

**Linguistic Regulation and Interactional Reality:  
A Sociolinguistic Study of Call Centre Service Transactions**

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**Abstract**

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This thesis aims to contribute to the study of workplace talk, language and gender, and the sociolinguistics of globalization by exploring the phenomenon of 'linguistic regulation' in call centres. 'Linguistic regulation' refers to the practice, now widespread in the globalized service economy, of codifying and enforcing rules for employees' use of language in service interactions with customers. Drawing on authentic service interactions from call centres in the UK and Denmark, and interviews and communication material from both those countries as well as Hong Kong and the Philippines, this study shows that linguistic regulation exerts a significant influence on the language used by call centre agents, and suggests that this has implications for all three areas of inquiry. In relation to the study of workplace talk, the findings raise questions about the degree of local management and individual speaker agency that has often been asserted in previous work. In the area of language and gender studies, the finding that female speakers in both countries show a higher degree of compliance with linguistic regulation than male ones is related to ongoing debates about the local variability of gender. It is argued that the field may benefit from supplementing the currently favoured locally-based methods with one which seeks to link linguistic behaviour with supra-local systems of inequality. Finally, in relation to the sociolinguistics of globalization, this thesis documents the existence of a distinct, globally prescribed, call centre style which is culturally marked as North-American. In practice, this style is locally inflected, with British agents exhibiting greater conformity to the prescriptions than their Danish counterparts. It is argued that this may be because the

prescribed style conflicts with the Danish cultural preference for 'getting to the point'. These findings highlight the importance of considering language in the context of a global system. The thesis concludes by considering what the research it is based on may contribute, not only to academic debates in sociolinguistics and the sociology of work, but also to professional discussions within the call centre industry.

**For Jakob, Nike and ?**

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**Contents**

|                                                                  |      |
|------------------------------------------------------------------|------|
| Abstract                                                         | ii   |
| Acknowledgements                                                 | v    |
| Contents                                                         | vii  |
| List of tables                                                   | viii |
| List of figures                                                  | ix   |
| List of abbreviations                                            | x    |
| Chapter 1: Call centres at the nexus of language and society     | 1    |
| Chapter 2: Methodologies                                         | 20   |
| Chapter 3: Linguistic regulation in Thistle and Mermaid          | 49   |
| Chapter 4: Accomplishing corporate goals in Thistle and Mermaid  | 80   |
| Chapter 5: Accomplishing customers' goals in Thistle and Mermaid | 113  |
| Chapter 6: Gender and interactional reality                      | 140  |
| Chapter 7: Globalization and interactional reality               | 173  |
| Chapter 8: Conclusion                                            | 209  |
| Appendix A: Transcription key                                    | 218  |
| Appendix B: Original Danish texts                                | 219  |
| Appendix C: Consent forms                                        | 233  |
| Bibliography                                                     | 239  |

**List of tables**

|                                                                    |     |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Table 2.1 Overview of entire dataset                               | 21  |
| Table 2.2 Hearer roles in accommodation theory                     | 38  |
| Table 2.3 Overview of linguistic rules to be analysed              | 45  |
| Table 4.1 Overall rule adherence in Thistle                        | 82  |
| Table 4.2 Overall rule adherence in Mermaid                        | 82  |
| Table 4.3 Number of times Thistle agents use caller's name         | 94  |
| Table 6.1 Mean rule adherence by male and female agents in Thistle | 144 |
| Table 6.2 Mean rule adherence by male and female agents in Mermaid | 145 |
| Table 7.1 Overview of call centres analysed in Chapter 7           | 175 |
| Table 7.2 Mean rule adherence by Thistle and Mermaid agents        | 194 |
| Table 7.3 Variants over pronominal usage in Mermaid greeting       | 205 |

**List of figures**

|                                                                     |     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| Figure 6.1 Male and female agents' rule adherence in Thistle        | 147 |
| Figure 6.2 Male and female agents' rule adherence in Mermaid        | 147 |
| Figure 6.3 Number of times male and female agents use caller's name | 149 |
| Figure 7.1 Thistle and Mermaid agents' rule adherence               | 194 |
| Figure 7.2 Thistle and Mermaid agents' use of address form          | 203 |

**List of abbreviations**

|           |                                        |
|-----------|----------------------------------------|
| CA        | Conversation Analysis                  |
| CCA       | The Call Centre Association in Britain |
| DBS       | Dictionary of Behavioural Standards    |
| HKBook    | Hong Kong booklet presentation         |
| HKOral    | Hong Kong oral presentation            |
| HKScor    | Hong Kong scorecard                    |
| IFA       | Independent Financial Adviser          |
| MM        | Mermaid Mobile                         |
| MMS       | Multimedia Messaging Service           |
| PhilTrain | Philippine training material           |
| SC        | Scoring Criteria                       |
| SS        | Service Standards                      |
| SUG       | Stepping Up Guide                      |
| SW        | Sales Wheel                            |
| TI        | Thistle Insurance                      |
| TTRP      | Turn Transition Relevance Place        |

## **Chapter 1**

### **Call centres at the nexus of language and society**

I think just about everyone in the world hates call centres  
(Respondent in a study by the National Consumer Council in the UK).

#### *Introduction*

The quotation above comes from a respondent participating in a recent study undertaken by the National Consumer Council in Britain (Cullum 2006). I have chosen it to open this thesis because it encapsulates the antagonism that shrouds call centres among the general public and in the press (Taylor and Bain 1999, Key Note 2002, Channel 4 2008). One way in which call centres attempt to combat their bad reputation is by institutionalizing practices of intervening in the language that call centre agents use in interaction with customers (Taylor and Bain 1999, Cameron 2000a, 2000b, Kinnie et al. 2000). Such practices, to which considerable resources are devoted, consist in particular of subjecting employees to extensive communication training programmes and devising customer service manuals which detail what agents must say in customer service interactions and how they must say it. Vast expenditure is subsequently committed to systematically monitoring and assessing whether agents adhere to these rules in practice. As a recent management report makes clear, agents' 'communication skills' are so important that they cannot be left to take care of themselves: 'Good quality interactions don't just happen; agents should be carefully coached in conversational skills as a priority' (CM 2004: 16). The Call Centre Association (CCA), which is the professional body for the call centre sector in the UK, interviewed managers in the industry and found that communication skills are foremost among four skills required by call centre agents, ranking above system, product and sales knowledge (CCA 2001). The tendency by call centres to intervene in their employees' use of language is arguably one of the most important principles around which the work in call centres is organized.

In the chapters to come, I set out to investigate this tendency - henceforth 'linguistic regulation' - from a sociolinguistic perspective. Doing this will enable me to address central questions in the sociolinguistic areas of workplace talk, language and gender studies, and the sociolinguistics of globalization. Each of these areas faces new questions in light of current economic and social restructuring, and call centres, being iconic of such changes, offer a unique opportunity to shed light on these. In this thesis, these three areas are considered not so much as discrete but as interrelated topics, and the emergence of a global 'new work order' (Gee et al. 1996) has become a key locus for contemporary sociolinguistic debates on all of them. The thesis also has an applied aim which I hope will benefit the call centre industry in general. More specifically, I seek to explore the extent to which prefabricating a standard template for language use, a major component of linguistic regulation, is in practice possible given that it is fundamentally at odds with the central sociolinguistic tenet that language varies according to context (e.g. Labov 1966, Hymes 1974, Gumperz 1982). In this chapter, I start by discussing how studying call centre interactions may contribute to our understanding in each of the sociolinguistic subfields identified above and, in terms of the applied aim, how call centres may in turn benefit from a sociolinguistic study. The paucity of call centre studies relying on interactional data is then discussed before I offer some background information on call centres, with particular reference to the UK and Denmark, where my two primary data sites are located. I end the chapter by providing a brief overview of the thesis structure.

### *Workplace talk*

The first field of knowledge to which I aim to make a contribution is the study of workplace talk. Scholars working within the research tradition of Conversation Analysis (CA) have been particularly productive in this area (e.g. Drew and Heritage 1992, Boden

1994, Baker et al. 2005a, Richards 2006),<sup>1</sup> which they tend to refer to as ‘institutional talk’. It is a basic tenet of orthodox CA that ‘[i]nstitutions do not define the kind of talk produced within them: rather participants’ ways of designating their talk actually constructs the “institutionality” of such settings’ (Hutchbby 1999: 41). What is emphasized in workplace studies undertaken in CA, in other words, is the local agency of workers. This presupposition is maintained in the first book-length treatment of call centre interactions, which, perhaps unsurprisingly given that the field has relied extensively on telephone talk as data since its beginning (e.g. Schegloff 1968), is written within the research tradition of CA. The papers in the volume entitled *Calling for Help: Language and Social Interaction in Telephone Helplines*<sup>2</sup> are all based on authentic data from call centre interactions between an agent and a customer (in the broadest sense of the term). Faithful to their research tradition, the papers aim to document regularities in how the activity under investigation (in most cases ‘helping’) is accomplished by the speakers participating in the interaction.

What contributors to this volume do not engage with, however, is an increasingly widespread tendency in call centres to, if not script, then at least partly determine in advance agents’ interactional contributions. Such interventionist tendencies have been studied in depth by sociolinguists and others. The work of Taylor (1998), Cameron (2000a, 2000b), Roy (2002), and Cowie (2007), e.g., shows the unprecedented extent to which call centres teach, prescribe, codify and enforce rules for a vast array of employees’ linguistic behaviour. Typically, such rules are targeted at the level of interactive discourse, such as what speech acts to use and how to perform them, the choice of address forms, salutations and politeness formulae, as well as prosody and voice quality (Cameron 2000b). Though

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<sup>1</sup> I do not mean to give the impression, however, that CA has monopolized the area of workplace talk. Other scholars who would either explicitly or implicitly distance themselves from the epistemological standpoint of CA have also made important contributions to the area, as have a range of edited and methodologically eclectic volumes (Gunnarson et al. 1997, Holmes and Stubbe 2003, Holmes 2006a, Mullany 2007, Wodak 1997, Sarangi and Roberts 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Though the editors have chosen to refer to the workplaces discussed in the book as ‘helplines’, many of them could also be called ‘call centres’. ‘Helplines’ are generally understood to be government- or charity-funded organizations set up to offer free advice in crisis situations while ‘call centres’ are more often considered to form part of a commercial organization. Both types are discussed in the volume.

there are differences in the degree to which call centres regulate agents' language use (Hutchinson et al. 2000, Taylor et al. 2002), the vast majority engage in some ways of pre-specifying the conversational moves that agents must go through in the interaction and/or the manner in which they must conduct it (Taylor and Bain 1999, Cameron 2000a, 2000b, Kinnie et al. 2000). Before I go on to discuss the new questions that this tendency raises in the area of workplace talk, it is useful to provide some background knowledge about the social changes which have given rise to it.

It is widely agreed that the restructuring of the economy has had far-reaching consequences for the ways in which we perceive language and the importance we accord it (Fairclough 1992a, Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999, Cope and Kalantzis 2000). In consumer society in particular, which is characterized not by a lack of goods, but by a lack of buyers, language has become a commodity (Heller 2003, Cameron 2005a). Carefully managing it, rather than leaving it to take care of itself, is seen as a way of ensuring competitive advantage. Part of this reflects a shift in where organizations mainly derive their profits. Selling 'business solutions', that is hardware, software, and services in a bundle, provides a much more stable income than selling a physical good, as demand for the latter is much more elastic. Mobile phones provide a good example of the 'business solution' model. The mobile phone itself tends to cost very little; its price depends on how long you as a customer are able to commit to a contractual relationship with the provider. If you take out a contract for a year, the phone becomes significantly cheaper, or even free; if you favour a pay-as-you-go option, with no contractual agreement, the phone becomes considerably more expensive. In this business model, known in management literature as 'servitization of business' (Vandermere and Rada 1988), where businesses receive most of their revenue from ongoing contracts with their customers rather than from one-off purchases, cultivation of the customer relationship becomes all the more important (du Gay and Salaman 1992, Sturdy 2001b). As a consequence, the notion of 'communication skills' has gained a highly prominent place in contemporary society (Fairclough 1992a,

Cameron 2000a, The New London Group 2000), and reconceptualized communication from a taken-for-granted ability into a set of skills to be acquired.

Coming back to the CA scholar Murtagh's description of call centre work, he identifies the following co-constructed interactional 'chain' in a mobile phone call centre: At the beginning of the call the adviser makes a request for the telephone number of the caller, and the caller instructs the adviser by providing the information. This, according to Murtagh, can be seen as the first instructional course of the calls. Subsequent to this the adviser offers help and the caller provides a detailed description of, for example, technical problems experienced with the use of the phone. The adviser then engages in delivering a series of instructions designed to deal with the caller's inquiry. Naturally these instructions vary according to the problem presented, as Murtagh points out. Finally the call is closed, often by the adviser formulating (summarizing) what has just occurred. What Murtagh identifies and describes here is an interaction that is, as he writes, 'interactionally produced by caller and adviser as a mutual accomplishment' (2005: 301).

However, because of the interventionist approach to language embraced by call centres, it is highly likely that the agent's request for the customer's telephone number, their offer to help and their formulation (summary) of what has just occurred are all conversational units that have been determined by the management prior to the interaction itself. In fact, as we shall see in the chapters to come, they are moves that typically feature among the core moves that agents must perform in call centre interactions. Such factors, extraneous to the conversation at hand, are of no interest to conversation analysts, whose emphasis remains on the local agency of speakers. There is evidence to suggest, however, that linguistic regulation has consequences for actual language use. For example, one agent interviewed by sociologist Steve Taylor explained:

When I know she [the supervisor] is not listening, I can't help but change my accent, what I actually say and the words I use... I had one really ignorant git on the phone once, I was seething, but I knew she was listening so I had to contain it... When I am positive she is not listening, I have been really short with bad customers, it's a great feeling (1998: 94).

The agent in this testimony admits to modifying her accent and the content of what she says depending on whether her supervisor is monitoring her call. This suggests that in call centres, workers' linguistic behaviour is not solely constructed by agent and caller in mutual engagement. There is another participant, albeit not contributing *in situ*, i.e. linguistic regulation, which has the potential to influence what is said and how and why it is said. Cameron (2000a, 2000b) has pointed out that call centres provide a challenge to classical conversation analytic studies that construe 'institutionality' as being endogenous to the talk that unfolds between conversational participants.

The study of call centres can contribute to our understanding of the changes that many workplaces are currently undergoing, particularly in the service sector, including supermarkets, retail businesses, fast-food restaurants, airline companies, etc. (Leidner 1993, Cameron 2000a, Hochschild 2003). Call centres themselves have grown exponentially over the past few decades and are expected to continue to do so (HK 2004, MBD 2007). This in itself is one reason for putting them under the academic spotlight as is the fact that sociolinguistic research on workplace talk has tended to focus on workers with relatively high institutionalized power, such as doctors, managers and lawyers, and neglected workers in less prestigious occupations (McElhinny 1997). If, as CA practitioners posit, one characteristic of institutional talk is that it has a goal (Drew and Heritage 1992), and insofar as such goals are accomplished linguistically, as assumed in CA and as actually happens in call centres, the question then becomes not so much the CA one about how institutional goals are accomplished, but rather how (if at all, or to what extent) institutional goals are accomplished when speakers' linguistic agency is restricted.

### *Language and gender*

The second field of knowledge to which I hope to contribute is language and gender studies. Research in this area has found that when women enter into areas of work which

are or have historically been associated with men, such as the police force or managerial positions, they may face certain challenges because their feminine gender identity is at odds with what is required of them, e.g. being assertive and authoritative (Lakoff 1990). One way in which they may attempt to overcome such challenges is by defeminizing their speech, as McElhinny (1998) found was the case for female police officers, and Reynolds (1998) observed for female managers in Japan. Another way may be to work harder to prove that they are worthy participants in the setting, a strategy theorized by Eckert (1998) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995, 1999, 2003), and which may be referred to as the 'interloper theory'. Eckert writes

Men have greater legitimacy in [elite] institutions, while women moving into them are generally seen as interlopers, and are at greater pains to prove that they belong (1998: 67).

Shaw's (2000, 2002, 2006) work on female politicians in the British House of Commons provides an illustrative example of this theory. Her findings (2006) suggest that female politicians seem to feel the need to legitimize their presence in this extremely adversarial (and, arguably, 'masculinized') environment. They do this, Shaw found, by obeying the official rules to a greater extent than their male colleagues, i.e. they do not heckle, interrupt, filibuster (deliberately speak so long in a debate that there is no time for it to be resolved), or joke as much.

The assumptions which underpin questions about women's coping strategies in the public sphere, however, have recently begun to change because the values attached to different ways of speaking have changed (Cameron 2003). In contemporary society in general, there is a tendency towards 'informalization', i.e. a tendency to, at least overtly, downplay power markers and emphasize commonalities (Fairclough 1992a). Social theorist Anthony Giddens might explain the revalorization of informal talk with reference to the crucial status that the concept of 'trust' has in contemporary society. He argues that as traditions, kinship ties, families and communities break down, 'trust' can no longer be taken

for granted but becomes something that needs to be 'worked at' and created through 'demonstrable warmth and openness' (1990: 121). This work must to a large extent be done linguistically, and one way in which it may manifest itself is in an increased emphasis on the 'interpersonal' or 'interactional' level of talk, which views language as a tool for maintaining social relations. In contrast to this is the 'referential' or 'transactional' level of talk, which views language as a tool for exchanging information (Leech 1983, Halliday 1985, Kaspar 1990).<sup>3</sup> The academic community has documented the upgrading of such interpersonal talk in book and chapter length treatments of the topic (Coupland 2000, Holmes and Stubbe 2003).

With the revalorization of informality has come a revalorization of women, as they are, *qua* indirect association (Ochs 1992), believed to be particularly good at the interactional and interpersonal aspects of talk (e.g. Holmes 1995, Coates 1996). This is the case in the area of work and employment in general, but it is perhaps particularly visible in the service sector. In the area of work and employment in general, the move towards post-Fordism has transformed the traditional hierarchical relationship between managers and employees and replaced it (in theory) by a new participatory relationship (Fairclough 1992a, The New London Group 2000). Employees in contemporary workplaces undergo 'staff appraisals' and participate in 'workshops'; they work in 'teams' and are expected to 'motivate' one another. In such new constellations, interpersonal skills, teamwork, flexibility, and the ability to motivate and create rapport are increasingly seen as assets (Sjørup 1998, Cameron 2000b, 2003, Kerfoot 2001), and women are often believed to have the edge in these areas. In the service sector, organizations have been quick to realize that they can capitalize on women's presumed 'natural' skills. In an increasingly saturated market where businesses compete on service, they want employees who are willing to serve the customer, who can create rapport, show a personal interest in the customer, offer empathy and understanding, and women, at least stereotypically, seem to fit the bill. Though

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<sup>3</sup> The distinction between 'interactional' and 'transactional' usage is in reality often more one of degree than either or (Holmes 1984, Cameron et al. 1988).

exploiting caring and nurturing qualities for commercial purposes is not in itself new (see e.g. Hochschild 2003 [1983]), it is not coincidental that the revalorization of femininity co-occurs with the shift to service-based economies. In short, current economic and social changes appear to make women, and their presumed femininity, particularly valued, not least in the service economy (Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000, Cameron 2000b, Belt 2002).

In light of these current ideological changes, sociolinguists need to reformulate some of the questions they ask. Rather than asking, e.g., how do women cope in an environment where their gender identity is at odds with the requirements, it seems that the pertinent question is whether women's presumed superiority frees them from (some of) the challenges that they previously faced. Conversely, we may ask whether in a context where femininity is highly valued it is men who assume status of interlopers, as traditional notions of masculinity (with its emphasis on status, independence, rationality, and emotional restraint) may be at odds with what is required (Kerfoot 2001, Kimmel 2001, Messner 2001, Morgan 2001, Coates 2003). These are questions I set out to answer in this thesis, and ones which are particularly well-suited to address in the context of call centres, for two main reasons.

Firstly, call centres are emblematic of the shift to service-based economies and the accompanying revalorization of femininity that characterizes it. Examining communication material and conducting interviews in call centres, Cameron (2000b) has found that the speech style that is expected of call centre agents alludes to features of what was identified as 'women's language' by Robin Lakoff in 1975. Similar to women in general some thirty years ago, call centre agents today are expected to engage in a speech style that conveys enthusiasm; they must create rapport and empathize with the customer, ask questions, and smile. Although, as Cameron (2000b) points out, these features are not necessarily empirically accurate, there does seem to be a widespread belief in the call centre industry that more women than men possess the qualities that they are looking for (Tylor and

Taylor 1997, Belt 2002). The conception of call centre work as 'women's work' shows up numerically in that roughly two-thirds of call centre agents are female (IDS 2001),<sup>4</sup> something which has always struck scholars and other commentators as noteworthy.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, the fact that call centres are heavily rule bound - rules exist for a myriad of aspects of language use - makes them ideally suited for testing the interloper theory. Examining the extent to which male and female call centre agents adhere to the linguistic rules which prevail may enable us to find out how the value placed on femininity affects the linguistic behaviour of male and female agents respectively. Will it exempt female agents from the need to prove their worth by obeying the rules more and instead place that burden on the men?

#### *Sociolinguistics of globalization*

Thirdly, this research may provide insights for the newly emerging field of the sociolinguistics of globalization, which is still at an embryonic stage (Coupland 2003, Blommaert 2003). In a special issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, editor Nikolas Coupland (2003) argues that it is time for sociolinguists to start addressing questions about the impact of globalization on language. One key feature of globalization is that people who have not been in contact before are suddenly brought together in new constellations, which may have a bearing on language. Sociologist Manuel Castells (1996), for example, describes the world as a 'network society' because it has been reorganized into a set of networks which deemphasizes the traditional division into nation states. In his epilogue to the special issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* devoted to the subject, Blommaert (2003) argues that one task

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<sup>4</sup> This figure is remarkably stable across countries including Germany, Ireland, Canada, Denmark and the UK (Richardson and Marshall 1996, Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000, Breathnach 2000, Michel 2001, Mathiesen and Wiegman 2004,) though it tends to vary according to the specialization of the call centre (in technical support men tend to outnumber women) (Belt 2002).

<sup>5</sup> In the sociology of organizations, a theoretical distinction is traditionally drawn between organizations that are gendered by virtue of numerical overrepresentation of one sex (Kanter 1977) and between those in which the work carried out is primarily associated with one gender (for instance, 'nursing' is a 'women's job' because women are 'naturally' good at caring) (Acker 1990). In practice, however, the two often coalesce in that organizations where one gender is numerically overrepresented create the illusion of that gender being better suited to carry out the job (Leidner 1991).

of a sociolinguistics of globalization must be to identify the so-called 'mediating institutions' which serve as vehicles for the global exportation of certain types of language.

Call centres are an obvious candidate for a 'mediating institution', being both enabled by and contributing to globalization. Call centres are easily exported to other countries because they rely on the development of an operational prototype, which can be infinitely reproduced. This is attested in the fact that call centres, regardless of type, specialization and geographical location, tend to be extremely similar (Bain and Taylor 2000), and research has revealed remarkable similarities in call centres located in Israel, Italy, Greece, France, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Australia, the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, US, Canada, Colombia, Japan and India (D'Alessio and Oberbeck 1999, Belt et al. 2000, Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000, Korczynski et al. 2001, Tsoukas and Vladimirou 2001, Bain et al. 2002, Buscatto 2002, Bittner et al. 2002, Arbetslivsinstitutet 2003, Mathiesen and Wiegman 2004, Taylor and Bain 2005, Valsecchi 2006, Raz and Blank 2007, Weiss 2007). The call centre industry defines itself as a community; there are industry journals and a steadily growing number of national and international conferences and workshops held each year (Belt et al. 2000). Many call centres share a common pool of labour (Belt et al. 2000); indeed, a lot of the agents I interviewed for this study had worked in several call centres, and they reported very little variation between them. The alignment across international borders and vertical markets is perpetually reinforced through the establishment of benchmarks by which call centres assess their performance and how they stack up against the competition (Bain and Taylor 2000). There is considerable justification, then, to conceive of call centres as deriving from one single organizational template, constituting a community in their own right with many more unifying than differentiating traits. This would seem to make them an ideal candidate for a 'mediating institution' with the potential to shed light on the impact of globalization on language.

Drawing on linguistic regulation material collected from the UK, Denmark, Hong Kong, and the Philippines, I seek to find out what kind of language, if any, is being

exported to other locales, and what kind of values underlie it. Another important question to address, insofar as linguistic globalization is found to be occurring, is how a global norm is inflected by local peculiarities. Globalization theorists have fervently pointed out that the imposition of one culture onto another is rarely a straightforward or inevitable trajectory; much more often it is fraught with a mixture of wholehearted acceptance, full-blown resistance and everything in-between (Robertson 1995, Featherstone and Lash 1995, Appadurai 1996, see also Blommaert 2003). Drawing on naturally occurring call centre interactions collected from two of the countries whose linguistic regulation material is examined, Denmark and Britain, I compare the way in which a possible globalized linguistic norm is inflected in the respective language used by speakers in these two countries, i.e. Danish and UK English. Given that the field of the sociolinguistics of globalization is still in its very early days, Coupland writes that ‘it would be premature to posit some “sociolinguistic theory of globalisation”’ (2003: 466). My hope is, however, that the research presented here will contribute a small step towards generating such theory.

### *Practical applications*

In describing the contributions to knowledge I hope to make in this thesis, I have up until now concentrated on what the study of call centres may bring to our understanding of current questions in the field of sociolinguistics. It may also be pertinent to outline, however, the benefits that a sociolinguistic study of call centres may add to the knowledge accumulated by the industry itself. This is not least because part of my entry ticket to obtaining the data I needed for this study was a promise to report back my findings to the call centres who kindly agreed to participate in the study. This avowedly applied aim clearly differentiates the work presented here from that in the previously mentioned CA volume *Calling for Help* in which the editors make clear that ‘the studies in this volume are essentially *descriptive* in character. Critiques, admonitions, evaluative assessments of helplines and/or helpline call-takers, and recommendations for changes in working practices, are

thus avoided' (Baker et al. 2005b: 6, emphasis in original). Knowing that call centres themselves study call centre interactions as part of their regular activity of assessing call centre agents' performance, it may be objected that this study merely reproduces work that is already undertaken by call centres themselves. However, unlike the internal call assessments, which are conducted based on material supplied by communication consultants which fails to build on existing academic knowledge and tends to lack theoretical sophistication, this study is empirical. It draws not only on my own fieldwork data but on a whole body of mainly sociolinguistic work and theory. In further contrast to the advice supplied by communication consultants, this work has no commercial interests at stake and may therefore serve as a more impartial and reliable source of information.

One obvious question for a sociolinguist to pursue, for instance, would concern the extent to which devising a template for spoken interaction - which linguistic regulation is essentially about - is practically feasible. Linguistic regulation in call centres is understandable in terms of Giddens' notion of 'expert systems', which he defines as 'systems of technical accomplishment or professional expertise that organise large areas of the material and social environments in which we live today' (1990: 27). Giddens argues that encoding knowledge, in this case about 'call centering' in 'expert systems' is a practice which is a hallmark of contemporary society. The number one rationale for this is rationalization, that is, an endeavour to constantly make systems and processes more efficient, another tendency which Giddens recognizes as highly significant in contemporary society. The advantage of 'expert systems' is that they allow for cost-effective replication since it is of course much less costly to simply reproduce the same format over and over again than having to devise a new system each time it is needed.

Since the 1970s, however, when sociolinguists in a consolidated effort began to part company with Noam Chomsky's generative enterprise, there has been an awareness that context is not only a crucial but integral part of communication. Chomsky (1965) makes a distinction between 'competence' and 'performance' where 'competence' represents an

idealized, cognitively internalized grammar with the potential to generate an infinite set of sentences in any language. The 'performance' component refers to the concrete output produced by the 'competence' component; an output which is potentially affected by such 'irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic)' (1965: 3). Hymes (1972), who had a background in anthropology, explicitly distanced himself from Chomsky's disinterest in 'performance', introducing the notion of 'communicative competence' as an extension to Chomsky's concept. Hymes wanted to make the point that in order to speak a language one needs to learn not only its grammar, vocabulary, and phonology, but also how to produce contextually appropriate utterances. This brought to the forefront the notion of context, which Chomsky had discarded as uninteresting. On this background, it makes sense to ask to what extent prefabricating a standard template for spoken interaction is actually feasible given the infinite set of localized and contextual factors that may influence its implementation.

#### *An interactional approach to call centres*

The four aims of this study all require access to call centre interactions, more specifically transcripts of audio-recorded versions of the spoken language that unfolds between call centre agents and their customers. Sociolinguists have a tradition of placing a high value on naturally occurring speech (e.g. Manes and Wolfson 1981), and this is no less important for the purposes of this study. In order for this study to have anything to say about workplace talk, whose overarching aim is to document how institutional goals are accomplished linguistically, access to spoken data is essential. Likewise, in the area of language and gender studies, scholars have repeatedly pointed out that ideologies of gender are not necessarily empirically accurate representations of how women and men really speak (e.g. Cameron 2000b). Also, sociolinguists interested in issues of globalization have pointed out that a global hegemonic norm is likely to be locally inflected in the language use of the speakers it

affects (e.g. Blommaert 2003). Finally, for this study to live up to its applied aim and examine the extent to which linguistic regulation is actually feasible, close examination of interactional data is essential.

Despite an upsurge in research on call centres in the last decade (e.g. Fernie and Metcalf 1998, Frenkel et al. 1999, Bain and Taylor 2000, Callaghan and Thompson 2002, Holtgrewe et al. 2002, Deery and Kinnie 2004, Baker et al. 2005a, Taylor and Bain 2005), the call centre interactions themselves remain largely unexplored. Partly, this neglect is due to the topical interests and methodological traditions of those who have been most active in building up the call centre literature. Industrial sociologists and sociologists of work have contributed the largest bulk of studies, exploring topics such as the economic and geographic impact on the areas in which call centres are situated (e.g. Richardson and Marshall 1996, Richardson et al. 2000, Richardson and Belt 2001), employee relations and unionism (e.g. Bain and Taylor 2002, Gollan 2004, Van den Broek 2004, Taylor and Bain 2008), human resource management (e.g. Purcell 1999, Callaghan and Thompson 2002, Deery and Kinnie 2004), gender issues (e.g. Belt et al. 2000, Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000), and the effects of 'emotional labour' (i.e. creating rapport, showing empathy, and being polite) on job satisfaction (Deery et al. 2002, Lewig and Dollard 2003, Deery et al. 2004). Perhaps what has received most attention in the literature is the nature of the work in call centres, which has been described as 'unique' (HSE 2001), the extent of control and monitoring that has become a hallmark of call centres and its impact on agents and managers (Callaghan and Thompson 2001, Houlihan 2001, Taylor et al. 2002).

Methodologically, sociological papers typically rely on one or a combination of the following data collection methods: participant or non-participant observations (of work practices or meetings), interviews (individual or group), document analyses, questionnaires and surveys (Knights and McCabe 1998, Fernie and Metcalf 1998, Bain and Taylor 2000, Belt et al. 2000, Houlihan 2000, Callaghan and Thompson 2001, Houlihan 2001, Taylor and Bain 2001, Korczynski 2002, Deery et al. 2004). (For a rare exception, a sociological

paper that includes interactional data is Rieder et al. 2002). Organizational psychologists too, uninfluenced, as it were, by the turn to 'discursive psychology' (Potter and Wetherell 1987), typically study stress and 'emotional labour' in call centres through quantitative analyses of agents' questionnaire responses (Bakker et al. 2003, Grebner et al. 2003, Lewig and Dollard 2003, Zapf et al. 2003), or experiments (Wegge et al. 2007) even when these are, arguably, principally linguistic phenomena.

One might have expected that the lack of interactional data in call centre studies had been remedied by sociolinguists, but in fact this has not been the case. While Cameron (2000a, 2000b) directly addresses the issue of linguistic regulation in her work, it was beyond her scope to examine the extent to which these rules are implemented in practice, partly because she was denied access to interactional data. Roy (2002) has studied the linguistic prescriptions made to call centre workers in the French speaking community in Canada and while she does draw on observations to assess the extent to which these prescriptions are followed in practice, her study does not involve a thoroughgoing analysis of interactional data, but relies primarily on interview accounts. Cowie (2007) has conducted an ethnographic study in a company which specializes in training agents for the booming Indian call centre industry and focuses on how the ideal of a 'neutral accent' is defined and interpreted by trainers and trainees. The closest she comes to examining real interactions is in her analysis of how agents perform the neutral accent in mock calls. When interactional data has been used in sociolinguistic studies of call centres, the focus has not been on linguistic regulation. Economidou-Kogetsidis (2005) uses call centre interactions as example data for studying cultural differences between Greek and British speakers in the use of politeness strategies, and Orr (2004) draws on interactional data to study how agents accommodate sociophonetically to customers. In contrast, applied linguist Friginal (2007) does explore both the regulatory practices of an offshore call centre in the Philippines, in which agents communicate with US-based customers, and the extent to which agents adhere to these rules in actual interactions. His work, however, starts out from the call

centre's own definition of what constitutes 'good communication skills' and therefore fails, in my view, to approach this from a sufficiently critical angle.

The dearth of studies relying on interactional data is probably most of all due to the fact that these data are exceptionally difficult to obtain, an issue I discuss in more detail in the next chapter. Studies like the ones undertaken by primarily sociologists, organizational psychologists and, less frequently, sociolinguists, have played a key role in laying the groundwork for our understanding of the nature of call centre work. It is timely, however, that they are supplemented by a study which takes as its primary data naturally occurring service interactions.

### *The growth of call centres*

Having outlined the contributions to knowledge I hope to make in this thesis, it is useful to present some facts and background information about call centres. A call centre<sup>6</sup> is a workplace whose employees have as their primary task interacting with customers using integrated telephone and IT-technology. Call centres are usually divided into 'inbound' and 'outbound' depending on whether they primarily receive or make phone calls. More common than outbound call centres, inbound call centres constitute approximately two-thirds of all call centres in both Denmark and the UK. Calls to inbound call centres are customer service-related and include customer account inquiries and questions to technical helpdesks. Agents in outbound call centres make unsolicited calls (an activity also known as 'cold-calling') in an attempt to sell a product, fundraise or conduct survey research. In practice, though, the distinction between inbound call centres as service-oriented and outbound ones as sales-oriented is difficult to maintain as sales pitches are often incorporated into the service routine of inbound call centres (e.g. Baethge et al. 1999,

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<sup>6</sup> The term 'call centre' ('callcenter' in Danish) is in fact a misnomer as the telephone is often just one of the channels that call centres use for communicating with their customers; email, chat, internet, fax and conventional mail being the others. As a reflection of this, the term 'contact centre' ('kontaktcenter' in Danish) is on the increase, particularly among industry insiders; academics tend to stick with 'call centre'. For the purpose of the present thesis, where the focus is on spoken interaction, it seems apt to use the term 'call centre'. 'Centre', in turn, suggests that there is a one to one correspondence between outlet and organization and does not reflect the fact that an organization can have more than one centre attached to it.

Alferoff and Knights 2008). Call centres can be further subcategorized into whether they form part of an organization ('internal' or 'in-house'), which is most often the case, or whether they constitute an organization in and of themselves ('external'), in which case they may cater for the outsourced customer service functions of many different companies. A distinction is usually also made between on- and offshore call centres. Onshore are those where call centre and mother company are located in the same country, whereas offshore call centres are those that have been outsourced to a different country, with the result that the agent communicates with the customer in what is usually not their first language.

Call centres have grown exponentially over the past decades. It is almost impossible to conduct one's daily life without sooner or later coming into contact with a call centre. Most banks and insurance companies, transport and travel agencies, IT and telecommunications, retail and distribution companies, and increasingly also public services, have centralized their customer service departments into call centres. Originating from the United States of America, where the very first call centre was reportedly set up in the 1960s (Bagnara 2001), call centres began to spread to the United Kingdom in the 1980s with the sector being 'specifically defined during the late 1980s and early 1990s' (DTI 2004: 20). The call centre sector has massively expanded since the mid-nineties; in the UK, it was estimated that 2 per cent of workers had jobs in call centres in 2001 (IDS 2001), but as the industry 'continues to add tens of thousands of agent positions each year' (DTI 2004: 3) it currently (2007) employs almost one million people, about 3 per cent of the working population (MBD 2007). Denmark is lagging somewhat behind the UK, with an estimated 25,000 people directly employed in the industry (HK 2004), equivalent to just under one per cent of the total workforce. That Denmark still has some catching up to do is perhaps not surprising considering that the British industry is claimed by some to be the largest in Europe (Werdigier and Niebuhr 2000). There is general consensus that the growth in call centres will continue both in Denmark and in the UK in the years to come (HK 2004,

MBD 2007). Indeed, the industry is said to be the most rapidly growing form of employment in Europe today (Paul and Huws 2002).

### *Overview of thesis*

In the first data chapter, Chapter 3, I describe the linguistic regulation that prevails in two call centres, Mermaid Mobile in Denmark and Thistle Insurance in Scotland, from three different ideological perspectives. There is an official ideology, as embodied in documents and operating procedures mandated by the organization, which centres around the three principles of 'quantity', 'quality' and 'branding'. There are also, however, sub-official ideologies held by managers and call centre agents, which are not necessarily congruent with one another or the official one. From Chapter 4 onwards, I move my focus from linguistic ideologies to linguistic practices. I begin by examining how, to what extent, or indeed if at all, agents are able to accomplish the corporate goals laid out in Thistle and Mermaid's official ideology given the restrictions placed on their language use. The following chapter, Chapter 5, also addresses this question, yet from a slightly different perspective. Here I analyse two service interactions in their entirety (rather than just snippets of exchange as in Chapter 4), and examine how goals in the form of inquiries raised by a calling customer (as opposed to the corporate goals with which they need not be congruent) are accomplished by the agent, again in the context of their language use being subject to regulation. Chapters 4 and 5, then, both, albeit in slightly different ways contribute to the area of workplace talk. They also contribute towards the applied purpose of the thesis by examining the extent to which prefabricating a standard template for language use is in fact possible or even necessary. In Chapter 6, I explore the questions raised about gender while Chapter 7 addresses the issue of linguistic globalization. I begin, however, in Chapter 2, by describing the methodologies I employed for collecting and analysing the data, and the obstacles I faced in the process.

## Chapter 2

### Methodologies

#### *Introduction*

In view of my research objective to uncover not only linguistic ideologies but also linguistic practices in call centres, I needed to collect two different kinds of data. To generate an account of the linguistic ideologies, I collected material in the form of documents and operating procedures mandated by the organizations, conducted interviews with call centre managers and agents, and engaged in observations. To generate an account of the linguistic practices, I collected data in the form of authentic service interactions conducted by call centre agents and their customers. Table 2.1 gives an overview of the entire dataset collected for this thesis.<sup>7</sup> While all of the material presented in the table is not directly incorporated into the thesis, all of it has informed my analysis. In what follows, I describe the methods used for collecting and analysing the data and discuss the different sorts of questions this may raise. Since getting access to call centres is known to be notoriously difficult, I start by describing how, after considerable obstacles, I eventually managed to gain access to the two call centres that are the prime focus of this research, Thistle (Insurance) in Scotland and Mermaid (Mobile) in Denmark.

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<sup>7</sup> The research has been undertaken in accordance with the advice, then not officially in force, of the Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) at the University of Oxford on the ethical aspects of research involving human participants. Participants in Thistle, Mermaid, and the financial call centre in Denmark have all given their written consent to take part in the study. On each of these sites, consent was given by three parties: senior management, managers on the ground, and agents (see Appendix C for the English consent forms which were slightly adapted to suit the Danish sites). Callers' consent to use the service exchange was obtained by agreeing (implicitly in Thistle and explicitly in Mermaid) to continue the call after having been notified that it was being recorded. Pseudonyms are used throughout and all other identifying details have been changed.

| Field site                                                    | Data                                                                                                                                                    | Amount                              |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Call centre 1<br>(Thistle Insurance),<br>Scotland             | 79 call centre interactions<br>- 26 agents (16 female, 10 male)                                                                                         | 3 hours and 43 minutes <sup>8</sup> |
|                                                               | on-site observations                                                                                                                                    | 11 days                             |
|                                                               | 23 on-site interviews<br>- 20 agents (11 female, 9 male)<br>- 3 managers (1 female, 2 male)                                                             | 6 hours and 50 minutes              |
|                                                               | 2 call assessments (1 male agent, 1 female)                                                                                                             | 3 hours                             |
|                                                               | written material including operating procedures, course material, customer service manuals, call assessment scorecards, agent performance reports, etc. | 80 pages                            |
| Call centre 2<br>(Mermaid Mobile),<br>Denmark                 | 108 call centre interactions<br>- 18 agents (11 female, 7 male)                                                                                         | 5 hours and 28 minutes <sup>9</sup> |
|                                                               | on-site observations                                                                                                                                    | 8 days                              |
|                                                               | 17 on-site interviews<br>- 14 agents (9 female, 5 male)<br>- 3 managers (all female)                                                                    | 3 hours and 25 minutes              |
|                                                               | written material (as above)                                                                                                                             | 80 pages                            |
| Call centre 3 (inbound, internal, financial),<br>Denmark      | 13 on-site interviews<br>- 9 agents (3 female, 6 male)<br>- 4 managers (2 female, 2 male)                                                               | 6 hours                             |
|                                                               | on-site observations including call monitoring                                                                                                          | 2 days                              |
|                                                               | written material (course material)                                                                                                                      | 4 pages                             |
| Call centre 4<br>(outbound, external, telemarketing), Denmark | 1 off-site interview with a male manager                                                                                                                | 30 minutes                          |
|                                                               | written material (course material and customer service manuals)                                                                                         | 20 pages                            |
| Call centre 5<br>(inbound, external, various), Philippines    | on-site observations                                                                                                                                    | 2 hours                             |
| Call centre 6<br>(inbound, internal, financial), Hong Kong    | 1 on-site interview with female manager                                                                                                                 | 2 hours                             |
|                                                               | on-site observations                                                                                                                                    |                                     |
|                                                               | written material (call assessment scorecards, information on recruitment and training practices)                                                        | 26 pages                            |
| Telephone fundraiser training course, England                 | participation                                                                                                                                           | 1 day                               |
| Call centre agent training course, Philippines                | participation                                                                                                                                           | 1 day                               |
|                                                               | written material (course material)                                                                                                                      | 120 pages                           |
| Call centre conference 1, Denmark                             | participation                                                                                                                                           | 2 days                              |
| Call centre conference 2, Scotland                            | participation                                                                                                                                           | 2 days                              |

<sup>8</sup> Thistle calls were collected both by me and by my gatekeeper. Those collected by me last between one and five minutes. I have no exact information about the length of those selected by my gatekeeper but it seems reasonable to assume that on average they are of a similar length as those I collected myself since the requests within them are comparable.

<sup>9</sup> Calls in the Mermaid corpus last between just under a minute to thirteen minutes.

| Field site                            | Data                                      | Amount     |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|------------|
| Call centre conference 3, Philippines | participation                             | 2 days     |
| Communication consultancy, Scotland   | 1 off-site interview with male consultant | 20 minutes |

Table 2.1 Overview of entire dataset (data informing the account of linguistic practices is shaded; unshaded data informs the account of linguistic ideologies)

### *Getting access*

Academics worldwide lament that workplaces are unwilling to grant them access to their sites (Leidner 1993, Hammersley and Atkinson 1995, Mullany 2007). This is perhaps particularly true of call centres. In a study investigating work conditions in call centres, Bain and Taylor (2000), two prominent and established researchers in the field, were denied access to the call centre itself and had to base their study exclusively on interview data obtained from workers offsite, prompting them to object that '[w]hilst observation of the labour process would have complemented the testimony of our key informants, managerial sensitivities precluded the possibility of on-site visits' (2000: 16). That the article published on the basis of this study has nonetheless gone on to become a key paper in the call centre literature is indicative of the major constraints within which call centre researchers are working. Even in their later fieldwork in 2005, when one might have expected that their by then solidified status as call centre experts would make call centres realize the potential benefits in granting them access, entry was still heavily restricted. They were given tours of all the facilities and were allowed to observe training sessions in one case, but they were denied direct access to interview employees onsite, a hurdle they overcame by serendipitously organizing and conducting group discussions outside the workplace (Taylor and Bain 2005). While Korczynski, in another study on work conditions in call centres, was permitted to interview workers onsite, he reports that 'management attempted to guide us to interview "model" workers' (2001a: 84-85). Cameron (2000a) too faced such difficulties in the call centres she studied, reporting that managers were reluctant to let her talk to employees unchaperoned, and even less permissive of letting her record the interviews.

They also insisted that they approved of what she wrote in advance of publication (a condition she was not prepared to meet), and another pilot study she wanted to conduct collapsed because the workers she approached were strictly forbidden to talk to outsiders.

The reason for such reticence in granting researchers access to their sites is that call centres have had a lot of bad press, and they are therefore understandably wary of how potential researchers will portray them to the public (Cameron 2000a). There is also a prevalent view in call centres that important material, from a researcher's point of view, is part of a company's competitive sensitivities (Bain and Taylor 2000, Cameron 2000a). Thus, in Mermaid, I was asked to sign a confidentiality agreement, and upon my arrival at Thistle, I was warned that the interviews I had recorded and the field notes I had taken might be checked by the company before I left the premises to make sure that I did not carry confidential information offsite. What may also be partly to blame for restrictions on access in call centres is the highly regimented work environment which makes it difficult to deviate from routines to accommodate requests for interviews and on-site visits. Getting hold of actual call centre interactions is even more difficult because these are typically encompassed by Data Protection Acts to prevent disclosure of what may be sensitive customer information. Since they also involve the participation of customers, these must likewise consent to having their interaction recorded.

Despite such difficulties in obtaining access to relevant sites, Sarangi and Roberts argue that it is important for researchers to 'fight against the temptation to collect what is easily collectable' (1999: 40-41) and persevere in their attempts to gain access to restricted research sites. It is important to realize, however, that research in call centres is less about design and more about being grateful for whatever material comes one's way. Although it is possible to have a rough idea of what to do, flexibility is meritorious as one will invariably encounter obstacles that deter and delay one's research. As Leidner, who managed to get access to the notoriously secretive restaurant chain McDonald's admits: '[v]irtually all

candid tales of fieldwork describe some mix of careful planning, serendipity, blunder, and idiosyncratic predilections' (1993: 233), and mine is no different.

Since part of my research objective was to test the cultural plasticity of a presumed globalized service norm, I needed to get access to call centres in at least two different national cultures. It seemed to make sense to use my Scandinavian background because of the assumed advantage in my being familiar with the culture in question, in terms both of getting access and of being able to interact inconspicuously with the participants. Britain seemed an obvious choice for the second country because there is a lot of literature to draw on, yet not so much that no area is left unexplored, call centre interactions being a case in point. To gain access to suitable field sites, my strategy was to cast the net widely on the grounds that I could always turn down sites in the unlikely event that I received more leads than I could pursue. I enlisted the support of everyone I could possibly think of in my network (my supervisor, family, friends, colleagues) on sociolinguist Janet Holmes' rationale that 'access to the sites usually depends on knowing somebody who will vouch for you' (quoted in Bargiela-Chiappini et al. 2007: 34). While this strategy was successful in procuring supplementary material (an interview with a manager in an outbound call centre in Denmark as well as the opportunity to attend communication courses in the Philippines and Oxford) in the end the call centres that became my primary study sites were unrelated to my contacts. As it turns out, I was relieved by this as it would leave me freer to observe and write, unfettered by sympathies and loyalties.

While my network was helpfully keeping an eye out for me, my own fulltime efforts were also devoted to finding a suitable research site, starting in Denmark and Sweden. I searched the internet and sent out preliminary email inquiries to prospective participants, in most cases directed to the customer services department or to the press officer of the respective companies, with the initial purpose of establishing whether they fulfilled the criteria I had in mind. Knowing that men are significantly underrepresented in the industry, and given that a component of the research plan was to compare men and women, the call

centre had to be of a considerable size to ensure that enough male employees would be available. Also, since my study hinged on getting access to interactional data, the call centre should preferably be in-house so that it would be empowered to decide whether I was allowed to record service interactions. Furthermore, I needed the call centre to focus at least some degree of attention on agents' communication skills to enable me to compare linguistic practices with linguistic ideologies. The latter was not a problem, as all of the approximately ten call centres I received a reply from had some version of a training programme in place that focused on employees' communication skills.

During this exploratory internet search, I came across information about an EU-sponsored research collaboration between academics and industry representatives in which four major Danish call centres took part. I deemed this to be a potentially promising opening on the grounds that the call centres in question had already proven themselves to be open to researchers (Mullany 2007). I would therefore be able to align myself with these academics to exploit their already established contacts with the industry. Since the names and contact details of those responsible for the project were listed on the website, it also solved the problem of whom within an organization to contact to minimize the risk of the inquiry going straight into the wastepaper basket (Alvesson and Deetz 2000). I decided to send out emails with an outline of my proposed study to both the academics and the call centres involved in this project on the rationale that it would increase my chances of getting access if I alerted as many people as possible to my project. That way, I hoped my request would become the topic of discussion between them and would not be as easily overlooked or brushed off as if I had only established one point of contact. Although the academic researchers involved in the EU project were relatively quick to get back to me, assuring me that they would enthusiastically promote my project to the industry participants, the decision on whether to grant me access eventually lay with the latter, and it was still going to be months before a formal agreement was reached.

It is increasingly recognized that one way of enhancing the chances of getting access to research sites is for the researcher to make the research relevant to the workplace and thereby mobilize their engagement in the research process. This involves entering into a *quid pro quo* relationship where the participants devote time and resources to assist in the data collection process, and in return have a say in the decision of the research topic (Sarangi and Roberts 1999, Mullany in press). Though the topic for this study was not jointly negotiated by me and the participants (see Cameron et al. 1992 who problematize the idea that participants' and researcher's interests can necessarily be aligned), I did try to frame my study in a way that I believed would be useful to the company. In Denmark, I framed it as a gender study, because I was under the impression that call centres struggle considerably with living up to a classical Scandinavian endeavour to achieve a 50-50 per cent sex balance in the workforce (e.g. many contributors to a volume edited by Von der Fehr et al. 1998). It emerged from the website of one of the call centres participating in the EU-sponsored project (this was Mermaid, the call centre which later granted me full access) that they were committed to recruiting marginalized groups (ethnic minorities, people with disabilities, and women) to senior level positions. The research proposal I sent out to the call centres participating in the EU project picked up on the gender imbalance dimension by suggesting that one possibility for the low number of male agents was that the speech style that was required of them might be at odds with their linguistic construction of masculinity (Cameron 2000a, 2000b). My proposal also outlined what I, in turn, would need access to in order to explore this question, while guaranteeing complete anonymity.

Although the gender dimension seemed to strike a chord with many of the industry representatives and academics involved in the EU project, with one (male) call centre manager expressing seemingly genuine enthusiasm about the potential of my project to increase the number of male employees and making the workplace 'less of a chicken farm', it was quite another thing when it came to seeing a formal agreement materialize. Often, I received no reply to my email reminders and my follow-up phone calls went unreturned.

When prospective participants did reply, they tended to express kind interest, but then proceeded to give various reasons for why they were not interested in participating; they were either too busy or the workplace was not suitable for the kind of study I wanted to pursue. One excuse I was given was that the few men they employed were not 'real' men(!), with the implication that the assumption on which my study rested, i.e. that the prescribed speech style would cause a double bind for male agents, was invalid.

One of the call centres (which later granted me partial access) in the financial sector, was prepared to let me observe work practices for a day or two, but would not let me participate in training courses on the grounds that these were part of the company's commercial assets. Nor was I permitted to interview agents and I was given no reason why. They did agree, however, to let me observe work practices for a day or two. I knew that this was not going to be sufficient for the type of study that I wanted to conduct, so I tried my best to persuade them that it was crucial that I obtain interactional data. In an attempt to turn this into a potential benefit for the call centre, I told them (which was my intention at the outset of my study) that access to interactional data would enable me to perform an experiment to determine whether customers preferred to speak to male or female agents. Having apparently not been able to explain myself sufficiently clearly, this was promptly refused on the grounds that it would hassle their customers. In fact, my intention had been to conduct a subsequent matched guise experiment on an independently collected set of informants. In the end, however, it was not this misunderstanding, but a proscription enforced by the legal department, which prevented me from recording interactions. I was permitted, however, to listen to a few calls while sitting next to the agent. After further negotiations, I managed to curtail the restrictions placed on interviewing and was given the go-ahead to interview agents and managers, though without recording those interviews. Instead, I used a stenography-inspired method to jot down interviewees' answers on my laptop as fast as I possibly could. Although some of the constraints were relaxed in the end, what was particularly disappointing about these negotiations was the length of time I

had to wait (over a month) to get a decision from the legal department on the question of obtaining interactional data; a decision which in the end turned out to be negative. After agonizingly long periods of waiting, I was still without interactional data.

Another of the four call centres in the EU project (Mermaid), was also excruciatingly slow in communicating back to me. Although a senior level (female) manager had expressed profound interest in the project because of its gender dimension, I had to wait for nearly three months before my request had been formally considered by the rest of the senior level management, and I did not manage to speed up their decision despite many friendly email reminders and phone calls. To my huge disappointment, my request was eventually turned down on the grounds that the company was in the middle of restructuring, and that they had already been visited by several researchers, which meant that employees were sick and tired of them. At this point, still without access to interactional data, I deflatedly contemplated strategies from abandoning the project in favour of something else where data was more easily attainable to more ethically and methodologically dubious methods such as taking a job as an undercover call centre agent or ring up call centres myself with a fictitious query and record the subsequent interaction.

Then, out of nowhere, my luck changed. Mermaid Mobile suddenly, and for reasons that are still unclear to me, changed their mind and granted me full access. I was invited for a face-to-face meeting where we further discussed my rights and obligations, and I was happy to learn that I had seemingly been granted unfettered access. Despite this, there were later unforeseen hurdles in the data collection process. A few days before I was about to embark on my research on one of the three sites constituting the Mermaid Mobile call centre, I was informed that I was not going to be allowed to interview the employees after all. Since it was the month of December, Mermaid was running a Christmas campaign on TV which had caused phone lines to become unexpectedly busy; so busy in fact that employees who were not scheduled to be at work had to be called in extraordinarily. The managers explained to me that they did not want to come across as sending out mixed

messages to their employees if all of a sudden they allowed them to leave their busy phones to go and do an interview with me. While I was sorry about this, I was comforted by the fact that interviews were not my primary data and that I had already obtained a reasonable amount of interview data from the other two Mermaid outlets.

Although I had been familiar with the difficulties faced by other scholars who had conducted research in workplaces, I had not been altogether prepared for the long periods of eager anticipation and accompanying disappointment that characterized it. It took roughly three months in all from my first contact until an initial agreement was in place and a further six months until the fieldwork was embarked upon (though this was partly because the Thistle fieldwork was conducted first). In the end, what seemed to work to my advantage was probably a combination of luck in that there was already an ongoing project that I could link up with as well as the fact that I had been so slap-invitingly annoying as to pester almost everyone participating in the project. One person in the study told me over the phone, slightly irritatedly, that I seemed to have bothered everyone.

Getting access to a corresponding British field site went comparatively smoothly. As I had done in Scandinavia, I sent out unsolicited emails to some call centres who seemed (to judge from their website) receptive to researchers. These either did not reply, or turned down my request. I also sent an email to the mailing list of the CCA with an invitation to participate in a 'communication skills' study, a topic which, to judge from their website, seemed to resonate with a preoccupation in the industry, and which would, I hoped, increase my chances of getting access. This email resulted in two replies, one from an insurance company in Scotland and one from an internet betting agency in Gibraltar. The company in Gibraltar was interesting from the point of view of the cultural comparison in that it counted both local Gibraltarians and British expatriates among its staff, but in the end it was decided that the lack of cultural homogeneity might complicate a comparison with a Scandinavian call centre, so I gratefully settled for Thistle Insurance in Scotland. This initial agreement was followed up by various negotiations via email, the submission of

my study proposal, and phone calls until clearance from top management had been received and a formal agreement was in place.

As was the case with Mermaid, even after I had formally been granted access to the required data, I still encountered various snags and dead-ends along the way. A few days before I was about to depart for Scotland, I received a phone call from my gatekeeper saying that I was not allowed to take recordings of service interactions offsite, despite the fact that they had already approved this. The reason given was the high sensitivity of the data contained in the interactions and the company's compliance with the Data Protection Act. I was naturally extremely discouraged by this and felt that the whole project would collapse, since I considered the service transactions to be my primary data. I tried to accommodate their concerns by insisting that names and any other identifying and sensitive information would be deleted, but they would not be swayed. (I refrained from pointing out that it had in fact already been approved.) My gatekeeper instead offered to assign some employees to the task of transcribing the material I needed, and assured me that I would also have the possibility once I was there to transcribe some interactions myself, as long as the transcripts were anonymized and the audio recordings themselves did not leave the site. I reasoned that this was a price worth paying compared to starting all over with a new site, a process whose tribulations I had already become all too familiar with.

#### *Generating an account of linguistic ideologies*

In order to obtain an understanding of the work practices and linguistic ideologies that circulate in the two call centres which granted me access, I relied on an ethnographic approach. This is not to be understood here in the anthropological sense of years of exposure to a culture under study of the type linguistic anthropologists rely on. Few sociolinguists have produced 'ethnographies' in this sense. Rather, I use 'ethnography' in the sense it is most often used in sociolinguistics, i.e. to gain an understanding of the context that produces certain kinds of talk (Hymes 1974, Gumperz 1982). In all my study

sites, I aimed to extract as much information as I possibly could during the period of time that had been allocated to me. My methods included participant and non-participant observation, conducting interviews and engaging in informal talk with participants, as well as examining printed and electronic materials. Each of these methods served to illuminate different levels of ideology circulating in the call centres.

In order to provide an account of the official linguistic ideologies which prevail in Thistle and Mermaid, I collected and examined as much written documentation as I could. This included customer service manuals, communication training material, scorecards for call assessments, reports of agents' attainment of targets, information from the organization's intranet, memos, online course material, post-its on agents' computer screens, and whatever else served to illuminate the nature and extent of linguistic regulation. Most of the time, this material was voluntarily handed over to me by my contact persons, at other times, I had to ask for it to be made available, and my request then had to be cleared with senior management. On a few occasions, agents provided me with the material without the knowledge of senior management. I also took part in induction courses for new recruits in both Mermaid and Thistle which were ideal for giving me a quick overview of both the corporate values and the general work practices of the call centres.

In order to examine the linguistic ideologies held by the people on the ground, notably managers and agents, I needed to engage in some degree of interaction with the participants. This involved both participant and non-participant observation. I observed daily work activities, which included, from my perspective, two highly valuable call assessments in Thistle; I chatted informally with managers and colleagues over lunch; and I took part in social events (lunches, dinners and visits to the pub). As often as I could, I wrote down in my field diary what I observed and was told, so as to have 'documentary evidence' of events (Sarangi and Roberts 1999: 27). Duranti (1997: 99) suggests a scale for describing how engaged the researcher is in the activities of the participants, from 'passive

participation' at one end to 'complete participation' at the other. Though my own role varied slightly, with some activities (such as presence at social events) requiring my full participation, my position was, on the whole, closer to the passive end of the scale. Though there are clearly advantages gained in being more involved in the activities of the call centre (Suzy Orr's work (2007), for instance, is partly based on her own experiences as a call centre agent), it may also carry the risk that one is distracted from the research task (Duranti 1997) or that an overly embellished picture is drawn; in other words, 'bias may arise from "over-rapport"' (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995: 110).

Interviews, known to be a common method of obtaining data in the social sciences, provided another highly useful method for eliciting the linguistic ideologies held by agents and managers. Since, in my case, there were temporal constraints which prevented me from being as immersed in the call centre as for instance Sylvie Roy (2002) was in her Canadian call centres, interviews also served the additional function of quickly providing an insight into the daily routines of the workplace; a speedy version of participant observation (Harvey 1992). Equipped with a set of pre-planned questions and a minidisk recorder, I interviewed agents and managers with the overall aim of eliciting their understanding of and reactions to the concept of 'communication skills'. Thistle agents received five pounds as a token of appreciation for the time taken in being interviewed. My intentions were to give the Mermaid agents the equivalent in Danish kroner, but I was advised by my gatekeeper that Mermaid employees were not allowed to receive gifts from outsiders. Interviews were subsequently partially transcribed.

In an ethnographic account of human behaviour, 'truth' does not exist independently of researcher and participants. Rather, their co-constructed account is partly constitutive of it '(as) modern epistemology recognises [that] there is no description without a standpoint' (Connell 2001: 32). This, I suggest, makes an ethnographic account parallel to the 'realist' position advocated by Cameron et al. (1992). The authors distinguish between a 'positivist' position on the one hand (which fully embraces the idea of a truth

existing independently of researcher and participants), and a 'relativist' and 'realist' position on the other, which can be seen, respectively, as a radical and non-radical version of social constructionism. The radical relativist belief, held by many ethnomethodologists, would dispute there being any sort of truth existing independently of the research participants. Their account of 'truth' is the ultimate arbiter of what constitutes it. Realists, by contrast, would acknowledge that some social phenomena exist independently of the research participants, while accepting that any account of such phenomena relies on the researcher *interacting* with the research participants. 'Truth' is, to a certain extent, the result of such interaction; it is a joint production between researcher and researched. In such an account, it makes no sense to discuss the extent to which the researcher vitiates the data she is trying to obtain; she is seen as an integrative part of it, as are any obstacles faced in the research process.

Obstacles to collecting data were faced in both call centres. Rather than letting this disqualify the data however, as long as such obstacles are accounted for, in a realist position they can be seen as having something important to say about the community under study. For instance, my Thistle gatekeeper maintained some degree of control over who and when I interviewed. If my request to interview agents happened to coincide with a sudden and unexpected upsurge in incoming calls, I was urged not to take up more than fifteen to twenty minutes, although interviews were scheduled to last for thirty minutes. Rather than regarding this as a potential bias, in that not all interviewees were interviewed for the same length of time, it can also be interpreted as indicative of the fact that capacity management in call centres is quite complex both because they experience huge fluctuations in demand over relatively short periods of times and because they tend to be under- rather than overstaffed to ensure there are never idle agents. Similarly, when some agents proved particularly voluble and occasionally overran their allocated thirty minute interview slot, I interpreted this as them perceiving interviews as a welcome reprieve from a repetitive and stressful workday rather than worrying about it from a methodological point of view. It

also gradually became clear to me that my Thistle gatekeeper was very concerned that I represented the company favourably, even if this entailed, from my point of view, some compromises on methodological rigorousness. For instance, he urged me to observe the call assessment of a female agent who (I later came to know) always obtained an exceptionally high score in assessments. When I asked him whether she herself had consented to this on the forms I had distributed prior to my arrival, he replied in the affirmative, but when I showed her the form in connection with something else, she told me that it was the first time she had seen it. Conversely, my gatekeeper looked correspondingly anxious when I insisted on also attending the call assessment of an agent who struck me as being less attached to the workplace, something which he nevertheless permitted me to do after some insistence on my part. On another occasion, when an employee asked me for a copy of my interview questions 'for his records', I had a suspicion that he had been sent on behalf of his manager (my gatekeeper), who I presumed wanted to know what I talked to his employees about.

I faced similar hurdles in Mermaid, where my gatekeeper, much to my regret, would not let me attend call assessments even though this had already been approved in a pre-visit meeting. My experience of this in Thistle had been excellent as it gave an understanding of how managers and agents interpret the official ideology. Despite the fact that I had received written consent from a good proportion of the agents to attend their call assessment as well as from a female coach who was in charge of them, my gatekeeper, who out-ranked her, insisted that this was impossible as no employees wanted me present. Having discussed my wish with my gatekeeper more than once, I eventually decided against pursuing the issue any further as he came across as obdurate and quite unwilling to budge. What this may tell us about Mermaid is that there seems to be a prevailing fear of getting into trouble with the trade unions, who at the time of my visit focused their attention specifically on assessment practices. The individual reward schemes that are extremely commonplace in call centres worldwide are, according to my Mermaid gatekeeper,

prohibited by law in Denmark (collective incentive schemes are allowed, however), and this causes tensions between global and local practices.

In general, though, my feeling was that Mermaid was more genuinely interested in an independent study than Thistle. On the whole, I was given freer rein in Mermaid than in Thistle. Upon my arrival at Thistle, my gatekeeper warned me that he would want to listen through the interviews and read through my field notes before I left the premises; Mermaid gave me no such warning. (At the end of my stay at Thistle, however, no one expressed an interest in seeing my records, and I did not offer to show them.) In contrast, Mermaid managers made a point out of saying that I must commit myself to reporting back to the company whatever the results of the study, and my gatekeeper presented himself as someone who was eager to combat sampling bias by pointing out a risk entailed in the possibility that only the most cooperative, and by implication the better, call centre agents would volunteer to participate in the study. My Thistle gatekeeper, in comparison, seemed quite confident that his company was better in terms of both work conditions and customer service than the competition and I sometimes got the impression that they had granted me access so that I could document this superiority on paper. He went to great lengths to present his company in a favourable light, telling me about the company's low resignation rate (which according to him was only 3 per cent compared to the industry average of 7 per cent), the many charities they were involved in, the promotions they ran and the initiatives they had taken to improve work conditions.

Since one component of this research involves exploring a potential homogenization of service ideologies, I was aware that I would be able to make more reliable claims if I included data from non-European sites. I therefore travelled to the Philippines to attend a two-day conference in Manila on English communication skills for the offshore industry where I also presented a paper. In return, I obtained a wealth of pertinent information, written and oral, on communication skills in the booming Asian call centre industry, both on and offshore. The organizers of the conference had taken

advantage of their substantial links to the industry, which alongside the academic community was the target audience for the conference, enabling them to arrange on-site visits to several call centres in Manila. Moreover, one of the conference organizers, an applied linguist by training, had set up her own business teaching English communication skills to agents in the offshore Philippine industry. She kindly offered to let me attend one of her training courses for a day and provided me with plenty of useful communication training material. While attending the training, I recorded my observations in the form of fieldnotes. Another conference organizer, based at the Polytechnic University in Hong Kong, had invited me to give a talk there. Before going, I attempted to set up a visit to a call centre there. This was, as expected, difficult and on most occasions my request was turned down. However, it did result in one invitation to an onshore call centre in the financial sector. This two-hour visit, to which I brought along the conference organizer and her doctoral student, included a tour of the call centre and a managerial presentation with particular emphasis, at my request, on the linguistic requirements of call centre agents. The presentation was recorded on an MP3-player, and was subsequently handed over to us in a printed and condensed form. We were also given a sample of a call assessment scorecard. The material collected on this trip constituted a highly valuable addition to generating the account of linguistic ideologies and it will be discussed in more detail in the chapter on globalization, Chapter 7.

#### *Generating an account of linguistic practices*

To generate an account of linguistic practices, i.e. to investigate the extent to which the ideologies of language that circulate in the call centres are implemented in reality, my principal data consists of the interactions that unfold between agent and caller in telephonic service encounters. Since the aim here is to uncover 'facts' (the quotation marks are intended to signal the social constructionist scepticism that anything can be said to have factual status) rather than ideologies, I was intent on using a method which would

minimize researcher and participant interference with the methodological process. A quantitative approach, with its positivist assumption that there is a truth 'out there' for the researcher to uncover, seemed suitable for this purpose. In a quantitative approach, 'objectivity' is a central concept which should permeate all steps in the methodological process, from data collection to analysis. In this section, I describe each of the steps involved in this process and discuss them in relation to the ideal of objectivity. As shall also become clear, however, there were limits as to how far I could rely on an exclusively quantitative approach.

As far as obtaining objectivity in the data collection process is concerned, call centres are ideal sites to study since they allow the researcher to circumvent the 'observer's paradox' (Labov 1972), i.e. the problem inherent in wanting to observe how people speak without them being observed.<sup>10</sup> In Thistle Insurance, it is, for quality assurance purposes, part and parcel of everyday work practices to record every single call made to and from the call centre using dedicated technology. This technology enabled me to take on the inconspicuous role of 'eavesdropper' (Bell 1984). Sociolinguist Allan Bell argues that speakers accommodate their linguistic behaviour according to whom they know to be present, and he distinguishes four types of interlocutors according to whether they are directly addressed by the speaker ('addressee'), known and ratified, but not directly addressed (auditor), known but not ratified or addressed ('overhearer'), and 'eavesdropper', who is neither known, ratified nor addressed (see Table 2.2). Speakers will attune their speech most to 'addressees', less to 'auditors', still less to 'overhearers' and not at all to 'eavesdroppers'. The fact that the recording of calls is normal procedure in Thistle, then,

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<sup>10</sup> The concern with uncovering a 'vernacular', i.e. a 'natural', 'authentic' type of speech uncontaminated by the researcher's presence, is shared by orthodox conversation analysts and variationist sociolinguists (e.g. Milroy 1987, Schegloff 1997). In a social constructionist view, however, where language is viewed as socially constructed, notions of 'authenticity' have understandably come under challenge (Billig 1999, Meyerhoff 2006).

endowed me with, in the variationist's eyes, the enviable role of 'eavesdropper'.<sup>11</sup> The fact that callers to Thistle, as is customary in most call centres, are informed before they reach an agent that their call is being recorded also allowed me to meet the ethical requirement of informing customers.

|                     | <b>Known</b> | <b>Ratified</b> | <b>Addressed</b> |
|---------------------|--------------|-----------------|------------------|
| <b>Addressee</b>    | +            | +               | +                |
| <b>Auditor</b>      | +            | +               | -                |
| <b>Overhearer</b>   | +            | -               | -                |
| <b>Eavesdropper</b> | -            | -               | -                |

Table 2.2 Hearer roles in accommodation theory (adapted after Bell 1984: 160, Table 3)

The recording technology used in Thistle had the additional benefit of enabling me to use objective sampling methods. The technology, which is used for assessment purposes allows managers to select a number of calls taken at a specific time by a particular agent. I exploited this function to collect calls of a similar duration and taken in the same time interval, thus holding the potentially confounding factors of call length and productivity constant. Regrettably, however, from the point of view of objectivity, I was only able to sample half of my Thistle corpus in this way. The other half was collected by my gatekeeper. Given the fact that I had to transcribe all calls on location, this was a way of maximizing the data I could get hold of in the period of time that I had been allocated. In a quantitative account, which is focused on matters of fact, such sampling methods are not, of course, ideal. I already suspected at the time that my gatekeeper, eager to present his company in a favourable light, had selected calls that were particularly 'pleasant' or at least contained no customer complaints. My hunch is borne out in the actual data in that the calls that were selected by him exhibit greater rule adherence than the ones collected by myself. However, male and female agents are equally distributed in the two corpora so these sampling inconsistencies are unlikely to have any implications for the findings relating to gender. As far as national culture is concerned, rule adherence in my own Thistle calls

<sup>11</sup> There is another interesting dimension to Allan Bell's framework in a call centre context. Since call centre managers very often use compliance with linguistic regulation as an incentive for bonuses and salary rises, agents can in theory attune their talk more to managers than to callers. An intriguing case, as Cameron (2000b) points out, where the role of the auditor has the capability of overriding that of the addressee.

was also still considerably stronger than in Mermaid, so it does not alter the overall finding of Chapter 7 that Thistle agents adhere more to the rules than Mermaid agents.<sup>12</sup>

In Mermaid, my data collection could not always proceed as inconspicuously as in Thistle. As it is not part of Mermaid's standard work procedures to record calls, my recordings of them inevitably constituted some deviation from normal practices.<sup>13</sup> In order to operate the recording equipment, a regular tape recorder which we connected to the telephone, I had to sit next to the agent as they took the call, which possibly further served to make my presence noticed. The most obvious way in which my presence affected the research situation, however, was in the mandatory consent-giving procedure. I had been instructed by the Mermaid management that, as surreptitious recording is against Danish legislation, agents would have to ask permission from the callers at the beginning of each call to record it. This was also a prerequisite of my institution's ethical requirements. If the caller did not consent to this, which happened only once in one hundred calls, I switched off the tape recorder and did not use the call. For my own part, I preferred when the consent-giving preamble could be over and done with in an as swift and unnoticed manner as possible, but much to my scholarly chagrin and embarrassment, this was not always possible. Some workers would occasionally forget to say it (in which case I did not use the call); at other times, when they remembered, it regrettably disrupted the usual turn of talk. Agents usually preferred to perform the consent-giving procedure just after the speakers had exchanged greetings, which was when the caller was about to state his business.

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<sup>12</sup> Another difference between my own Thistle corpus and that selected by my gatekeeper is that my corpus excludes outbound calls and calls between colleagues. In my gatekeeper's corpus six calls are outbound and four of these are between colleagues. Outbound calls and calls between colleagues have been disregarded from the analysis when the possibility could not be excluded that their type and nature affected rule adherence.

<sup>13</sup> As was the case with the part of the Thistle corpus which was selected by my gatekeeper, my Mermaid corpus contains some outbound and some internal calls, more precisely twenty-two outbound calls of which twenty-one are internal calls between colleagues. There is also one inbound internal call. It is not uncommon for calls to contain calls within them, which happens when an agent calls technical support or other departments while the customer is left on hold. Because I had no way of knowing before switching on the tape recorder whether a call would contain such 'subcalls', I was not, as in Thistle, able to exclude them from the corpus. As in the Thistle gatekeeper corpus, such calls have been disregarded from analysis. Sometimes too, the tape recorder was switched on too late so that the beginning of the call would be missing. Where this has implications for the analysis (as is the case for the opening greeting, for instance) the call has been excluded.

Occasionally this came across as an interruption. There was also some indication of awkwardness on the part of the agent, detectable in the many hedges they mitigated their utterance with (e.g. ***do you know what** can I **just** ask you something **before we start*** <laughing>).<sup>14A</sup> On a few occasions, the caller and the agent would explicitly invoke my presence by engaging in an exchange about who I was, why I was doing this study and for whom. At other times, callers actually exploited the fact that the call was recorded, an issue I will return to in Chapter 5.

Such references to my presence in Mermaid drew attention to my role as ‘auditor’. In contrast to my ‘eavesdropper’ role in Thistle, my presence was both known and ratified, though I was not directly addressed. In a positivist-inspired paradigm, this is not ideal as it may alter the reality I am aiming to uncover. Having said this, however, monitoring and control are still highly salient aspects of work practices in Mermaid. ‘Mystery callers’, i.e. pretend customers, regularly and surreptitiously call in to assess the quality of service provided by agents. It has been suggested that such omnipresent ‘threats’ of surveillance are enough to make agents alter their linguistic behaviour to comply with the regulation (Ferne and Metcalfe 1998). Also, although recordings are not automatic, as in Thistle, they do occur on a regular and systematic basis for coaching purposes. This was evident in the way that the recording equipment, although nowhere near as sophisticated as in Thistle, was readily available and agents were very familiar with setting it up. From this point of view, then, my presence is not likely to have been perceived by agents as a major anomaly. Indeed, on most occasions, the interaction seemed to progress smoothly and without either explicit or subtle reference to the recording, and I did get the same impression as Duranti (1997: 118) that ‘people are too busy running their own lives to change them in substantial ways because of the presence of a new gadget or person’ (though of course there is no way

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<sup>14</sup> Whenever I cite material collected from Mermaid in the running text, I present it in a translated, and occasionally lightly edited, version and, where potentially relevant, refer readers to Appendix B, using a letter identifier, for the original Danish text. Fairclough (1992b) finds translated data objectionable for the purpose of analysing the sociopolitical context of a given country, but as this is not the aim here, I have opted to translate the text into English in order to enhance readability and ease comparison with the Thistle material.

of knowing this for sure). The fact that my role was different in Thistle and Mermaid is more unfortunate for the cross-national comparison. That it does not invalidate the results, however, will become clear in Chapter 7 where I find that Mermaid agents adhere considerably less to the rules than their Thistle counterparts. If my presence had affected rule adherence, it would in all likelihood have caused agents to adhere to them more.

The second step in the data collection process aiming to uncover linguistic practices involved the transcription of the call centre interactions. In Mermaid, I transcribed all calls myself using a consistent system. In Thistle, the aforementioned constraints on recordings meant that only half of the calls could be transcribed by me, the other half had to be done by typists appointed to the task for my benefit. The fact that these transcriptions are done by transcribers who are not linguistically trained combined with the fact that I was not permitted to give them directions on how best to transcribe could be perceived as a problem since it is generally recognized that it takes some practice to accurately transcribe speech. There is a risk, for instance, that important units of speech which may seem insignificant and/or occur in stretches of overlapping speech, which can be difficult to decipher, may be lost. However, it is not unknown for sociolinguistic studies to rely on transcriptions made by non-linguists. Christie (2002) and Shaw (2002), for instance, both rely on Hansard transcriptions in their studies on how politicians in the House of Commons speak, and Ehrlich (2001) bases her analyses on courtroom transcriptions. Moreover, in terms of 'accuracy' it would be naïve to assume that academic transcriptions are privileged over non-academic ones; both are the product of sociopolitical and theoretical choices both in terms of *what* is transcribed and *how* it is transcribed (Bucholtz 2000). The consequence of having worked with two different transcription systems means that when I reproduce interactional data in the chapters to come, transcripts will differ primarily in the level of detail which they go into. As the system used by the non-linguists is rather straightforward, I have not deemed it necessary to give a transcription key

for it. For the examples transcribed by myself, however, readers are referred to Appendix A for a transcription key.

Regarding the Thistle transcriptions I had to make on location, I reasoned that it was preferable to maximize the data I was able to collect even if this meant having to omit some parts of the interactions. The data that I omitted from transcriptions were typically rather lengthy sequences relating to insurance products and policies which did not have any relevance to the research topic. In places where either my own or the typists' transcripts are incomplete and it cannot be ascertained with 100 per cent accuracy that the variable under study would have occurred in the omitted passage, I have excluded the call from the analysis. This applies also in the relatively few cases where the relevant stretch of speech is inaudible. For these reasons, the total number of calls will vary for most variables analysed.

In relation to data analysis, my initial intention was, as already mentioned, to use a quantitative approach. This, however, turned out to be inadequate in that quantifications were not always possible or relevant. Nor did they necessarily provide the best understanding of the data (an issue I will return to in Chapter 4). I therefore ended up supplementing the quantitative approaches with qualitative ones. Combining different approaches, I thus align myself with a growing number of language and gender scholars (e.g. Swann 2002, Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003) who highlight the advantages of combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Some might argue that a quantitative approach, with its roots in positivism, would not be compatible with a qualitative, ethnography-inspired methodology, as these differ fundamentally in ontological and epistemological standpoints. One cannot, at one and the same time, it may be objected, hold such radically different views about what constitutes knowledge and how to uncover it. It could be argued, however, that the dichotomy between the quantitative and the qualitative paradigm is overdrawn and that both contain features of one another; quantification inevitably requires qualitative interpretation, and qualitative analysis entails some element of quantification by pointing out recurring textual features. Silverman (2000),

in turn, suggests that the quantitative-qualitative dichotomy is highly dangerous as it may prevent the camps from learning from one another, and he argues that combining even radically different research methods can serve to validate findings, thereby aligning himself with those who embrace methodological eclecticism (e.g. Baxter 2003, Blommaert 2005). Cameron (2005c) does not perceive methodological eclecticism as a virtue in and of itself but argues that there must be a clear rationale for combining methods. Following this line of argument, my rationale for combining methods is that it will allow me to obtain the best understanding of my research problem, as explained below. Rather than being committed to a certain methodological paradigm, whether this be quantitative, qualitative or eclectic, I thus make what Creswell (2003) calls a 'pragmatic' claim to knowledge.

Where the purpose was to compare different groups of speakers, i.e. male and female and British and Danish call centre agents, I was intent on using a quantitative approach because this method is better suited than e.g. discourse analysis to make claims about the distribution of linguistic tokens across different groups of speakers (Jaworski and Coupland 1999a). Also, a quantitative method is more likely to prevent me from unwittingly reproducing gender and national stereotypes, by allowing the significance of any observed differences to be checked using statistical tests. This is, I would suggest, particularly important when it comes to gender, an issue I will discuss more fully in Chapter 6. Though phonological and morphosyntactic variation is often analysed quantitatively in variationist sociolinguistics (e.g. Eckert 2000, Cheshire 2005), discourse units, with which I am concerned in this thesis, are usually thought to be less suitable to quantitative analysis. One reason for this is probably the unrealistic amount of time and patience it requires to collect enough tokens of the variable under study from naturally occurring speech. Another reason is that, in contrast to phonetic and morphosyntactic variation, where the realization or non-realization of a variable is easily predictable by its context, what Meyerhoff (2006: 91) refers to as the 'envelope of variation', in discourse, speakers have a much wider range of options available to them. The implication of this is that it would be nonsensical to

consider the absence of a given discourse variable as having anything to say about the speaker, as it may never have occurred to them to use the variable in question. Although their focus is not on *linguistic* behaviour as such, Hammersley and Atkinson implicitly draw on this observation to argue for an ethnographic approach to studying human behaviour

because people's behaviour is not caused in a mechanical way, it is not amenable to the sort of causal analysis and manipulation of variables that are characteristic of the quantitative research inspired by positivism (1995: 8).

However, because of the intense regulation that exists in call centres, people's behaviour in this environment *is* to some extent 'caused in a mechanical way' and it *is* amenable to 'causal analysis' and 'manipulation of variables'. The high degree of predictability makes it feasible both to predict an 'envelope of variation' for a given discourse unit and to collect a sufficient amount of data for a statistically significant result to emerge. Arguably, then, just as call centres are ideal sites in which to combat the 'observer's paradox', they are also exceptionally well suited for using a quantitative method of discourse analysis.

Once I had decided that part of my analysis would involve quantitative comparisons, I proceeded to determine which of the many rules that prevail in the two call centres to include in the analysis. My starting point was to include as many rules as possible on the grounds that this would increase reliability. In practice, however, I had to limit myself to rules that fulfilled three criteria. Firstly, the rules I examine relate to 'soft' targets (Taylor et al. 2002), i.e. to do with the way in which the service interaction must be carried out. 'Hard' targets to do with product knowledge and sales targets are not examined here as they are not the topic of the thesis.<sup>15</sup> The second criterion is whether the selected rules are objectively recognizable. As this is a positivist-inspired approach, designed to uncover matters of 'fact', I needed to be able to establish precise recognition criteria for each variable. This excludes rules from analysis whose presence seems to call for more impressionistic judgement, such as for instance '[agent] sounds genuine and enthusiastic' and 'clearly articulates so that they can be easily understood' (as written in Thistle's

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<sup>15</sup> One exception to this is the so-called 'transitional question' in Mermaid which is partly sales related.

*Dictionary of Behavioural Standards* to be discussed in Chapter 3). Incidentally, these more subjectively construed rules are, to a large extent, coextensive with rules that relate to the level of prosody. Since I was not permitted to bring recordings offsite in Thistle, I was regrettably unable to examine prosodic variables (but see Orr 2007 for an in-depth study). My strategy to rely on objective recognition criteria also meant excluding rules from the quantitative analysis that require the agent to *avoid* using certain language, such as certain types of questions, phrases, words, and interruptions as obviously it is not possible to count something which is not there. Thirdly, and finally, I have had to exclude rules whose presence is difficult for me to verify given my status as an outsider. Such rules require agents to suggest using pre-printed forms and using online services whenever appropriate. My marginalized status did not allow me to determine with a satisfactory degree of accuracy whether such suggestions were indeed appropriate. These three selection criteria left me with a total of twenty-three rules to be analysed in Thistle and thirteen in Mermaid (see Table 2.3).

| <b>Rule</b>             | <b>Explanation</b>                                                                         | <b>Prescribed in</b> |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Greeting                | Use correct greeting                                                                       | Tl and MM            |
| Offer to help           | Offer caller assistance                                                                    | MM                   |
| Acknowledgement         | Acknowledge caller's problem                                                               | Tl and MM            |
| Verbal handshake        | Ask for caller's name and state your own                                                   | Tl                   |
| Thanks/please           | Use 'please' and 'thank you'                                                               | Tl                   |
| Signposting             | Inform caller of what you are doing                                                        | Tl                   |
| Name                    | Use caller's name at least twice                                                           | Tl                   |
| Small talk              | Engage in small talk with the caller                                                       | Tl                   |
| Empathy                 | Use words that demonstrate empathy and understanding                                       | Tl                   |
| Transfer notification   | Notify caller that they are being transferred                                              | Tl                   |
| Hold notification       | Notify caller that they are being put on hold                                              | Tl and MM            |
| Summary before solution | Summarize own understanding of situation before offering a solution                        | Tl                   |
| Questions               | Use questions effectively                                                                  | Tl and MM            |
| Active listening        | Signal to caller that you are listening by using expressions such as 'mhm', 'uh huh', 'OK' | Tl and MM            |
| Offer alternatives      | Offer alternatives as part of a solution                                                   | Tl                   |
| Check understanding     | Verify that caller understands and/or accepts the proposed solution                        | Tl and MM            |
| Timescale               | Provide a timescale for call backs and correspondence                                      | Tl                   |
| Summary                 | Summarize next steps to be taken                                                           | Tl and MM            |

| Rule                  | Explanation                                     | Prescribed in |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| Transitional question | Ask for permission to enter the sales process   | MM            |
| Anything else         | Ask whether anything else is needed             | TI            |
| Welcome to call back  | Bid caller welcome to call back                 | TI and MM     |
| Thanks for calling    | Thank caller for calling                        | TI and MM     |
| Personal endnote      | Add a personal endnote, e.g. 'Have a nice trip' | TI and MM     |

Table 2.3 Overview of linguistic rules to be analysed (TI=Thistle Insurance; MM=Mermaid Mobile)

These rules were then operationalized by defining precise recognition criteria. Sometimes, the linguistic correlates of the rule in question were very clear from the communication material (or through interviews). For instance, for the greeting rule there was no doubt that it should be rendered verbatim as: 'Good morning/good afternoon Thistle, how may I help you' in Thistle and as 'Welcome to customer services, you are speaking to [first name and last name]<sup>C</sup> in Mermaid. At other times, it was less clear how the rule was to be understood and, occasionally, the same rule was stated slightly differently in different documents, and sometimes even within the same document. For instance, according to the *Thistle Scoring Criteria* document (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3), agents must 'give caller a timescale for hold, e.g. "I'll be a couple of minutes"'. The same document phrases the rule differently just prior to this, stating that agents must 'ask caller's permission to put them on hold'. In such unclear cases, I have, using other information, tried to establish what the call centre holds as the general rule, and if this has not been possible, I have chosen one of the formulations and/or written down my own recognition criteria to enable a consistent coding practice. This has been done paying careful attention to both the form and the function of the utterance as advocated by e.g. Holmes (1984) and Cameron et al. (1988).

Using a binary coding system, I inputted the data into SPSS. I gave an agent one point each time she or he used the variable in question and zero if they did not. Normally, the term 'variable' would not be appropriate for analysis of variation at the level of discourse (it is used most often in variationist sociolinguistics to refer to bipolar points on a phonological continuum), but in the case of call centres where a rule is either adhered to or

not, it makes sense to use it. The majority of variables, such as acknowledgement and greeting, are designed to occur only once; others, such as signposting, active listening, and thanks/please, are designed to (and do in actual calls) occur more frequently. In cases of multiple occurrences, I have coded the rule as adhered to if there is more than one occurrence of it in the call, except in the case of Thistle's naming rule which must be used twice.

Where groups of speakers are compared (in Chapters 6 and 7), statistical significance was calculated using non-parametric tests. These tests take into account how many times a given group of speakers (i.e. Thistle females, Thistle males, Mermaid females, Mermaid males) adhere to a rule and do not adhere to a rule and subsequently calculate the statistical significance of the comparison. As I did not make any prior assumption about the outcome, all tests conducted were two-sided. Following the convention used in the quantitative social sciences, I have considered reportable findings that have a significance value of lower than .05, which means that there is less than a 5 per cent chance that the observed pattern is generated by random variation. I shall consider also differences with a value of around .10 as worthy of mention, however. Even if the precise numerical values according to which something is deemed 'significant' contain some measure of arbitrariness, as poststructuralists would most certainly argue, there is still something to be said for the underlying principle that quantification permits the analyst to make more reliable claims about the patterns that appear in a sample of data. I should also point out, for the sake of completeness, that as calls are roughly equally distributed between agents, I have not deemed it necessary to control for identity.

There were, however, as already mentioned, limits to the workability of the quantitative approach. Despite, or arguably because of, the relatively simplistic binary coding system used, it was not always wholly unproblematic to determine whether a norm was adhered to or not. For instance, I soon realized that there were many cases in which the realization of a given linguistic rule was absent, not because of a failure by the agent to

obey the norm, but because of contextual factors.<sup>16</sup> Thus, although Chapter 4 is partly based on a quantitative analysis which serves to provide an overview of overall rule adherence, I mostly discuss a range of examples which aim to explain where and why agents do not follow the linguistic prescriptions. Chapter 5, similarly, relies on a qualitative discourse analytic approach to study two calls, which allows me to examine the extent to which agents are able to solve the caller's request, and if not, why this is the case. As this question aims to find out *why* something does or does not happen it is better suited to a local discourse-based analysis. Finally, in Chapters 6 and 7, where I compare the distribution of linguistic tokens across groups of speakers, I start out by using a quantitative approach, but end up supplementing this with a qualitative analysis. The quantitative analysis was thus used as a preliminary tool which guided me towards which examples to select for a more in-depth qualitative analysis.

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<sup>16</sup> When contextual factors prevent a rule from being realized, I have excluded the call from the quantitative part of the analysis. In practice, this means that the total number of calls is variable for each rule analysed, which is why I present rule adherence in percentages rather than in absolute numbers so as to facilitate comparison between different groups of speakers.

## Chapter 3

### Linguistic regulation in Thistle and Mermaid

#### *Introduction*

In Chapter 1, I referred to the contemporary tendency of service organizations to intervene in the linguistic behaviour of their employees. In this chapter, I describe the way in which work practices and, in particular, spoken interaction are regulated in two call centres, Thistle Insurance and Mermaid Mobile. I first describe the way in which work practices in general are regulated in Thistle and Mermaid, and then move on to a description of their corporate linguistic ideology, as embodied in documents and operating procedures mandated by the organization. This serves as a contextual framework for subsequent chapters in which I explore the extent to which the official ideology is adhered to by agents in their interactions with customers. Having described the official linguistic ideology, I move on to a discussion on how employees on the ground, i.e. managers and call centre agents, orient to it in their own discourse; how it is understood, embraced, applauded, criticized and resisted. This account is informed primarily by interview data and observations of call assessments.

#### *Work practices in Thistle Insurance and Mermaid Mobile*

Thistle Insurance is a major player on the insurance market employing over 6000 people in the UK. Forming part of the organizational structure, Thistle call centres are in-house and located across three sites in three countries, Glasgow in Scotland, Derry in Northern Ireland and Bangalore in India. The Glasgow site is the largest, employing 250 people, where Derry and Bangalore have 50 and 150 employees each, totalling 450 agents<sup>17</sup> in the entire company. Thistle call centres are inbound answering 7000 calls each day across the

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<sup>17</sup> Though their official title is 'customer service consultant' ('kunderådgiver' ('customer adviser') in Mermaid), most call centre agents in Thistle refer to themselves as 'call handlers'. I use the term 'agent' throughout to refer to Thistle and Mermaid phone operators in the same way.

three locations, of which the Glasgow branch accounts for 5000. The data on which this chapter is based was collected from the Scottish branch; more specifically from the Scheme Department which has forty-five employees divided into four teams, 'for management purposes' and to encourage people to 'help, develop and support each other', according to a Thistle manager, with ten to twelve agents in each.<sup>18</sup>

Calls taken in the Scheme department can be relatively complex and deal with quite advanced insurance matters. They thus belong to the side of the spectrum which is characterized, among other things, by high call complexity, flexibility and customization (Taylor et al. 2002). One male agent told me that he did not think of himself as a call centre agent in the traditional sense as the knowledge required of him in the Scheme Department was much more considerable than would have been the case in a call centre dealing with car insurance for instance. Approximately half of the calls received in Scheme are from Independent Financial Advisers (IFAs) calling on behalf of a client, the other half being from policy holders themselves. The latter type of callers can be further divided into individual insurance scheme members and those responsible for the scheme within an organization, for instance human resources personnel. Queries about occupational pension schemes tend to be more complex than those about individual policies since occupational pension schemes can have up to one hundred members in them. Because of the relatively higher level of expertise required for some of the calls taken in Scheme, agents in this department have typically worked in the call centre for slightly longer than the average agent in the call centre as a whole. To assist them, they have, in addition to a vast array of electronically available help files, laminated A4-sized colour-coded cards to signal to their supervisor, while interacting with a customer, that they need support of a certain kind. It happens occasionally that calls are so technically complex that agents have to transfer a caller to a colleague more equipped to deal with the query.

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<sup>18</sup> While 'teamwork' is a common organizational arrangement in call centres, as it is in most contemporary workplaces, commentators have pointed to its many paradoxes (e.g. Knights and McCabe 2003, Mathiesen and Wiegman 2004), with some reporting that 'teamwork' in a traditional sense is incompatible with the sociotechnical design of call centres (Van den Broek et al. 2004).

Mermaid Mobile is a large mobile phone company which employs over 900 people in Denmark. While it was initially a concern to me that my two call centres operate in different sectors, one in the insurance and one in the telecommunications industry, as I believed it might confound, in particular, the cultural comparison, I gradually realized, as my fieldwork progressed, that these concerns had been unwarranted. On many parameters, including number of outlets, call volume and complexity, degree of scripting and number of customer types, the two sites turned out to be remarkably similar. The company uses four inbound call centres, three of which are run by the company itself (the same number of in-house call centres as Thistle). The three centres are located in Ålborg in Jutland, Svendborg in Funen and Glostrup, a suburb of Copenhagen, which houses the headquarters. Glostrup employs thirty-five agents, Ålborg has fifty and Svendborg is the largest with sixty-five employees. As in Thistle, Mermaid employees are divided into teams to 'create a common responsibility for achieving the set targets' as a manager explained. In addition to the three in-house centres, Mermaid has outsourced part of their call volume to a call centre based in Southern Jutland, which caters also for the customer service of other companies. This was to provide a more cost-effective solution to keeping the business open at odd hours, weekends, evenings and nights. Employing the same number of people as the three in-house centres in total, this centre answers just over half of the total 7000 calls (the same number as Thistle) made to Mermaid daily. The data on which this thesis is based was collected from all three of the in-house centres, Svendborg, Ålborg and Glostrup.

Calls to Mermaid are customer service related inquiries about mobile phone subscriptions. They include mainly account queries (such as checking the balance on one's account and topping up talk-time) and questions about technical problems (such as lack of network coverage or how to send text messages). Callers are, as in Thistle, of three different types, private subscription holders, business subscription holders and Mermaid shop assistants. (Like most mobile phone companies, Mermaid has physical outlets around

the country, but customers who may think that they can avoid call centres by bringing their query to the actual shop are mistaken as all inquiries must go via the call centre.) If calls are too technically complex, a technician will be consulted, usually while the caller is left on hold.

Call centres in general rely on extensive target setting and control mechanisms to monitor adherence to set targets (Korczynski 2001a). As one call centre worker interviewed by sociologist Marek Korczynski puts it 'you get measured on how many times you scratch your shoulder' (2001a: 89-90). Thistle and Mermaid are no exception to this. Targets are set for both what Taylor et al. (2002) refer to as 'hard' aspects of the work, such as call duration and speediness of picking up the phone, and 'soft' ones which relate to the way in which the service interaction is conducted. As regards the hard targets, dedicated software registers all aspects of the work by having agents type in a code for each task they are engaged in; one code is keyed in for talking to customers, another for 'wrapping up' of the call, e.g. writing a memo about further actions and sending it off to the relevant department, updating the customer record, etc. Other codes are typed in for attending meetings, going for lunch, taking a toilet break, and so on. At the end of each workday in Thistle and every fortnightly in Mermaid a report is generated that displays in columns the exact amount of time the agent has spent on each task. If the set targets are exceeded, for instance, if agents have spent too long on their lunch break or in the bathroom, or if they have overrun the amount of time that they are allowed to block the phone for incoming calls, their end-of-year bonus or potential salary rise may be affected. Aside from the regular printed report, managers and agents can also access the information in real time in order to determine whether they are lagging behind the targets so that required action can be taken immediately. In call centres 'the supervisor can be aware of what the agent is doing at any moment of the working day' (Richardson et al. 2000: 363), or, as a Mermaid agent grandiloquently expressed it, 'it's like having a joystick up one's arse'.

Thistle's hard targets are set to three minutes and forty-five seconds for call duration. This is also the target set for the post-processing, or wrap up, of the call. In combination, talk time and wrap up time yield an overall targeted call handling time of seven and a half minutes which means that agents, assuming a continuous flow of incoming calls, could take eight calls per hour. Based on a workday of seven and a half hours, agents should be able to take sixty calls per day. This is somewhat different from the information given by my Thistle contact, according to whom agents are expected to take only between twenty-five and thirty calls per day. Here, though, a few things should be borne in mind. First of all, there may be fluctuations in the stream of incoming calls, which means that occasionally, albeit rarely, agents may have to wait for a call to arrive. It is also possible that the target set for call duration may be (considerably) lower than what is attainable in practice, though lack of data on actual call duration prevents me from verifying this for Thistle, but see below for what is the case in Mermaid. Furthermore, it cannot be excluded that my Thistle contact somewhat understated the target for call volume in an attempt to present the work environment as more lenient than it actually is. Nonetheless it should be clear that, although my observations gave me the impression that agents were pretty much tied to their desk for the majority of their workday, they also do other things than answering the phones, wrapping up calls, and waiting for calls to come in. A substantial part of the workday, of course, is devoted to regulatory practices such as training and coaching sessions, call assessments, performance reviews, and general meeting attendance. Targets exist also for how quickly calls should be answered; in Thistle it is set to having 90 per cent of calls answered within fifteen seconds. There is a target also for the maximum duration for a caller to be left on hold, which is two minutes. If, for whatever reason, the agent has not been able to resolve the caller's request during the two minute hold, they must return to the caller and let them know how much longer they are going to be.

Mermaid has similar hard targets. Each agent is expected to answer about forty calls per day (compared to twenty-five to thirty in Thistle) and each call is targeted to last an average of three minutes (compared to three minutes and forty-five seconds in Thistle). This adds up to two hours talk time per workday, and immediately struck me, when my Mermaid contact provided me with the figures, as being on the low side, since my own observations seemed to suggest that agents did little else than being on the phone all day. As in Thistle, however, agents must also process the call after they have hung up, and the target set for this activity is difficult to get a grasp of because it is given as a percentage of the total log-in time (10 per cent) rather than the call handling time. As I have no information on how long agents are on average logged on to their system each day, the actual time spent on wrapping up the call remains unclear. Even so, wrap up time cannot account for the rest of the workday in Mermaid. Just as was the case in Thistle, it should be remembered that Mermaid agents also spend time away from their desk when going on breaks, attending meetings, training and performance reviews. It should also be considered, however, that the target of three minutes for call duration might be somewhat understated. Indeed, the presence of a target does not guarantee that it is attained in practice. In the Mermaid corpus of 108 calls, there is considerable variation in call duration with the shortest lasting just fifty-two seconds and the longest thirteen minutes. Average call duration in the corpus is just over four minutes, i.e. a whole minute longer than the target.<sup>19</sup> As Thistle, Mermaid also has a target for how fast agents should answer the phone, and this is set to 80 per cent of calls answered within twenty to thirty seconds. In contrast to Thistle, though, there is no maximum for the length of time that a caller can be left on hold.

As regards Thistle and Mermaid's soft targets, i.e. targets that relate to the way in which the service interaction is to be conducted, these are encoded in various documents and regularly and systematically assessed. In Thistle, the ideal service interaction is codified

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<sup>19</sup> The calculation is based on eighty-six Mermaid calls; twenty-two 'subcalls', i.e. calls within calls, had to be excluded due to the absence of information on call length.

in a document referred to as the *Dictionary of Behavioural Standards* (DBS), which is distributed to every agent. The DBS is a two page document divided into sixteen moves, each move corresponding to a stage in the service interaction, for instance 'welcome', 'present solution' and 'thanks and goodbye'. Each move is subdivided into a few bullet points with explanatory comments and examples of how the move is to be performed. In Mermaid, the service interaction is also divided into stages and drawn up in a two page document called the *Service Standards* (SS), with which every agent is familiar. The four stages are referred to as 'initial interaction', 'problem solving', 'sales process' and 'close and farewell'. (These are referred to in English, an issue which will be further discussed in Chapter 7.) As in Thistle, each stage is supplemented with explanatory information and detailed examples. Though both the DBS and the SS provide examples of phrasings for the agent to use, the documents are organized around conversational stages rather than words and phrases.

The fact that agents' contributions are not wholly scripted, but merely staged (both with the exception of the opening greeting which must be rendered verbatim), places Mermaid and Thistle towards the less routinized end of the linguistic regulation spectrum proposed by Cameron (2000b) who draws a distinction between 'script', 'prompt sheet' and 'staging', which represents a continuum of the extent of linguistic regulation in call centres. The first requires agents to reproduce a scripted interaction more or less verbatim and is typical of short highly routinized service interactions such as directory inquiry assistance. The second prompts agents to contribute certain conversational moves in a particular order, such as 'greet the customer', 'perform security check', and 'acknowledge caller's problem', but leaves the exact wording of these to the discretion of the agent. The last type does not even go that far, but provides rough guidelines, leaving the exact number and nature of moves in each stage up to the agent. Thistle and Mermaid both belong somewhere between the 'prompt sheet' and 'staging' end of the spectrum. While agents are

encouraged to perform certain conversational moves in a particular order, deviations from the stages are to a certain extent tolerated.

The content of the customer service manuals, as we might call them, is further illuminated and elaborated on in extensive in-house training programmes. These are taken both online (in Thistle) or by committing either an external communication consultant or an experienced colleague to organize a course. Vast portfolios of communication material exist in both call centres. 'They like courses', as an agent in Mermaid squarely put it. He had taken courses on everything from how to adapt one's speech style to different types of customers to how to motivate oneself. An agent in Thistle told me: 'I have done customer service courses till I'm blue in the face' while another jokingly commented 'There's a course for everything - except the coffee machine'. The following blurb for a communication skills course in Thistle highlights the 'high pressure' environment of the call centre and suggests that the way to deal with this is by 'fine-tun[ing] one's communication skills and, by implication, attending the course advertised.

Communication skills are very important for a successful career in customer service and sales. This is especially true in a call centre environment. Call centres can be high pressure, fast-paced environments where you may have to deal with hundreds of people in one day. That is why it is so important to fine-tune your communication skills (posting advertising a communication skills course at Thistle).

In terms of monitoring the actual service interactions, this is done either in real-time or by recording them for later assessments. When monitoring occurs in real-time it can be performed both overtly with a supervisor sitting next to the agent listening to a call, followed by a discussion on its quality, or covertly with the agent in principle unaware that a manager is listening in. This is known as 'silent' or 'remote listening'. In Thistle, coaches (specially trained agents with longer than average experience) can and do listen in (either overtly or covertly) on calls daily while managers listen in weekly. The role of silent listening can be outsourced to external companies who call in as 'mystery shoppers' and report back to managers on the quality of service they receive, which is the case in

Mermaid. Remote listening also means that private calls can, in theory, be monitored. My Thistle gatekeeper wisecracked that personal calls tended to contain particularly interesting information and he encouraged me to listen in to a newlywed agent, whose calls to his wife were bound to contain some 'saucy details'.

As far as recording calls is concerned, Thistle uses specially designed software that records calls and subsequently allows coaches to select a certain number of calls from a particular agent in order to assess them. Thistle records every single call in the call centre; both internal and external, incoming and outgoing. Aside from forming the basis for call assessments, managers and agents were keen to let me know that recordings were also for the benefit of the agent in case of a dispute over what was said in a customer interaction. It seems indisputable, though, that the primary use of the recordings is the regular call assessments. Call assessments in Thistle are held monthly and a more in-depth performance review is held every six months. Call assessments are based on five to ten calls taken by the agent during the past month randomly selected by a coach. Five calls are selected if last month's performance was good, ten if it could have been better. Agents do not know when their call assessment is coming up, so they cannot prepare for it or be extra vigilant when they think it is due. As a Thistle agent told me: 'You cannot have an off-day here; what if your calls are assessed on that day? Tough luck!' How well agents do in their call assessment has an impact on their end of year bonus. In addition, the better they perform, the higher their chances of getting a salary increase, independently of the bonus. Assessments last for ninety minutes and start with the coach playing back a call. After that the agent is encouraged to say what he or she thought about it, which is followed by a discussion and finally the coach reveals the grade.

Thistle uses a document called *Scoring Criteria* (SC), which outlines a set of pre-specified criteria against which the agent is assessed. The document is divided into a one page 'accuracy' section and a three page 'quality' section. 'Accuracy' involves, among other things, correctly performing a security check by asking callers to confirm their address and

date of birth (thus making sure that information is only given out to callers entitled to receive it) and correctly relating technical details about premiums, policies and contributions. It also involves the ability to spot potential money laundering, correctly logging complaints and ensuring that system records are correctly updated. Thistle's language-related 'quality' criteria are organized around the acronym 'HIPES', which stands for their brand values 'Honest dialogue', 'Imagination', 'People focused', 'Energy' and 'Simplicity'. Each brand value serves as the heading for between one and four criteria, of which only some seem to relate to the actual heading. For instance, 'Honest dialogue' is subdivided not only into 'openness' and 'timescale quoted' but also, perhaps less obviously, into 'ownership' and 'seamless service'. Each criterion is accompanied with the maximum point that can be accorded to an agent for that particular criterion. The criterion 'clear & concise', for instance, under the brand value 'Simplicity', can give the agent a maximum of six points. Each criterion is also accompanied by so-called 'indicators', which are more precise criteria for what the agents must do in order to score. Under the criterion 'clear & concise', for instance, the indicators are

- Consultant is clear and concise
- Technical statements/jargon are not overused
- Processes clearly explained
- Well paced
- Matches the level of the caller

In call assessments, coaches will, in a very thorough and methodological manner, go through each criterion listed on the SC and score agents accordingly. Points will be deducted for a variety of reasons, e.g. if the agent gives out wrong information, fails to accurately perform security checks, forgets to state their own name or use the caller's name or inform the caller that they are being put on hold.

Unlike Thistle, Mermaid does not record every single call taken but as already noted they rely on consultancy 'mystery callers' to assess the quality of the interaction against a set of predefined criteria detailed in the already discussed *Service Standards* document. Each stage in the SS is subdivided into several criteria formulated as questions, e.g. 'Did the

agent offer to help you?'.<sup>A</sup> Mermaid has developed the SS criteria jointly with a customer service consultancy agency. Each criterion, as is the case in Thistle, is accompanied by a potential score and an indicator which outlines in more detail what exactly the agent must do in order to be accorded the potential score, e.g.

- Did the agent ask you at least two questions to clarify the exact problem of your situation?
  - o Potential score: 7
  - o Indicator: the agent must ask at least two questions to clarify the situation, e.g. 'What number are you trying to send to?', 'Are you able to make other calls?'<sup>B</sup>

The scores achieved, as well as any commissions, are calculated not for each individual agent but on a collective basis and displayed universally on the walls. The scores are regularly updated so that agents and managers can track performance continually. In addition to the collectively based mystery caller assessments, calls are sometimes recorded for internal monthly coaching purposes.<sup>20</sup> In the monthly sessions, team leaders offer feedback on calls agents have taken. Recordings are done by the agents themselves using a traditional tape recorder rather than especially dedicated digital equipment as in Thistle, which suggests a less institutionalized assessment practice in Mermaid than in Thistle.<sup>21</sup> Even so, there is in Mermaid as well as in Thistle a widely held belief that as long as the linguistic interaction of call centre agents is in compliance with predefined targets, it is good. According to customer service guru Philip Crosby

[service] requirements must be clearly stated so that they cannot be misunderstood. Measurements are then taken continually to determine conformance to those requirements. The nonconformance detected is the absence of quality. Quality problems become nonconformance problems, and quality becomes definable [...] whenever you see the work 'quality', read 'conformance to requirements' (1979: 6-15).

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<sup>20</sup> Agents also have a more in-depth appraisal yearly as in Thistle.

<sup>21</sup> Part of the comparatively lesser propensity of surveillance in Mermaid is likely to stem from the aforementioned involvement by the Danish trade unions in the practices of call centres. At the time of my visit to Mermaid, trade unions had their attention strongly focused on call centres, even publicly blacklisting some. Such tensions between trade unions and call centres often made it difficult for me to obtain exact and non-contradictory information about targets, surveillance and commissions and, it was presumably also this vigilance which precluded my presence at call assessments. I certainly came across managers in Mermaid who more or less subtly bemoaned the attention they received from trade unions, muttering things like, 'no, we can't do that or we'll get into trouble with the union'.

Although Crosby's words are now rather dated, the equation of 'quality' with 'conformance to requirements' is a crucial call centre mantra even today. In the next section, we will have a more detailed look at what exactly is encoded in the communication material in Thistle and Mermaid. It can be argued that what is prescribed in it seeks to maximize three principles which have a crucial status in today's service economy: quantity, quality and branding. I will discuss each of these in turn and illustrate them with some examples from the linguistic regulation material.

#### *Official linguistic ideology in Thistle and Mermaid*

The number one rationale for centralizing customer service departments in call centres is rationalization, i.e. an endeavour to constantly make systems and processes increasingly efficient. Though rationalization theories are traceable to nineteenth-century Weberian sociology and have been practically implemented in early twentieth-century Taylorism and Fordism, rationalization tendencies have been intensified in contemporary society (Giddens 1991, Ritzer 2004). The globalized service economy, partly enabled by transnational financial deregulation and improved IT and telecommunications infrastructure, faces increased competition from corners of the world where labour costs are considerably lower meaning companies are therefore under pressure to rationalize their operations. Call centres are examples *par excellence* of the rationalization of society. Centralizing customer contact into a separate organizational division is rational because it enables offshoring, or outsourcing to regions within the same country where there may be a plentiful pool of labour, low overhead costs (rent, servicing, etc.), and fiscal or grant incentives (Richardson and Belt 2001). Staff need also only be trained in one task and since they do nothing but this task all day, assembly line work techniques can be implemented to speed up work.

In the linguistic regulation material, the goal of efficiency is encapsulated in rules designed to have agents communicate in a manner which serves to get the message across

to the caller as clearly and as quickly as possible, avoiding technical jargon which may confuse the caller and prolong the call unnecessarily

- Consultant is clear and concise
- Technical statements/jargon are not overused
- Processes clearly explained
- Well paced

By the same token, agents are also advised to take charge of the call. This will minimize the possibility that callers rant or provide irrelevant details, which may also prolong the call. In the Thistle SC document agents are encouraged to demonstrate good 'ownership' in the following way

- Good use of 'I' statements
- [Use] 'what I'll do is' and 'I'll be able to answer your query/help you'

The example phrases all serve to signal to the customer that their query is being dealt with in an efficient and proactive manner. Notably, they all contain a pronoun in the first person singular (*what I'll do* and *I'll be able to...*), a choice which the material also draws explicit attention to in the criterion *Good use of 'I' statements*. The clearly expressed preference for this type of construction (rather than for instance an impersonal passive construction such as 'this can be done') suggests that high value is placed on the agency and control of agents. In both call centres, agents are also advised to recap the gist of the call; in Thistle this should be done several times throughout the call; in Mermaid once towards the end. In the DBS, advice to reiterate what the customer has said is given both explicitly and implicitly under the four stages referred to as 'acknowledgement', 'active listening', 'summarize situation' and 'recaps key details'. Under 'recaps key details', it is written that the [efficient] agent

- Recaps next steps or repeats key details/actions discussed, e.g. 'okay, so you will receive the form next Tuesday or Wednesday. All you need to do is... What happens then...'

Mermaid gives almost identical guidance under the 'close and farewell' stage in the SS

- Did the agent repeat (summarize) what was agreed in the conversation?<sup>c</sup>

Though it may seem to contradict the efficiency principle for agents to repeat information already given, reiterations are designed to eliminate misunderstandings which may prolong the call.

Deploying questions is in both call centres regarded as central to the ability to control a call. This is because the person who asks questions tends to have topical and conversational control, and both Mermaid and Thistle seem to be acutely aware of this, judging by the space that they devote to the topic in their communication material. In a communication training booklet entitled the *Stepping Up Guide: Your Guide to Providing Exceptional Customer Experiences* (SUG) used in Thistle, agents are informed that 'The knack of asking good questions is to understand what you are trying to achieve', implying that questions have the potential to serve as problem solving strategies. The material then goes on to taxonomize questions into six types, two of which are 'open' (wh-questions) and 'closed' (yes/no-questions).<sup>22</sup> The DBS picks up on the topic of questions in a stage referred to as 'effective questioning' and advises that the agent

- Questions to find out relevant details about the situation, e.g. 'Who is the policy owner Mrs...', 'What information are you looking for today?', 'Did you check with your IFA first?'
- Starts questioning with more open and probing questions, 'What sort of income do you take from this investment?', 'What advice have you taken about transferring this policy', etc.
- Avoids assumptions, e.g. 'You have two policies; which one would you like to cash in today?'
- Funnels down with closed questions to clarify and confirm exact details, e.g. 'So you are looking for a way to increase your income, is that right?', 'Would it help if I arranged for someone to give you a call?'

The guidance asks the agent to take responsibility for the smooth and efficient processing of a call by actively eliciting the information they need at each stage of the exchange rather than merely waiting for the caller to provide it. The agent is asked to 'avoid assumptions',

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<sup>22</sup> The other four are more or less perspicuously classified as 'alternative/leading' (e.g. 'So are you looking for information on a partial or regular withdrawal?'), 'assumptive' (e.g. 'Am I right in thinking that...?'), 'consequence' (e.g. 'What would happen if ...?'), though the material stresses that agents should make sure to 'have rapport before asking this type of question!', and 'multiple', which, the material suggests, should be avoided as they will confuse the customer.

presumably because this could potentially lead to misunderstandings which would prolong the call unnecessarily. Open questions should be asked when the agent is trying to establish the customer's situation and their requirements. Once this has been achieved, however, the agent should 'funnel down' (narrow the scope of inquiry) by using closed questions to check accuracy and clarify details. The belief in Thistle is that open questions are less controlling, permitting the recipient more options in response to them and encouraging her or him to take more speaking time. Using closed rather than open questions as a call proceeds can thus be seen as a strategy for controlling interaction, limiting the customer to short and predictable answers in order to keep the exchange on-task and bring it to a timely conclusion.

In Mermaid too, where a good portion of calls are from callers experiencing technical problems with their mobile phones, questions are regarded as important and efficient trouble-shooting devices and agents are required by the SS to ask at least two in the initial step of the problem solving stage. The agent is expected to eliminate problem after problem, purposely asking questions starting with the most obvious ones, such as 'Is your phone turned on?', 'Is there enough battery on it?', 'Do you have network coverage?', and so forth. In the problem solving stage of the interaction, the SS advises the agent to ask 'at least two questions to clarify the exact problem'.<sup>D</sup> Presumably, the idea from the point of view of efficiency is that this will increase the chances of the agent correctly identifying the problem from the beginning, thereby avoiding the risk of having to backtrack or ask the caller to repeat information already given. Efficiency in Thistle and Mermaid, and in call centres in general, is indeed key, not least when a one-second fall in call time per agent in a UK call centre has been estimated to save the business two million pounds in a year (Miozzo and Ramirez 2003).

While maximizing quantity is their primary goal, call centres are also committed to the contemporary service philosophy of 'customer care', based on the notion that in a competitive market, businesses must actively solicit loyalty by treating every customer as a

unique and valued individual. This must be done in call centres by building rapport, displaying empathy and expressing personal interest in the customers by engaging them in small talk. Bringing up topical issues that are apparently unrelated to the purpose of the call emphasizes the 'interpersonal' or 'interactional' level of talk (Leech 1983, Halliday 1985, Kaspar 1990) and reflects the move to 'informalization', which was discussed in Chapter 1. The attention paid to the interpersonal level of talk in call centres is perhaps even more elaborate than in other face-to-face service workplaces because of a general awareness that when call centres were launched as cost-effective service solutions, it happened at a cost. Substituting face-to-face interactions with telephonic transactions meant that customers would lose out on the personal assistance that they were used to, and discourse tokens designed to compensate for the *en masse* service are therefore inserted into conversation, a strategy aptly dubbed 'synthetic personalisation' (Fairclough 1989).

In the Mermaid and, in particular, Thistle communication material, the concern with customer care is reflected in the prescription to create 'rapport' with the caller, i.e. strategies designed to create common ground with the caller. Thistle's *Stepping Up Guide*, for instance, devotes a chapter entitled 'Dance with the customer' to the concept. Under the heading 'First Impressions - Create Rapport', the material reads

Rapport is a French word with meanings that include connection, respect, in touch with, agreeing with, regard and fitting together.

Two strangers on a train thinking different thoughts and looking very different are drawn into conversation by a chance remark. They realise they are travelling to the same destination, going to the same exhibition, that they like the same kind of art and share memories of other similar events they have been to. Very quickly they are absorbed in a reflective exchange of words, their gestures and facial expression flow with ease, the sound of their voices mingle together as they realise how much they have in common (SUG).

This allegory is used to illustrate to agents what rapport means. The concept is picked up again in the DBS where agents are given more details as to how rapport is to be built and achieved in practice. They are, for instance, encouraged to create commonality by 'mirror[ing] the customer's language and terminology', by saying for instance "“cash in your

policy” rather than “you wish to surrender your policy” if this is the phraseology used by the caller. The SC lists more suggestions on how to create rapport

- Give your name to the caller
- Ask for the caller’s name and use it
- There needs to be obvious signs of rapport built into the call by saying or doing something which is not ordinarily [done] in business calls, e.g.
  - o Ask how the caller is at the start of the call
  - o Enquire about the weather
  - o Pick up on special events
  - o Seize the opportunity to make conversation

By asking agents to state their name, use that of the caller, and engage in small talk, these examples highlight the importance of creating the impression of a personalized service. Another aspect of creating rapport is the requirement to show empathy and understanding. In Thistle, agents were required to come into work extraordinarily on a Saturday to attend an ‘empathy course’ in which they were taught how to properly empathize with callers. The DBS proposes the following expressions to show empathy with the caller ‘I understand that must be really frustrating for you’, ‘I do appreciate your patience Mr/Mrs Customer’, ‘I’m sorry you’ve had that experience’. The emphasis on rapport is meant to ensure that customers do not feel as if they are processed according to standardized routines, but are given individual and personalized attention.

Agents in Thistle are also assessed on their ability to engage in ‘positive language’, which can also be understood as a dimension of rapport because it prioritizes harmony over dissonance. Under the heading ‘energy’, the SC document gives the criterion: ‘positive language (words)’ of which the indicators are

- Consultant uses positive language
- Good use of please and thank you
- Avoid negative statements, e.g. ‘that will be difficult/that’s not possible/I’m not sure’

In his call centre observations, Sturdy also found that agents were instructed to replace words that were perceived to have ‘negative emotional connotations’, such as ‘sorry’ and ‘no problem’ with so-called ‘sexy’ words such as ‘certainly, and ‘rest assured’ (2000: 1094). The Thistle *Stepping Up Guide* takes the ideology of positive language one step further by

engaging in the principle 'routinization by transformation' (Leidner 1993: 18). This principle seeks to make agents not only blindly abide by a script but to transform their mindset into thinking in accordance with the organization. Thus, the guide encourages agents to 'make a personal commitment' by substituting 'reactive' language with 'proactive' language. For instance, instead of saying 'there's nothing I can do', 'that's just the way I am', 'they make me so mad', 'they won't allow that', 'I can't', 'I won't' and 'If only', they should say 'let's look at the alternatives', 'let me try a different approach', 'I control the way I feel', 'I'm going to try and sell a solution', 'I choose', 'I can' and 'I will'.

In Mermaid, creating rapport is presented primarily as a strategy to increase sales opportunities. A sheet of paper is distributed to agents at the beginning of each work day on which to keep track of the sales they make in the course of the day, the outcome of which will affect potential bonuses. A section of the SS document is devoted to the 'sales process', and this is weighted in call evaluations on a par with solving a customer's problem. The 'sales process' in the SS document is supplemented with a separate semi-script called the *Sales Wheel* (SW) outlining the steps that agents must go through to increase their chances of selling. One of these steps draws on market segmentation strategies (Batt 2005) and involves agents accurately identifying the caller's personality type and adapting their way of speaking accordingly in order to more effectively convince them to buy a certain product. The four personality types are summed up in the acronym 'DISC' where 'D' stands for 'dominans' (dominance), 'I' for 'indflydelse' (influence), 'S' for 'stabilitet' (stability), and 'C' for 'competence'.<sup>23</sup> A caller who falls under the 'competence' category is believed to be analytical and critical and they need to be convinced that the product is a logical investment for them. By contrast, a caller who has a personality type that values 'stability' will want to know how the product in question can help stabilize their relationships. 'I' type of callers are easily influenced extroverts who are most easily convinced by hearing about who else uses the product, and 'D' callers are authoritative and

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<sup>23</sup> The Danish word for 'competence' is actually 'kompetence', but this is not used, on which see further in Chapter 7.

autonomous and will want to know what the product can do for them. The guidance reproduced here, which encourages agents to adapt their own communication strategies to those of their caller, reflects the importance of rapport in that callers should not be conceived of as a homogenized mass but as individuals with different personalities and needs (even if these are reduced to four types).

The third and final principle which Thistle and Mermaid seek to maximize is that of branding (which I will also refer to as 'consistency'), an extremely important concept in contemporary management culture (Cameron 2000a, 2000b). In an increasingly saturated market, it is crucial to have a distinctive brand which is easily recognizable to customers and which sets the company apart from the competition, whether this is in the form of standard letterheads or the way in which the phone is answered. There are even companies who specialize solely in branding the hold music, i.e. the music played to customers while they are on hold, for call centres so that it is consistent with their corporate values. A UK management report on call centres puts it quite squarely

effort should be made to identify the conversational characteristics that resonate with your brand identity. Only then will you be assured that the conversations your agents have are not only high in quality but distinctive and reflective of your organisational values (CM 2004: 16).

At one of the call centre conferences I attended in Denmark, I talked to a manager for a call centre belonging to an insurance company who told me that one of the criteria he used when recruiting agents was whether their voice sounded 'secure', which was of the utmost importance considering that they were going to work for an insurance company. By partly predetermining the service interaction, Thistle and Mermaid aim to obtain as consistent a service as possible and give the caller the impression that they get the same service irrespective of which agent they happen to get through to.

The opening greeting can be seen as a particularly illustrative example of the extensive efforts devoted to branding. In both Thistle and Mermaid, the greeting is the only move that is entirely scripted and in connection with which the word 'correct' is used in the

assessment criteria, i.e. 'Did the agent use the correct greeting?'<sup>E</sup>, and in both call centres, agents will be marked down if they get it wrong. This might stem from an awareness that the greeting is the first point of contact that the caller has with the organization. According to the highly acclaimed CEO of Scandinavian airlines, Jan Carlzon, first impressions are crucial for future business relations; they are, as he puts it, 'moments of truth' (1987). With outlets distributed across several locations in both Thistle and Mermaid, and since callers are always distributed at random across these sites by means of the ACD (automatic call distributor) system, there is even more reason for Thistle and Mermaid to ensure that customers are greeted in a uniform way. A uniform greeting will signal to the customer consistency of service whether they are transferred to Bangalore, Derry or Glasgow, or Ålborg, Svendborg or Glostrup.

Somewhat ironically, although the standard greeting is the most important bit of the interaction to get right, given its crucial function as brand carrier, it is also the one which is most often changed. It happens quite often in corporate culture that branches merge, companies fuse and departments are outsourced, and each time this happens, the greeting needs to be modified to be internally consistent. Agents who have worked in Thistle through its many different ownerships have had to change the way they answer the phone frequently as a response to these changes. As one manager said: 'the standard greeting changes every five minutes.' At the time of my visit to Thistle, there was intense focus on the greeting, which had very recently been standardized to 'Good morning/Good afternoon Thistle Insurance how *may* I help you' whereas before agents could choose between 'can' or 'may' at their discretion. Agents were supposed to use the new greeting at the time of my visit, but since it was a period of transition from one greeting to the other, they were treated leniently and would not get marked down if they happened to use the old

one. The rule, however, would be strictly enforced a few months later.<sup>24</sup> An agent admitted to finding it difficult to adopt the new greeting, but, as she said, 'we are we are getting there. Until we change it again!' Ironical, too, is the fact that the greeting is probably one of the most difficult things to unlearn. Because of the high routinization of the greeting (an agent in Mermaid told me that he had internalized the standard greeting to the extent that he would sometimes accidentally answer the phone in his home with it), it tends to be highly ingrained in memory. Because some agents would continue to get it wrong, using 'can' instead of 'may', actions had been taken to eradicate the problem by having administrative personnel stick prompts to agents' computer screens to remind them of the correct phrasing.

To end this section, it is pertinent to ask where Thistle and Mermaid get their ideas about language from. As is common practice in contemporary service workplaces, Thistle and Mermaid rely on management consultancies specializing in customer service. The customer service consultancy business is a multibillion pound industry which supplies, among others, call centres with knowledge primarily deriving not from linguistics but from therapy, cognitive psychology, communication and the (less reputable among most linguists) field of Neurolinguistic Programming (Cameron 2000a, Sturdy and Fleming 2003). Despite the considerable costs<sup>25</sup> involved, call centres are usually more than willing to rely on external consultants because they are influenced by neoinstitutional norms of rationalization and progress (Abrahamson 1996). In call centres, the primary objective is always to make the road to a given end more efficient. Hiring management consultants

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<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to know for certain what motivated Thistle to opt for 'may' instead of 'can'. When I asked managers and agents about it, I was not given any particularly convincing or illuminating answers; some said that 'may' was a more 'positive' way of offering help. Presumably the explanation is that 'may' indexes a higher degree of deference than 'can', essentially denoting a request for permission to help, which thereby resonates with the 'customer is king' philosophy that prevails in most service organizations (du Gay and Salaman 1992). The preference for 'may' over 'can' may also be because it is marked as American, and therefore connotes an American style helpfulness and serviceability, which is often considered superior to European service (Cameron 2000a).

<sup>25</sup> If they become sufficiently famous, management consultants can make huge amounts of money on royalties from books published, accompanying workbooks and training material, seminar presentations and consultancy fees. According to Huczynski (2006), the management guru Tom Peters, who is renowned for his advice on service quality, was rumoured to be charging 25,000 US dollars per presentation.

sends out a powerful ideological message to employees and shareholders, the latter of which are extremely important in the new economy, that the organization proactively works on rationalizing its operations (Sennett 2006). While Huczynski (2006) argues that one criterion for a business idea to take on is that it is timely, i.e. it has to resonate with a real need, it could also be argued, from a neoliberalist point of view, that management consultancies in a way create a need that may or may not be there. Consultancies may for instance exploit the bad reputation of call centres, diagnose the problem as a communication problem, and offer solutions designed to remedy the (fictitious) problem. Organizations and consultants can thus be said to exist in a co-dependent and mutually reinforcing relationship (see also Abrahamson 1996). In the next two sections, I will move my attention from the official corporate ideology and examine how people on the ground orient to it in their own discourse, beginning with managers.

#### *The linguistic ideologies of Thistle and Mermaid managers*

When I asked managers in interviews what they understood by ‘good communication skills’ they tended to emphasize the concern with quality and deemphasize the concern with quantity. (As we shall see in the next section, however, there is evidence that this does not reflect their actual practice.) My Thistle gatekeeper was keen to impress on me that Thistle prioritizes customer satisfaction over call volume. Many of the examples managers highlighted as important, such as being clear and not misleading, avoiding the use of jargon, verifying understanding, speaking loudly and clearly, asking questions, and engaging in active listening, could be interpreted as relating simultaneously to the principles of quantity and quality, as they serve both to minimize the risk for misunderstandings which may prolong the call unnecessarily as well as to signal to the caller that they are being cared for. Despite this, managers tended to present them as relating primarily to the latter, i.e. as strategies designed to cater for the customer’s needs. This was further exemplified in their overtly expressed preference for agents to show empathy, create rapport, be polite, and to

show an interest in the caller. There certainly seemed to be a widespread belief among the managers in the importance of treating every customer as an individual, and being attuned to the idea that callers may have different preferences. One Thistle manager explained to me, not without pride, that the aim was to make the call resemble a conversation between friends more than a business transaction between strangers. Observations of call assessments corroborated the highly salient aspect of creating rapport. In one assessment, the coach commented on a missed opportunity to create rapport. When the caller in the call in question stated his date of birth it emerged that his birthday was imminent, and the coach remarked that the agent should have picked up on this, asking something along the lines of 'oh, are you doing anything nice for your birthday?'. In another assessment, the (male) agent was commended for creating rapport with the (female) caller by 'joking' and 'flirting' with her. The coach explained to me later: 'Many people don't like call centres so they like it to feel a bit more personal'.

In their discourse, managers also reproduce the official ideology of branding. Consistency in Thistle is presented as a virtue in and of itself, which is evident from the following anecdote (whose authenticity is uncertain) related to me by a Thistle manager

A little old lady had been on the phone for various inquiries over the course of two weeks and she wrote a letter to us saying that Mara who had dealt with her inquiries had been wonderful, but when we traced it down, it turned out that she had been talking to six different girls each time but had thought it was the same. That's what we aim to achieve.

It is clear from this quotation that Thistle aims to give customers the impression that their queries are being dealt with, not by various and random service providers but by an individual and committed agent who follows customers' case through from start to finish. This, of course, is the exact opposite of the organizational rationale of call centres whereby workers are actually prevented from providing a follow-through service since calls are always distributed randomly to any available agent. Nevertheless, it is obviously a concern to Thistle to disguise the principle of multiple worker involvement and create an illusion of a uniform provision of service. One manager quoted one of the management consultancies

they relied on as saying that 'a real strong brand and feeling for a company comes through consistency of delivery'.

Only one manager expressed a realization that the additional intense focus on quantity sometimes had nothing to do with quality of interaction. He told me that what he liked least about his job was the performance statistics, which measure among other things how quickly the phone is answered, call duration, wrap-up time, and abandoned calls, i.e. calls where the caller hangs up typically because they get tired of waiting. Research has shown that not only agents but also managers can feel entrapped in the heavily regulated environment of call centres and struggle to manage in effective ways (Houlihan 2001). On the other hand, managers also seemed to welcome the intense focus on quantity and targets, which according to some was what they liked most about their job. In call centres, stigmatized by poor quality of service, long queues of waiting and angry customers, relying on institutionally endorsed policies may relieve otherwise helpless managers of part of the responsibility for the chaos (Kieser 1997). Managing may also be facilitated by the principle of consistency because it endows managers with a high degree of control over the productive output. In my Mermaid corpus, there are a couple of calls in which the agent deviates from corporate policies to accommodate the caller's request. In one call, the agent agrees to terminate the caller's subscription from the current date rather than insisting on the required period of notice to elapse, and in another the agent agrees to send out a document to an elderly customer in the post rather than by email. From a managerial point of view, such deviations from the principle of consistency can be catastrophic because they severely usurp the amount of control that they can exert.

Despite general consensus among managers on the importance of quality and branding in call centres, managers are not always in agreement with one another about the linguistic correlates of these ideals. Indeed, there is evidence from the call assessments I attended in Thistle that what counts as 'correct' is often down to what seems to be the idiosyncratic preferences of the coach who happens to be appointed to the task on that

occasion. In the assessments in question, the coach insisted that the agent use the word 'minute' instead of 'moment' when announcing to callers that they would be put on hold with a 'I'll be back in a minute', on the grounds that 'minute' was more 'precise'. (When said in this context, however, 'minute' does not mean sixty seconds exactly; it is just as unspecific as 'moment'.) An agent I interviewed had also experienced the occasionally arbitrary way in which coaches evaluated his performance. He told me that in one call assessment he was told off for asking too many questions, in another, where he had felt that his actual behaviour was not significantly different, he was reprimanded for asking too few. On another occasion, I got the chance to interview a customer service consultant, who gives advice to companies and their employees on how to provide good service. The consultant told me that he would always teach call centre agents never to use the word 'speaking' on the grounds that it is 'such an overused word'. He slavishly followed this rule himself, so that when answering the phone, he would always say 'This is Ben Hogan', never 'Ben speaking' or 'You're speaking to Ben'. He also told me that whenever agents had to perform a security check on the customer (i.e. verify their identity), he would teach them to elicit the customer's name before any numerical information, such as their national insurance number, their customer record number, or their postcode on the grounds that 'names are more personal than numbers'. Such examples suggest that some of the knowledge that is disseminated to call centre agents is down to idiosyncratic, and not always well-founded, preferences of individual consultants and coaches. This is supported by an ethnographic study by sociolinguist Claire Cowie (2007). She studied a call centre consultancy in India and found that although all consultants agreed on the objective to strive for a 'neutral' accent in call centre agents, i.e. a 'regionless international variety', the interpretation of what a 'neutral accent' meant varied considerably among them. Older consultants tended to interpret it as 'educated Indian English', while younger ones were more prone to interpret it as an American accent.

Some communication consultants and managers may object that the linguistic regulation material is not meant to be followed slavishly; that it is more about possessing the appropriate 'mindset and framework', as one consultant I interviewed told me. However, the overarching focus on targets and measurements in call centres carries a risk that, in reality, linguistic regulation material is accorded much more significance than it deserves. This became particularly clear when I spoke to the manager of a call centre in the financial sector in Hong Kong who, drawing a familiar distinction between yes/no- and wh-questions, talked about which questions to use to which type of customers. At first she admitted that she was not able to 'say here and now which type of questions to use for which type of customers, it depends on the situation'. A few utterances further away, however, she revealed that 'you should use open questions for sophisticated investors and closed for more nervous ones'. On another occasion, she expressed a realization that agents should not use the caller's name in *every* sentence. That would, she admitted, 'be a nuisance'. She went on to say, however, that 'once in a while, say every five minutes, is good'. This very neatly illustrates a realization on the one hand that many rules are context dependent and impossible to pin down to watertight regulation, and, on the other, a coexisting wish for these rules to be applicable and quantifiable at almost any cost. It is perhaps not surprising that given the extensive resources devoted to linguistic regulation practices in call centres, those who engage in it need to find some justification for it even if they at times seem to realize its inadequacies. Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that when individual coaches disagree on what constitutes 'correct' linguistic behaviour, this is likely to lead to an exacerbation of linguistic regulation practices. A coach in Thistle explained to me that when it had come to the attention of the senior management that lower ranking managers occasionally resorted to more subjective and impressionistic means of assessing agents because of a realization that the scorecards were too compartmentalized to account for what goes on in real interactions, the response had been to further standardize and codify the evaluation criteria.

*The linguistic ideologies of Thistle and Mermaid call centre agents*

When I asked agents in Thistle and Mermaid what they understood about 'good communication skills', they expressed opinions which were to a large extent consonant with the official ideology. Agents talked about the need for the message to be clearly communicated, to keep callers informed about what they were doing, not use jargon, and deploy questions effectively. They also mentioned the need to listen to and understand the customer, expressed a preference for 'positive' over 'negative' language, i.e. say 'we can have that in five working days instead of 'I am sorry, we won't be able to have that for you for five working days', as well as of the importance of showing empathy and creating rapport, such as making a comment if you hear a baby crying in background, asking how the move went if a caller has just relocated, or asking them how the wedding went if they call in about a name change. That agents seemed to a large extent merely to reproduce the values outlined in the official ideology was especially apparent when they recited phrases directly from it or used obvious clichés, such as 'going the extra mile', 'make sure you stand out as a company or an individual', 'being there for the customer', and being 'honest, clear, fair and not misleading'. Though it ultimately remains a moot point, I consider it highly likely that the opinions expressed by the agents are a methodological artefact of being interviewed rather than being an accurate reflection of their own views. When I listened back to my interviews, it became clear to me that agents could have mistaken me for a consultant hired by the senior management to test their skills. A few agents reacted somewhat defensively when I asked them what they understood by good communication skills, with one agent retorting that I was putting him on the spot. Cameron (2000a) has pointed out that one of the disadvantages of having a formal agreement in place with a company is that when employees know that your presence has been approved by the

higher management, it can influence what they say to you.<sup>26</sup>

There were also times when the agents' opinions seemed to be a reproduction of the official ideology interpreted in their own idiosyncratic ways, just as was the case with the managers. Talking about the greeting, part of which had, as already mentioned, been changed to 'how *may* I help you' whereas before agents could choose between 'can' and 'may' at their discretion, some agents said that they found 'may' to be a 'softer' word than 'can' but one said that she found 'may' to be too informal. Another agent admitted to never using the word 'but' on the grounds that it was 'too negative'. Now, she told me, she would always use 'however'. Many agents referred to the official distinction between 'closed' and 'open' questions, but there was some disagreement as to which type was the best. Some said that a good mixture was ideal, others that you were supposed to start out with open and then progress to closed ones towards the end of the call (in line with the official ideology), and others still could not remember which type was which.

On the whole, agents both embrace and resist (parts of) the official linguistic ideology. One agent in Thistle told me that she had been instructed by a coach in a call assessment not to use the phrase 'no problem' on the rationale that it is 'not nice to use' since one hints that 'there might *be* a problem'. The agent in question had taken this advice with admirable solemnness and confessed to me that she now tried to say 'yeah, I'll get that done for you' instead. Another agent, showing an orientation to the official preference for 'positive' over 'negative' language, said: 'I don't think we should apologize for putting people on hold. I think it is much better to thank them for being patient'. Such acquiescence aside, agents also, albeit rarely, dispute what communication material or coaches teach them. Another agent in Thistle, for instance, had exploited the possibility

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<sup>26</sup> This became particularly apparent to me in one case with an agent I interviewed in the financial call centre I visited in Denmark. While there was nothing particularly remarkable about the replies he gave in the 'formal' interview, the account he gave changed dramatically when we had lunch together in the workplace canteen (he had been assigned to the task of accompanying me). Here, we chatted freely when it turned out that he was studying English at the University of Copenhagen (where I myself had undertaken my Master's Studies). This commonality combined with the informal setting of the lunch break made him confide in me that he had serious dislikes about his job (among other things, the constant focus on rationalizing work practices) and that he was in fact looking for an opportunity to leave.

which exists to appeal a decision made in their call assessment. The coach in question had decided to mark the agent down over his use of the term 'hold something in Estate'. The agent had said to a caller 'It'll be held in Estate' but the coach insisted it be 'It'll be held in your Estate'. The call had to be reassessed by several other coaches, and dictionaries had to be consulted until the agent finally won the appeal. About one call each month is appealed in Thistle but unlike what happened in this case, in by far the majority of cases (80-90 per cent), the original decision is upheld. Though they constitute a minority, some agents certainly did complain to me about the linguistic regulation. A few agents complained about the 'bureaucracy', and the attitude that 'you must do it this way'. Some even admitted to deliberately flouting the rules that they did not approve of. One agent told me that he would always end the call in a way that made sure that there was nothing else he could help with, but he refused to use the prescribed phrase 'is there anything else I can help you with?' because he thought it sounded insincere. Another reported that it occasionally happened that he did not perform the mandatory security check because he knew the caller so well even when he was aware that this might result in him not receiving his end-of-year bonus. Another still told me that he disapproved of the official ideology to use more 'open' questions to get details about what the customer wants, and that he preferred using more direct questions which would elicit exactly what the customer wanted.

When I asked agents whether they thought what was taught in communication skills classes was useful, many expressed doubts. Some Thistle agents referred to a course which had taught them how to placate and politely deal with belligerent customers, which they had found somewhat useful. Mostly, however, agents were of the impression that much of what was taught in communication skills classes was 'commonsense', 'basic stuff' or even 'a complete waste of time'. They believed in a 'learning by doing' approach, and that their ability to do their job grew with experience rather than with courses taken. One agent said that what is taught in courses does not address how complex and individual communication is. Though this point was made explicitly by only one agent, it is implied in

the numerous comments agents made on the importance of gauging the call and adapting to callers individually. Agents on the whole, then, showed an awareness of language as being far more context-sensitive and complex than what is implied in the official ideology.

As I argued above, managerial rhetoric tends to emphasize quality over quantity. In contrast to this, agents' testimonies are full of accounts which suggest that managers in reality are more concerned with the ideal of quantity. A Thistle agents puts it thus:

My feeling is (it's so great to be so honest and blunt) that the manager's role is to fetishize stats all day. That's not me. It's the most meaningless manipulation of both paper and figures.

Another Thistle agent (who was in the process of seeking jobs elsewhere because of this) talked to me about the management's relentless focus on call handling time and summed up their number one objective as such

'How much quicker can we make this? How much more efficient can we be?'  
'You've done really well this year, but next year we want more!' It's that vibe.  
There will never be enough to satisfy, no matter how efficient and fast you are.

In Mermaid, a female agent, who had qualified to become a manager, was reconsidering her initial plan:

As a manager one often has to bring bad news: 'You have to achieve more, you have to do more, you have to run faster'. And I am considering whether this is what I want to do.<sup>F</sup>

It also came to my attention that one particularly voluble agent, who told me that his greatest pleasure at work was to chat to customers and make them feel good, was often reprimanded by his supervisor for exceeding the targeted call duration. One month, when he had taken this criticism to heart and deliberately shortened his calls, he was commended with a handwritten message printed on his performance statistics report saying: 'Massive reduction in handle time this month. Keep up the good work!' Many agents felt that it was an eternal challenge to balance their desire to help callers with the management's emphasis on processing calls quickly and that the excessive focus on targets actually prevented them from executing their job properly. Some agents confessed to me that they often felt as if

customers took second place behind sticking to strict targets. An agent interviewed by Alferoff and Knights expresses it thus:

You're meeting the company needs, but it's not to say that you're actually meeting the customer's needs. In addition, you're just giving yourself that much more pressure, really. Umm, because you know yourself you're not giving the customer the service they would like, or that you would like to give them. At the same time, you are trying to meet the company's targets. Bit like a pig in the middle (2002: 196).

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I have described how the contemporary tendency to intervene in the linguistic behaviour of service workers manifests itself in two call centres, Thistle Insurance and Mermaid Mobile. I started out with a description of the corporate practices of Thistle and Mermaid and proceeded to a description of the official linguistic ideology, arguing that it is designed to maximize three principles which have a crucial status in contemporary service workplaces: quantity, quality, and branding. I then moved on to focus on the ways in which the official ideology was understood, embraced, reproduced, criticized and resisted in the discourse of call centre managers and agents. We saw that the ideologies or interpretations of these groups were not necessarily congruent either with one another or internally. With this chapter focusing on the level of meta-discourse, i.e. talk about talk, it provides the social context against which subsequent chapters must be understood. In the chapters that follow, I move the focus to the discourse itself in an attempt to answer questions about practical implementation (though I will refer back to the level of meta-discourse throughout the rest of the thesis) as there is no reason to assume that either of the ideologies described in this chapter are an accurate reflection of what agents actually do in talk. I begin, in the next chapter, by investigating the extent to which agents manage to attain the principles of quantity, quality and consistency, which formed the cornerstones of the official ideology, in their interactions with callers.

## Chapter 4

### Accomplishing corporate goals in Thistle and Mermaid

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I turn my attention from linguistic ideologies to linguistic practices. Drawing on examples of authentic service interactions collected from Thistle and Mermaid, I examine the extent to which agents are able to accomplish their institutional goals given that their language is subject to regulation. This is a pertinent question for a sociolinguist to ask because the contemporary tendency to engage in linguistic regulation, which we saw exemplified in the previous chapter, has altered the basic tenet which underlies many studies conducted in the area of workplace talk. Conversation Analysis, one of the dominant paradigms in the study of workplace talk (e.g. Drew and Heritage 1992, Boden 1994, Richards 2006), holds that '[i]nstitutions do not define the kind of talk produced within them: rather participants' ways of designating their talk actually constructs the "institutionality" of such settings' (Hutchbby 1999: 41). What is emphasized in such studies is the local management of talk and individual agency of workers. The extensive regulatory practices which we saw exemplified in Thistle and Mermaid, however, arguably reduce agents' scope for agency and therefore fundamentally change the basic assumption that has underlain many studies in the area of workplace talk. As CA practitioners posit, one characteristic of institutional talk is that it has a goal (Drew and Heritage 1992). Insofar as such goals are accomplished linguistically, the question becomes not so much how institutional goals are accomplished, but rather how (if at all, or to what extent) goals are accomplished when speakers' linguistic agency is restricted. This is a question I seek to answer in this chapter and the next.

The focus in this chapter is on corporate goals (as opposed to goals defined by the customer, which are the topic of the next chapter). By 'corporate goals' I understand the principles of quantity, quality and branding, which were identified in the previous chapter

as forming the three cornerstones of the official linguistic ideology in Thistle and Mermaid. To a certain extent, these corporate goals are likely to correspond to those of the agents whose financial remuneration and/or opportunities for promotion may be contingent on them being accomplished. By investigating the extent to which individual linguistic rules, as listed in Thistle and Mermaid's communication material, are actually adhered to in practice by agents, I seek to find out whether and, insofar as they are, how, institutional goals are accomplished. At the same time, the chapter aims to feed into the applied purpose of the thesis by asking to what extent prefabricating a standard template for spoken interaction is actually feasible, or even necessary, given the infinite set of localized and contextual factors that may influence its implementation.

#### *Rule adherence in Thistle and Mermaid*

It is useful first of all to provide an overview of overall rule adherence in Thistle and Mermaid (see Tables 4.1 and 4.2). The columns 'rule obeyed' and 'rule not obeyed', respectively, list cases where it was possible to make a categorical decision of either adherence or non-adherence to a rule. These cases form the basis of the quantitative analyses and will be presented and discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. The column entitled 'rule not applicable' lists the number of times in which it would be unfair to attribute the non-compliance of a rule to the agent. These relate to contextual factors over which the agent has no control. They constitute the very reason why I had to abandon my original research plan to rely on an exclusively quantitative approach to the data, and they form the substance of this chapter. The final column, 'calls excluded', lists the number of calls that had to be excluded from the analysis due to methodological shortcomings, most frequently the result of incomplete transcripts. Although I have distinguished cases in which rules are not obeyed from those in which rules are not applicable, this distinction is to a certain extent theoretical. In practice, it was not always one hundred per cent self-evident whether the reason for an agent's failure to follow the rule was contextual or individual. To make

such a decision with confidence would require access to the cognitive realms of a speaker, and this is, to my mind, one of the most challenging yet important tasks faced by sociolinguists. The table, therefore, should be considered as a rough illustration of the point that when a rule is not adhered to, this is by no means solely attributable to a failure of the agent to adhere to the rule, but just as much to contextual factors over which the agent has no control.

| <b>Rule</b>             | <b>Rule obeyed</b> | <b>Rule not obeyed</b> | <b>Rule not applicable</b> | <b>Calls excluded</b> |
|-------------------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Greeting                | 37                 | 34                     | 8                          | 0                     |
| Acknowledgement         | 36                 | 30                     | 9                          | 4                     |
| Verbal handshake        | 25                 | 23                     | 31                         | 0                     |
| Thanks/please           | 63                 | 13                     | 3                          | 0                     |
| Signposting             | 57                 | 16                     | 3                          | 3                     |
| Name                    | 44                 | 29                     | 6                          | 0                     |
| Small talk              | 5                  | 68                     | 6                          | 0                     |
| Empathy                 | 16                 | 3                      | 60                         | 0                     |
| Transfer notification   | 9                  | 0                      | 70                         | 0                     |
| Hold notification       | 11                 | 3                      | 65                         | 0                     |
| Summary before solution | 6                  | 60                     | 8                          | 5                     |
| Questions               | 3                  | 59                     | 6                          | 11                    |
| Active listening        | 49                 | 0                      | 0                          | 30                    |
| Offer alternatives      | 3                  | 29                     | 42                         | 5                     |
| Check understanding     | 22                 | 45                     | 3                          | 9                     |
| Timescale               | 15                 | 4                      | 57                         | 3                     |
| Summary                 | 30                 | 1                      | 44                         | 4                     |
| Anything else           | 11                 | 57                     | 7                          | 4                     |
| Welcome to call back    | 17                 | 39                     | 23                         | 0                     |
| Thanks for calling      | 15                 | 48                     | 16                         | 0                     |
| Personal endnote        | 3                  | 70                     | 6                          | 0                     |

Table 4.1 Overall rule adherence in Thistle (based on 79 calls)

| <b>Rule</b>           | <b>Rule obeyed</b> | <b>Rule not obeyed</b> | <b>Rule not applicable</b> | <b>Calls excluded</b> |
|-----------------------|--------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| Greeting              | 0                  | 78                     | 22                         | 8                     |
| Offer to help         | 28                 | 50                     | 22                         | 8                     |
| Acknowledgement       | 23                 | 60                     | 23                         | 2                     |
| Hold notification     | 3                  | 22                     | 83                         | 0                     |
| Questions             | 38                 | 47                     | 23                         | 0                     |
| Active listening      | 91                 | 4                      | 13                         | 0                     |
| Check understanding   | 15                 | 69                     | 24                         | 0                     |
| Summary               | 36                 | 0                      | 72                         | 0                     |
| Transitional question | 4                  | 66                     | 38                         | 0                     |
| Welcome to call back  | 10                 | 68                     | 29                         | 1                     |
| Thanks for calling    | 0                  | 79                     | 28                         | 1                     |
| Personal endnote      | 9                  | 78                     | 21                         | 0                     |

Table 4.2 Overall rule adherence in Mermaid (based on 108 calls)

One of the most obvious factors affecting possibilities for rule adherence is what, for want of a better word, I will refer to as type of call. As mentioned in Chapter 2, some calls in my corpus are outbound and/or internal (between colleagues). Outbound calls are likely to exhibit another kind of greeting than inbound ones, and calls between colleagues, in turn, are likely to contain, if not an abandonment, then at least a relaxation of the rules. It could be objected that such calls should be entirely excluded from the analysis. However, neither the Mermaid nor the Thistle material in any place mentions that incoming external calls should be considered more canonical than others and that, consequently, rules apply only to those.<sup>27</sup> For this reason, when agents fail to comply with the regulation seemingly because the call is outbound and internal, I have chosen to count it as ‘rule not applicable’ rather than as ‘calls excluded’. There are other obvious factors constraining rule implementation. The application of the rules transfer and hold notification, for instance, will depend on whether callers actually *are* transferred to another department or whether they *are* put on hold. Moreover, if a caller’s request is solved within the transaction, this would seem to cancel out the summary rule according to which the agent is required to summarize the action they are going to take when the call has finished. It would also cancel out the offer alternatives rule according to which agents must offer alternatives when they propose a solution as well as the timescale rule which advises agents to give a timescale for future actions. Similarly, the deployment of the empathy rule is contingent on the caller expressing some sort of predicament which warrants such display. These are hardly rip-roaring findings, but they are of such fundamental importance for the interpretation of the data that they need to be mentioned. It is also worth noting that despite its triviality, it is, with the exception of the empathy rule, nowhere mentioned in the communication material that some rules are supposed to apply only in certain types of calls.

There is another highly significant contextual constraint which will have a bearing on whether a prescribed rule is followed or not, and that is the conversational

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<sup>27</sup> In the two call assessments I attended in Thistle, however, all ten calls chosen by the coach for assessment were incoming and external.

contributions of the co-participant in the interaction, in this case, the calling customer. In contrast to the constraints imposed by type of call, the constraints occasioned by the presence of a co-speaker are likely to be less obvious and require more in-depth analysis. Consequently, they are presumably less likely to be noticed by people who are not linguistically trained, such as coaches in call assessments. Rules likely to be constrained by the conversational contributions of a co-speaker may include, among others, verbal handshake and acknowledgement. Extending the caller a verbal handshake, i.e. asking for the caller's name and giving one's own, would needless to say be bizarre if the caller had already said who they were. The deployment of an acknowledgement token, in turn, and particularly the form of it is likely, as we shall see, also to depend on the co-speaker's preceding utterance. In stark contrast to this are the greeting rule, prescribed in both call centres, and the offer to help rule, prescribed in Mermaid, which cannot be affected by the preceding conversational contribution of the co-speaker since they are, by definition, the first to occur.

Other factors which may prevent agents from adhering to the linguistic prescriptions seem to stem from them being in some way incompatible with one or more principles which form the cornerstones of the official ideology. The principle of quantity, for example, appears to prevent agents from adhering to rules which are intended to make the caller feel cared for and being given an individualized service. Such rules are among the ones most often flouted. Agents rarely engage in small talk with the caller or offer a personal endnote of the type 'have a nice trip'; they rarely offer a summary of the call before offering a solution or check that the caller has correctly understood the solution proposed. Also, more often than not, they do not close the call in the prescribed way by asking the caller whether there is anything else they can do, welcome them to call back and thank them for calling. As suggested, one possibility for this non-compliance may be that agents perceive such rules as incompatible with the demand of having to process the call quickly, an issue I shall return to later in this chapter. The only rule relating to quality which

does not seem to be avoided is the Thistle name rule, which requires agents to use the caller's name a minimum of twice in any interaction. This is another issue I shall return to. Conversely, the principle of quality appears to prevent agents from deploying the transitional question, which is prescribed in Mermaid and requires agents to ask the caller for permission to enter the sales stage of the call. This is used very rarely and I shall argue that it is because it is at odds with the requirement to create rapport.

There are also rules which seem not to be obeyed because they build on misguided knowledge. This is most obviously the case with the questions rule in Thistle, which requires agents to begin the call with open (wh-) questions and end it with closed (yes/no) ones (an issue I shall also discuss in more detail in a later section in this chapter). In Mermaid, the questions rule is more often adhered to, something which is likely to stem from the fact that the rule is formulated in another way. More specifically, the rule prescribes that agents must deploy two questions in the course of the transaction, something which is naturally easier to comply with than making a closed question follow an open one. When rules display a comparatively high adherence, which is the case for active listening (the requirement to deploy minimal responses), in both Mermaid and Thistle, and signposting (the requirement to inform the caller of what they are doing), and using thanks and please, in Thistle, it is not always clear whether this is because of the regulation *per se* or because of other factors, another issue I shall illuminate in a future section.

To sum up, I have sought in the above to suggest some possible contextual constraints which may prevent a given rule from being complied with. The discussion might have given the impression that there is one overriding explanation for whether a rule is adhered to or not. In reality, of course, the situation is far more complex. Rule compliance is likely to depend, not on one sole contextual factor, but on a myriad of coexisting variables. For instance, although I mentioned type of call as a major constraint on the summary rule, it may also be constrained by the contributions of the co-speaker, as indeed we shall see in the ensuing analysis. Likewise, the reason for the relatively high

compliance with the questions rule in Mermaid may be attributable not only to regulation *per se*, but to other contextual contingencies including what agents are trying to do at that particular moment of the interaction. The purpose of this chapter, however, is not to tease such factors apart and determine their respective weighting but to explore the extent to which linguistic regulation interferes with agents' possibility to accomplish their goals. In the discussion that follows, therefore, I set out to do this by drawing on snippets of actual interactions. These have been chosen because they illustrate what appear to be among the most salient contextual factors, briefly introduced above, which prevent agents from complying with the regulation and from accomplishing their goals.

#### *Accomplishing the goal of quantity*

In the previous chapter, I argued that one of the three principles which constituted the official ideology in Thistle and Mermaid is quantity. The overriding objective is to process as many customers in as short a period of time as possible. In real interactions, there is evidence that agents appear to feel the pressure of processing calls as quickly as possible. This is manifested in the way they tend to paraphrase lengthy and verbose formula, prescribed by the communication material, into snappier, yet functionally equivalent ones. For instance, in the Thistle DBS section referred to as 'check understanding/acceptance', the agent is encouraged to ask the caller questions typified below to verify whether they understand and accept the solution that has been proposed.

- Does that make sense now, Mr/Mrs Customer?
- How do you feel about that now?
- Would you like me to go over any of those details again for you?
- What else do you think you'll need to explain this to your partner?

These formulations are designed to highlight agents' helpfulness and their concern for customers by attending to and alluding to their 'needs' and 'feelings'. They thus primarily reflect the coexisting principle of quality. It appears, however, that agents feel that such verbose formulations are incompatible with keeping up an acceptable pace of work. In real

calls, therefore, they either omit this rule entirely (in forty-five out of sixty-seven cases) or, when they use it (in twenty-two cases), they very often restate the suggested formulations into a simple *OK* with rising intonation as example 4.1 shows. In the example, the caller, who is administering the pension schemes for employees in the company she works for, calls Thistle to verify that they have received her information about a salary change of one of the scheme members.

Example 4.1

Agent we've had it and completed by first of July  
 Caller that's brilliant  
 Agent but there's no changes as such we've updated the salary  
 Caller yes you've updated the information that's brilliant  
 Agent there's no changes to the contributions  
 Caller lovely  
 Agent **OK?**  
 Caller alright Gerry thanks for your help  
 Agent no problem at all  
 Caller OK then  
 Agent bye bye  
 Caller bye

The bolded *OK* uttered by the agent is formally a far cry from the prescribed formulations, but functionally it is similar in that it serves to confirm with the caller that they accept the explanation given, and, indeed, this is how the caller seems to interpret it by stating *Alright Gerry, thanks for your help*. Agents in call centres, it has been claimed, 'will always feel under pressure and will be constantly aware that the completion of one task is immediately followed by another' (Alferoff and Knights 2002: 187), and they have been described as having 'an assembly line in the head' (Taylor and Bain 1999: 101). This may be why they paraphrase the prescribed move into a considerably shorter expression. It is worth noting, however, that although Thistle agents omit the move entirely in the majority of situations, the fact that they use it twenty-two times in the corpus suggests a commitment on their behalf to adhere to the rule. Abbreviating the suggested formulations, thus, may be seen as one way in which agents attempt to resolve a dilemma they may face (and whose existence is supported by interview data as we saw in Chapter 3) in trying to attend simultaneously to the goal of quantity and that of quality.

It may be argued that dual pressures to be efficient and polite are always in tension in conversations. The politeness model proposed by Brown and Levinson in 1987 (first published as an extended paper in 1978) is based on the idea that politeness in one way or another conflicts with the Gricean notion of conversational efficiency. Gricean theory, which assumes that speakers in a conversation are committed to its end-driven nature, holds that speakers follow four conversational maxims. These are the maxim of quality (speak the truth), the maxim of quantity (don't say more or less than is required), the maxim of relevance (be relevant), and the maxim of manner (be perspicuous; avoid ambiguity) (Grice 1975). Deviations from these maxims can be explained by phenomena of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987). For instance, if speakers judge that what they are about to say is potentially face-threatening, such as for instance a request which risks impeding the hearer's actions, or a piece of criticism, which expresses disapproval of the hearer, they can choose to modify their conversational contribution to signal this awareness, in the hope that this will minimize risks of social disruption. Typically, such redressive actions will entail an elongation of a given utterance, by for instance prefacing or hedging it, and they therefore in some way come to compromise the conversational objective of efficiency. The crucial difference between interactions that are linguistically prescribed and those that are not, however, is that, in the latter, potential face-threat is assessed by the speaker<sup>28</sup> in the actual situation, whereas the former assumes that such choices can be made in advance of the conversation actually unfolding. The finding that agents appear to disprefer the overly polite and verbose expressions suggested by the Thistle material suggests that they do not perceive the situation as face-threatening, and therefore, they can afford to dispense with the suggested politeness formulations and choose to have the ideal of efficiency override it. This finding raises questions about the extent to which it is possible to predetermine spoken interaction, which is an underlying theme of this chapter.

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<sup>28</sup> More recent theories of politeness emphasize also the role of the hearer and the context in the interpretation of politeness (e.g. Eelen 2001, Watts 2003, Mills 2003).

We saw in Chapter 3 that because of the culture of targets and measurement which prevails in Thistle and Mermaid the act of accomplishing goals really only matters if they are recognized by the corporation as such. However, the reliance on scorecards means that agents' ability to accomplish the three goals laid out in the official ideology can be judged only on criteria predefined by the corporation, usually on an either-or basis. Units of real interactions, however, are far from always reducible to categorical classification, to which, if nothing else, the 'linguistic turn', i.e. the move from positivist to more qualitative discourse analytic approaches in the social sciences is a testament. Recall example 4.1 discussed above, for instance, in which the agent abbreviated the rather cumbersome proposed expressions for checking whether the caller accepts the proposed solution into a much more efficient *OK*. Such an example, far from being an isolated occurrence, raises questions about the extent to which agents are given due credit even if they manage to accomplish the goals of quantity, quality and branding. In this section, I will present some interactional excerpts which serve to exemplify the complexities involved in linguistic analysis; complexities with which scorecards are ill-equipped to deal, and which mean in practice that goals are not officially recognized as being accomplished.

It is by now an axiom in linguistic theory that there is no one-to-one correspondence between the form and the function of an utterance. In the *OK*-example already mentioned, for instance, agents can circumscribe a rather lengthy utterance into a formally deviating, yet functionally equivalent shorter one. Another example (4.2) is given below, in which a Mermaid agent offers the following acknowledgement to the caller's problem (in bold).

Example 4.2 (see Appendix A for transcription key)

|        |                                                                                                    |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Caller | yes hello this is Martin Lund I ordered erh a GPRS<br>add-on subscription the day before yesterday |
| Agent  | yes                                                                                                |
| Caller | an:d don't really think it seems to be working yet                                                 |
| Agent  | <b>RIGHT</b> what is:- what phone number does it relate<br>to <sup>A</sup>                         |

The brief 'right' uttered by the agent is formally a far cry from the formulation 'I will help you with the issue' proposed by the communication material. Functionally, however, it communicates much more than what is expressed in the proposed formulation. Although it is somewhat difficult to translate into English without loss of meaning, much of the meaning of *right* (*nå* in Danish) is carried on the prosodic level of discourse. Spoken with emphasis and a falling pitch contour, it conveys meanings of both empathy and a certain degree of admission of responsibility, roughly equivalent to 'that's a shame' or 'that's certainly not ideal', which accomplishes the goal of both quality and quantity at the same time. Presumably this would be welcomed by the coach if properly recognized. Chances are, however, that utterances which deviate formally from those printed on the scorecard may be overlooked because of their category-based design.

Another, and related, complexity for scorecards to accommodate is the fact that a single utterance often fulfils several functions at once. It has been suggested that 'multifunctionality' in discourse is the 'unmarked case - that is, in real talk most utterances do many things at once' (Cameron et al. 1988: 77, see also Holmes 1984). This is clear from example 4.3 below in which the agent in her utterance (in bold) manages to adhere to three rules at one and the same time. It is a signposting strategy, in that she lets the caller know what she is going to do (*what I'll do Anne...*); it is a summary of the call in that it sums up what action she will take (which is to transfer the quote to a colleague). Finally, it is interpretable as a transfer notification in that the agent lets the caller know that she will be transferred to a colleague. All these three rules, signposting, summary, and transfer notification, feature in the Thistle communication material as discrete rules.

Example 4.3 (see Appendix A for transcription key)

|        |                                                                                                                       |
|--------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Agent  | good morning Thistle Insurance Limited how may I help you                                                             |
| Caller | hi it's Anne calling from George & Graham Consulting I need to get a top up quote please for a group personal pension |

[irrelevant sequences omitted]

|       |                                 |
|-------|---------------------------------|
| Agent | OK now what's your surname Anne |
|-------|---------------------------------|

Caller Helling H E double L I N G  
 Agent Helling H E double L I N G OK now it's Martin  
 McPherson you're through to but **what I'll do Anne**  
**I'll just quote the transfer you want to my**  
**colleague they will give you the illustration**  
**OK<sup>29</sup>**  
 Caller thanks  
 [caller transferred]

In the call assessments I observed in Thistle, coaches did not engage in the types of detailed analysis which would be required for acknowledging that agents can fulfil several communicative functions at once (and thereby accomplish several goals at one and the same time).

Just as many prescribed moves can be performed in a single utterance, adherence to one rule, or, accomplishment of one goal, will occasionally preclude adherence to or accomplishment of another, something which is also impossible for a prefabricated category-based scorecard to recognize. This is the case with two rules which require agents to show empathy with callers and avoid using negative language, including a proscription against formulations such as 'Unfortunately, I can't do that'. When we examine real interactions, however, it seems that agents' expressions of empathy often means that they simultaneously flout the regulation against negative language. The examples below (4.4-4.7) are all agents' responses to requests by callers which cannot be accommodated because agents are not specialized to deal with it.

Example 4.4

Agent **unfortunately I am not a specialist in this**  
**particular type of policy Mrs Way**

Example 4.5

Agent **unfortunately I don't specialize in this one**

In the example below, the caller asks the agent to give him an illustration of his retirement quotes over the phone. However, work regulations require this to be dealt with in written correspondence, as the agent points out to the caller, prompting the caller to ask for confirmation

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<sup>29</sup> The agent probably performs a metathesis here and intends to say *transfer the quote you want* rather than *quote the transfer you want*.

## Example 4.6

Caller oh so you can't tell me them over the phone

Agent **I'm afraid not no**

In the final example, the caller, who is emigrating to New Zealand, wants to cash in his policy.

## Example 4.7

Caller and I rang a couple of weeks ago to ask about  
because I'm emigrating

Agent right OK

Caller and I wanted to know whether I could continue it  
despite the fact that I was gonna be living in  
another country

Agent yes

Caller apparently the answer is no because Thistle  
Insurance don't work in New Zealand

Agent right

Caller so I need to cash it

Agent right **I'm afraid you can't cash it in** you can't  
cash these policies in you would just have to wait  
till your retirement date and take it as a pension  
I'm afraid Thistle Insurance don't work in New  
Zealand

In these examples it appears that any expression of a failure to assist the caller (*I am not a specialist...*, *I don't specialise...*, *(I'm afraid) not no*, and *you can't cash it in...*) is highly likely to be simultaneously attenuated by an expression of empathy such as *unfortunately* or *I'm afraid*. Paradoxically, then, the agent is much more likely to adhere to the rule of expressing empathy if they simultaneously flout the proscription against negative language. Such complexities of interrelation are not accommodated by scorecards, whose category-based design entails that the accomplishment of each goal (or adherence to each rule) must be considered separately.

The final piece of support for this argument is the distribution of minimal responses in actual calls. Both the Thistle and the Mermaid communication material prescribe that agents must engage in 'active listening'.

- Verbally nods during customer explanations, e.g. 'uh huh...', 'right...', 'OK...', 'I see...' (TI DBS)
- Did the agent perform active listening during the conversation? E.g. through reiterating what has been said or though sounds such as 'mhm', 'uh huh', 'yes', etc (MM SS)<sup>B</sup>

In real calls, however, the distribution of minimal responses, which can take various forms including 'uh huh', 'OK', 'mhm', 'right', 'yeah', 'no' as well as being a verbatim reiteration of the caller's contribution, correlates with factors which are mentioned nowhere in the communication material. Overall, there is considerable variation in how many times individual agents use minimal responses, the whole range spanning between zero and thirty-four times. The most salient factor for this variation is, perhaps unsurprisingly, call duration, which correlates positively with the number of minimal responses used. Aside from this, however, minimal responses are, in both Thistle and Mermaid calls, particularly densely occurring in contexts where the caller gives out information (see also Murtagh 2005). In Mermaid, agents contribute a minimal response with the meaning 'go on' or 'I'm listening' after each unit of information provided by the caller, such as for instance each digit in an International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI), policy or phone number. Presumably, this is because deploying a minimal response provides the agent with the opportunity to note down the number sequence before the next group of digits is announced, thereby maximising the chances that the information is correctly understood. Such displays of 'pragmatic competence', i.e. an ability 'to know when certain speech acts are required, appropriate or inappropriate' (Meyerhoff 2006: 96-97) are congruent with the call centres' wish for interactions to be conducted without misunderstandings. However, given that quantity in call centres extends only to those features which figure on overly simplistic scorecards, such subtle and more sophisticated ways of accomplishing what are in fact corporate goals are not accorded due credit.

Moreover, in their endeavour to accomplish the corporate goal of quantity, agents seem to produce an interesting, and most probably unintended, side-effect. This has to do with the requirement to create rapport with the customer, which, according to the Thistle scorecard, can be done in three ways: 1) by creating small talk with the caller, for instance, by asking how the caller is, or by enquiring about the weather, 2) by adding a personal endnote and closing the conversation with something like 'I do hope you enjoy your

holiday', or 3) by using the customer's name. Faced with these options, all of which face similar contextual constraints, i.e. agents are, in theory, supposed to be able to create rapport with the caller anytime and anywhere in the transaction, in real interactions, the agent seems to opt for the one type of rapport that is most efficiently executed. This is, by far, the naming rule. This is obeyed a striking 57 per cent of the time, compared to only 6.3 per cent for small talk and 3.8 per cent for the personal endnote rule, respectively. It is likely that agents favour the naming rule over the other ways of creating rapport because it is the most efficient. It is shorter and more speedily executed than both the small talk and the personal endnote rule, and, compared to the former, it does not risk lengthy responses from the caller that may further serve to compromise the ideal of efficiency.

In fact, the naming rule is not only the rule relating to rapport that is by far the most often adhered to; it is also extensively overused, with agents calling the customer by their name three times or more in twenty-nine out of seventy-nine calls (see Table 4.3), i.e. once or several times more than the required number of two. The record is held by an agent who uses the customer's name seven times in the interaction. Whether such extensive usage of callers' name is actually intended by authors of communication material, and whether indeed it serves the intended function of actually creating rapport with the customer remains a moot point, but it is a by-product of linguistic regulation. Such extensive usage of customers' names, which has arguably gone on to become an icon of call centre interactions, will indubitably resonate with the experiences of anyone who has had dealings with call centres.

| <b>Times caller's name used</b> | <b>Number of calls</b> |
|---------------------------------|------------------------|
| 7                               | 1                      |
| 6                               | 3                      |
| 5                               | 3                      |
| 4                               | 8                      |
| 3                               | 12                     |
| 2                               | 18                     |
| 1                               | 21                     |
| 0                               | 13                     |

Table 4.3 Number of times Thistle agents use caller's name

### *Accomplishing the goal of quality*

The principle of quality is, as we saw in the previous chapter, an important aspect of the official ideology in Thistle and Mermaid. Customers, it is believed, do not wish to be processed according to standardized routines, but prefer an individualized style of interaction. In real calls, agents do accomplish the goal of providing a personalized service, but, just as was the case when they accomplished the goal of efficiency, the attainment of this goal may not be immediately obvious to the organization because it does not fit in to a prefabricated scorecard. Let us compare two different realizations of the acknowledgement rule. According to the Thistle material, agents must use one of the following types of acknowledgements to signal to the caller that their query has been heard and will be appropriately dealt with.

- 'I'll be able to answer your query/help you' (TI SC)
- 'Let me see what's happened...' (TI DBS)
  - o 'Let me see how I can help...' (TI DBS)
  - o 'I do apologize for that, let me see what I can do...' (TI DBS)
  - o 'I can certainly help with that' (TI DBS)

Below (examples 4.8 and 4.9) I show two types of acknowledgements provided by Thistle agents which differ, in particular, in respect to politeness. (The acknowledgements are reproduced in bold.)

Example 4.8 (see Appendix A for transcription key; overlaps have been edited out for readability)

Agent good morning Thistle Insurance how may I help you  
 Caller hello it's Molly here calling from Flanagan Financial  
 Agent hi Molly  
 Caller hi can you give me a fund value please  
 Agent **yeah of course I can** can I take your national insurance number

Example 4.9 (see Appendix A for transcription key; overlaps have been edited out for readability)

Caller oh hello erhm I was speaking to Lucy Welsh last week  
 Agent yes  
 Caller who was gonna get some figures out to me  
 Agent alright  
 Caller and erh I'm just trying to find out what happened with them please  
 Agent **yes o- of course I do apologize you had to phone TWICE for the same matter let me find out**

### what's happening with your information

If we compare the two acknowledgements above, it seems that the degree of politeness favoured by the agent is contingent upon the politeness expressed by the caller in the preceding turn. In example 4.8, the caller's request is relatively brash and direct (*hi can you give me a fund value please*) compared to that in example 4.9, where the caller states his purpose in a lengthier and somewhat more hesitant way (*oh hello erhm I was speaking to Lucy Welsh last week who was gonna get some figures out to me and erh I'm just trying to find out what happened with them please*). In 4.8, the caller uses other-referencing in her request (*can you*), which Clayman and Heritage (2002) suggest is less deferential than self-referencing which is used by the caller in 4.9 (*I was speaking* and *I'm just trying to find out*). Moreover, the caller in 4.8 appeals to ability rather than willingness (*can you* rather than *will you*), and deploys a verb in the present tense (*can*) rather than the generally more polite past tense (*could*), both of which suggest a lower degree of deference (Heritage and Clayman 2002). By contrast, the caller in 4.9 hedges his request using *just* and a seemingly less forceful progressive construction *I am just trying* as well as a couple of hesitation markers *erh*. In short, then, the request in 4.8 is less deferential than the one in 4.9. In this light, it is not surprising that the agents differ in their types of acknowledgements. The relatively brash request in 4.8 seems to invite a similarly impetuous acknowledgement from the agent whereas the highly mitigated request in 4.9 seems to elicit an equally deferential acknowledgement from the agent, first an apology and then an offer to help. Such sophisticated ways in which agents tailor their speech style to different customers are examples of how agents accomplish the goal of creating rapport. Ironically, however, the attainment of such goals is not recognized by the corporations when they do occur.

Sometimes, when agents attempt to create rapport it has an effect that seems to be the reverse of what was intended. In Thistle, as already mentioned, agents are required to create rapport with the caller by using their name. Even when this rule is adhered to, however, there is no guarantee that it will lead to interactional success. Agents occasionally

get the callers' name wrong (example 4.10), with the possible effect of creating social disruption instead of alignment.

Example 4.10 (see Appendix A for transcription key)

Agent good morning Thistle Insurance can I help you  
 Caller oh hi it's **Kat** from Best Financial Advice in Brighton  
 Agent hi **Pat** //it's Chrissie=  
 Caller //h- hiya  
 Agent =here  
 Caller sorry it's **Kat**  
 Agent **KAT** //sorry **Kat** <LAUGHS>

The agent here mishears the caller's name as *Pat*, rather than what she really said, namely *Kat*. Similar social gaffes may occur in situations where the agent only has access to a written version of the caller's name and may doubt the pronunciation, which is occasionally the case with foreign names (Cameron 2000a). Though mishearings of the type shown in example 4.10 are relatively rare in my corpora of calls, there are other pitfalls of the naming rule. Agents told me about situations in which they had happened to use a caller's first name where it had later turned out that they would have preferred title and last name. They also related situations in which the caller happened to be a doctor and was not pleased at not being referred to as such. Of course, speakers in non call centre talk are not exempt from such social misdemeanours but the difference is that when uncertain about which address term to use, or of the pronunciation of a name, speakers in non call centre talk have an avoidance strategy at their disposal. They can choose not to employ an address term at all, an option which is not available to agents in call centres who are often told to use a caller's name a pre-specified number of times in any given transaction.

Another precarious situation is exemplified below (4.11). The caller, who is calling from a business, refers to the agent using his first name (which is not uncommon when the speakers, as here, are business associates), and he does so frequently (six times in total in the call, five of which occur in the extract below (in bold)).

Example 4.11

Agent good afternoon Thistle how may I help you?  
 Caller hello who am I speaking to?  
 Agent **my name is Steve**

Caller hello **Steve Steve** it's Mark calling from Reid's Partnership  
 Agent hello  
 Caller **Steve** can I give you a policy number please?  
 Agent yep  
 Caller oh right now I've lost it hang on bear with me  
**Steve** I had it and then I closed the file and lost it right it's four five three two eight one  
 Agent Mark could you confirm your full address as a security check?  
 Caller yes certainly it's six A Adley House Manchester Court Sir Aldous Huxley Road London N fourteen four QP  
 Agent that's great **you're talking to Steve** what can I do for you?  
 Caller OK **Steve** basically what it is I've done a review with this client I've just rung up and got some information from you guys and forgot this bit I just wanted to confirm the current contribution you're receiving on this one there should be both an employer contribution and employee

What we see is that the caller uses the agent's name, *Steve*, four times until the agent suddenly introduces himself in his last turn (*You're talking to Steve*), despite the fact that he has already introduced himself in his second turn and that the caller is obviously familiar with his name. This could be interpreted as somewhat rude, because it is as if the agent wants to make a point out of *allowing* the caller to call him by his first name. In all likelihood, such an impolite power display is not what the agent intended, nor does it seem to be interpreted by the caller as such. Rather, the agent's redundant stating his name is more readily interpretable as the already discussed degree to which the interaction is routinized and internalized. The fact that this exchange did not have more dire consequences in this case, however, does not alter the theoretical possibility, that in another case it might have caused affront or at least some degree of puzzlement on behalf of the caller. In these examples, agents' possibility to achieve the corporate goal of quality is actually undermined by that very principle.

There are also cases in which corporate goals seem to conflict with agents' own, locally based, goal to maintain social harmony. A particularly illustrative case of this is the so-called 'transitional question' prescribed in Mermaid, whose purpose is to elicit the

caller's consent to proceed from the problem-solving stage of the interaction to the sales process. The Mermaid SS says

- When caller's problem was solved, did the agent ask for permission to review their subscription or to introduce new Mermaid products?<sup>c</sup>

Suggestive selling is an important part of the service interaction in Mermaid with agents formally required to sell add-on products (such as photo messaging, video telephony, internet and email services) to 30 per cent of calling customers irrespective of whether callers have expressed any intent to buy anything. Before agents are allowed to enter the 'sales process' of the call, however, they must elicit the caller's consent to do so by asking a so-called 'transitional question' ('overgangsspørgsmål'). This is a legal requirement of the Danish sales law which prohibits companies from making unsolicited sales attempts. A transitional question, thus, is a question that signals transition from the problem solving stage of the call to the sales stage of the call. The company's four call centre sites competed in respect of adherence to the rule transitional question, with the Zealand site leading. It was not that the sales targets themselves were not met - they were - but whatever product had been sold was strictly speaking illegally sold if a transitional question had not first been asked.

In actual calls, agents' use of transitional questions is remarkably low; it is used only four times out of a total of seventy occasions when it should have been used. This may have to do with the inherently face-threatening nature of this linguistic rule. When agents ask if they can enter the sales process, they effectively recast the interaction from a customer-initiated service call into a company-initiated sales call, thereby risking imposition on the caller (see also Leidner 1993). In these four cases (two of which are exemplified below) where transitional questions are used, they are phrased in a highly mitigated way.

Example 4.12 (see Appendix A for transcription key)

Agent **I- I just** want to check with you **while I have you here** are you interested in being contacted **otherwise** if in the future we **sort of** come up with **a- a** new subscription that can be more advantageous<sup>d</sup>

Example 4.13 (see Appendix A for transcription key)

Agent what I **just** wanted to hear **if erh if I can just ask you a question** //(xx)=

Caller //yes

Agent =it's **if- if erh** you are interested in being contacted if we get some offers where we can see that **erh** it would be **erh** good offers for you<sup>E</sup>

Birgitte, in example 4.12, hedges her contribution with *just*, *while I have you here*, *otherwise*, *sort of* and there are also a couple of false starts *I- I* and *a- a*. Similarly, Karina, in example 4.13, uses the hedge *just*, an embedded conditional clause (*if erh if I can just ask you a question*), and deploys several hesitation markers (*erh*). All these can be analysed as devices that combine to convey an impression of tentativeness, in turn corroborating an interpretation of transitional questions as being inherently face-threatening. An alternative, and more cynical, interpretation might be that, by mitigating the assertiveness of their utterance, agents reduce the risk of a negative reply from the customer, and thereby the opportunity to receive a bonus, in that coming across as too forceful might antagonize them. (In both the cases above, the customer's response was in fact positive.) The former interpretation, however, is supported both by Mermaid's own impression that the rule which faced the biggest challenges in terms of implementation, was the transitional question and by the following Mermaid agent testimony.

You can't bloody do that [ask transitional questions]. Sorry for swearing. But seriously, you can't do that. The customer is going to think 'oh yeah so now she is going to palm something off on me'?<sup>F</sup>

At my visit to the Glostrup site, the focus on transitional questions was obvious in that the walls of the large open spaced offices in which agents were sitting were decorated with A4-sized sheets of paper on which possible wordings of transitional questions were written as blatant reminders. At the time of my visit to Mermaid, there was intense focus on transitional questions as they had been identified across the four sites as the one step of the service interaction that agents most often 'forgot' (presumably because of their inherently face-threatening nature, by which a customer-initiated service request is effectively recast into a company-initiated sales attempt). The highly face-threatening nature of transitional

questions, then, makes them stand out as a particularly illustrative example of the many tensions agents face. In this case, the tension consists of wanting, on the one hand, to adhere to the linguistic regulation and, on the other, to maintain social harmony with the caller.

*Accomplishing the goal of branding*

I expounded in the previous chapter that call centres strive for branding in the form of inter-call homogeneity. On one level, the ideal of consistency seems to have been attained. Agents certainly do orient to the regulation which is clear from the many rules, discussed above, which are followed if even just to a certain extent. As callers have gradually become acculturated to the workings of call centres, chances are they are no longer taken aback when agents on several occasions use names to create rapport, when they ask to confirm identities to perform a security check, when they put callers on hold or transfer them to another department, or when they, before closing the call, ask if there is anything else they can help with. Call centre interactions are by now an inescapable phenomenon of Western rationalized societies, the workings with which most adult speakers are familiar. From this point of view, then, the extensive focus on call consistency seems to have worked.

However, as already noted, there are limits to the extent to which agents are able to accomplish the goal of consistency, one significant factor being the conversational contributions of the co-participant in the interaction, in this case, the calling customer. In the communication material, the caller's conversational contributions are conspicuously absent. In real interactions, however, it is not infrequently the case that agents are prevented from following a rule because the caller does it for them. The verbal handshake rule in Thistle, for instance, requires agents to give their name at the first opportunity, but sometimes, beyond their control, the caller pre-empts them and states their name before the agent has a chance to follow the rule. A similar thing happens in example 4.14 below taken from Mermaid. The caller calls because her mobile phone keeps resending the same

multimedia message (MMS) to her recipient, and she wants to make sure that she will not be charged for this. Towards the end of the call, the caller summarizes the gist of the conversation (in bold) before the agent has a chance to do so.

Example 4.14 (see Appendix A for transcription key; overlaps and pauses have been edited out for readability)

Caller **but erh but they will deduct those again**

Agent you are- you will only be charged for- for one MMS<sup>6</sup>

Although Mermaid agents are required to summarize the main content of the call, the agent here is prevented from doing so because the caller has already done it. Such examples show that conversations are co-constructed between participants engaged in the interaction (Nofsinger 1991), and that agents are never fully in control of the conversation. Because of this there are obvious limits to the extent that consistency is attainable.<sup>30</sup>

Another example of this is provided below. Here, the caller's conversational contributions severely delay the agent's possibility to perform the prescribed security check, which, in turn, serves to compromise both his ability to attain the ideal of consistency and that of quantity by ensuring a quick and efficient processing of the call. Some of the most important work in conversation analysis has been to describe a system for turn-taking, i.e. describe a model for how speakers know when it is their turn to talk (Sacks et al. 1974). Speakers in conversation are able to establish with great precision a so-called 'turn transition relevance place' (TTRP), i.e. places where they are permitted or expected to take the floor. In example 4.15 below, the caller, an independent financial adviser calling in regards to a deceased client, understandably appears to consider the agent's 'how may I help' as a TTRP, and she proceeds to state her query (turn 2). What she does not seem to be aware of, however, is that her query is meant to be brief at this stage of the interaction, as it is supposed to be immediately followed by the agent's security check. In actual fact, there is not much the agent can do for the caller without having performed the mandatory

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<sup>30</sup> Of course, one could argue that the ideal of consistency is also attained as long as cases in which rules do not apply are treated consistently, for instance by classifying them as 'not applicable'. Call assessment scorecards, however, do not normally have a 'not applicable' option and so this does not seem to be a viable possibility.

security check to confirm that he is legally entitled to give out the information the caller is asking for.

Example 4.15 (see Appendix A for transcription key)

- 1 Agent good a- good morning Thistle Insurance Limited  
you're through to Ivan how may I help
- 2 Caller oh good morning Ivan this is Linda Tracy here  
at Callaghans Cargo at Cambridge (.) erhm we  
received a reminder letter in connection with  
an- the late Mr Ken Wickham (.) erhm and he I-  
I've been waiting for weeks and weeks to hear  
from the solicitor
- 3 Agent //OK
- 4 Caller //and we finally received a copy of the will  
(.) and erhm (.) you know so we would now find  
a claim form and erh it would be put in the  
post to you today
- 5 Agent excellent (.) erhm do you want me  
//just to put (xxx)-
- 6 Caller //but the only thing with this will it  
actually names erhm four people (.) so  
obviously I've had to put the four people on  
the claims //form=
- 7 Agent //yeah
- 8 Caller =and presume you'll just divide it you know i-  
in equal amounts between them
- 9 Agent o- erhm
- 10 Caller and just to confirm as well he's not married-  
Mr Wickham was never married but erhm
- 11 Agent %not married% //erhm
- 12 Caller //I've answered the form  
obviously to that effect
- 13 Agent no problem do you have a policy number there  
for me //(so I can)-please
- 14 Caller //erh yes (.) it's erh (.) well the  
actual reference number of- of the scheme  
is five double three C H (.) two four /six and  
erh Mr Wickham's reference number was D four A
- 15 Agent yep
- 16 Caller seven nine (.) two oh (.) one four (.) T for  
tango
- 17 Agent thank you very much (.) if you just bear with  
me a moment I get //those details

At turn 3, which would be an appropriate place for the agent to take the floor and perform the security check, he does not manage to get a turn at talk; his *OK* is overlapped by the caller's continued stretch of speech. At turn 5, he has another go at getting a turn at talk, but is interrupted by the caller (turn 6). The agent's *yeah* at turn 7 also fails to win the floor and remains, as his other attempts, overpowered by the caller's speech. At turn 8, the caller's stretch of speech continues with her announcement that she presumes that the

amount stated in the will of the deceased will be divided equally between the four claimants. Faced with what is essentially a question about the content of the will, the agent's response is merely *o-erhm* because he still has not got access to the actual details of the record. The caller continues to contribute information on the client in turns 10 and 12, and the agent, at turn 11, only manages to briefly acknowledge this piece of information by reiterating what the caller has just said (i.e. that the deceased was not married). It is not until turn 13 when the agent finally manages to ask for the policy number he requires to access the record and perform the compulsory security check, which is far later than the vast majority of calls in the corpus. In interviews, agents confirmed to me that one of the challenges in adhering to the prescriptions was that customers sometimes had a tendency to ramble. In this case, however, I would argue that the caller's rambling is a venial offence in that the prescribed 'how may I help you' appeals to her ethnomethodological awareness to state her query, yet without saying anything about this statement having to be brief.

To finish this section, I would like to point to what seems to be an unwanted side effect of the high focus on branding in call centres, just as I above pointed to unintended side effects of the focus on quantity and quality. Leidner argues that when work is highly routinized, as it is in call centres, it may cause workers to behave unreflectively, like automata. She relates an episode in which she, working at the till at a McDonald's restaurant as part of her research, had the following exchange with a customer

|               |                                                                       |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Customer      | A hamburger and a large Coke                                          |
| Robin Leidner | (while punching the order into the cash register): something to drink |
| Customer      | I said, a Coke                                                        |
| Robin Leidner | Oh, I meant to say, 'For here or to go?'                              |

(1993: 185)

There are many occurrences in the call centre interactions that show evidence of such routinization. In Thistle, agents are required to alter their opening greeting according to the time of the day in which they answer ('good morning' in the morning and 'good afternoon' in the afternoon), but given the high degree of routinization, they very often happen to use the wrong one, i.e. 'good morning' in the afternoon and vice versa. Sometimes, the error is

noticed and rectified by the agents (as in example 4.16 below where the agent even succeeds in turning the mistake into an opportunity to create rapport by making a joke of the situation). Very often, however, it is not.

Example 4.16 (see Appendix A for transcription key)

Agent hello Mr Harris good afternoon to you sir

Caller //(xx)

Agent //good MORNING sir Goodness getting ahead of myself

Caller <LAUGHS>

As further evidence of routinization, recall what was mentioned in the previous chapter, namely a Mermaid agent's revelation that he occasionally happened to answer the phone in his house with the prescribed Mermaid greeting. While linguistic regulation is hardly the sole culprit of such non-reflective deliveries of service - the routinization of work presumably also being to blame - it is hardly a way of combating them either. If the greeting were not supposed to be reproduced verbatim as prescribed, for instance, agents may have chosen a temporally generic one which would eliminate the possibility of them getting it wrong. This is an example in which linguistic regulation seems to desensitize agents and curtail their judgement. Linguistic regulation, in other words, seems to operate at a level where it paradoxically reduces agents' possibilities of accomplishing their institutional goals.

#### *Questioning the necessity of linguistic regulation*

So far, I have examined how agents attempt to accomplish corporate goals whilst the medium through which they are supposed to do this, i.e. language, is regulated. Given the problems highlighted, it is worth asking whether linguistic regulation is actually useful and necessary. As we saw in the previous chapter, questions figure prominently in both the Thistle and the Mermaid communication material and because of this they may be particularly interesting to scrutinize from the point of view of workability in actual interactions. Under 'effective questioning' in the Thistle DBS material, agents are urged to start with open and probing questions and funnel down with closed ones. In real calls in

Thistle, however, this rule is followed only three times, and disobeyed fifty-nine times. In most of the cases where the rule is disobeyed, this is because the agent does not need to ask the caller two questions in the problem solving stage of the call; more often the caller talks without having to be prompted to do so. Again, this points to a discrepancy between what is regulated and what is usable in actual calls. Similarly, in some cases, the non-adherence is due to the fact that the material's distinction between 'open' (i.e. wh-) questions and 'closed' (i.e. yes/no-) questions is not tenable in practice. As mentioned, the material urges agents to start out with the former and then narrow down the scope of inquiry by employing the latter. In example 4.17 taken from a real interaction, however, it is the yes/no-question that is the more open of the two and the wh-question that is narrowing the scope of inquiry.

Example 4.17

Agent we've got your retirement date as twenty fifth of December two thousand four you are correct **are you looking to extend past that**

Caller yes I am yeah

Agent right no problem at all **when are you looking to extend it to**

Caller ten years I think

Agent right no problem can you put that in writing for us Mr Holden and then we can get the file updated to show that

In the first bolded passage, the agent employs a yes/no-question to ask whether the caller wishes to extend his retirement date, and when this serves to elicit a positive confirmation, she proceeds, in the second bolded passage, to trying to specify when the caller wants to extend it to, i.e. she is in effect narrowing the scope of inquiry. She does this, however, by employing a wh-question, which the material described as open questions suitable for the beginning of a question sequence. It seems, then, that the function of the two types of questions is the reverse of what the material claims. Aside from exposing that the communication material is not based on empirical investigation, with the implication that it is overly simplistic, and at times inaccurate, this example also raises serious doubts about the usability and necessity of linguistic regulation.

There are, of course, numerous cases in which agents actually adhere to the linguistic regulation, the extensive use of naming being just one example. From this point of view, corporate goals are certainly accomplished. It is questionable, however, whether other instances of what seems to be rule adherence are attributable to linguistic regulation *per se* or to something else. We know from work in conversation analysis, for instance, whose enterprise is to document reoccurring structures in talk (e.g. Drew 2005), that some of the linguistic features which are prescribed in call centres also occur in talk which is not subject to regulation. Recall, for instance, the way in which agents obeyed the rule to verify whether the caller accepts the solution that has been proposed. They often do this by uttering an *OK* with rising intonation towards the end of the call, a practice which bears a remarkable resemblance to a phenomenon observed by Schegloff and Sacks (1973) in ordinary, non-regulated, conversations. One way of closing a conversation, they argue, is by using a pre-closer, such as 'OK?'. This considered, it cannot be excluded that the 'OK' uttered by our agents would not have occurred anyway even if the rule had not been explicitly prescribed. Jaworski and Coupland point out that a lot of interpersonal talk is ritualistic and proceeds according to well-established and predictable scripts. They write: 'Anyone who has been to more than one drinks party can attest that "all" conversations s/he has had there "were exactly the same"' (1999b: 292, see also Aijmer 1996). Given the ritualistic nature of talk, we may pertinently ask whether at least some of the content in linguistic regulation would have occurred anyway even if the interaction had not been prescribed.

The active listening rule, for instance, which exhibits an exceptionally high adherence (100 per cent in Thistle and 95.7 per cent in Mermaid) is in no way empirically unsound; it has been well known to conversation analysts and others long before the advent of linguistic regulation, and has been studied under various headings, including 'continuers' (Schegloff 1982) 'acknowledgement tokens' (Jefferson 1984) 'minimal responses' (Zimmerman and West 1975) and 'back channels' (Yngve 1970). The summary

rule, too, which also has a strikingly high adherence (96.7 per cent in Thistle and 100 per cent in Mermaid) is a feature well known to conversation analysts, who have studied it under the label 'formulations' (Garfinkel and Sacks 1970, Heritage and Watson 1980, Murtagh 2005). Formulations can be described as meta-comments that are designed to sum up the 'gist' or the 'upshot' of the ongoing conversation (Heritage and Watson 1980), much like the intention of the summary rule. Like minimal responses, formulations have been found to occur in both 'ordinary' (occurring in the private sphere) and 'institutional' (occurring in the public sphere) talk. Many of the prescribed linguistic features - in particular, it seems, those with an exceptionally high adherence - are also found to occur in non-regulated conversations. This suggests that their high occurrence may just as likely be attributable to the fact that they commonly occur in all conversations, whether regulated or not, than to them being the direct consequence of linguistic regulation.

There is also another factor which may be more important than linguistic regulation in explaining some of the features of call centre interactions, and that is the fact that they are technologically mediated in more than one way: They are conducted over the telephone and aided by software. We know from those who have studied telephone conversations (Schegloff 1968, Hopper 1992) that speakers tend to show an awareness of the fact that no visual clues are available. This manifests itself, for instance, in the way in which they identify themselves when answering the phone (Schegloff 1968) and in their use of deictic pronouns (Knuf 2003). Aijmer (1996) interestingly found that 'thank yous' in British English occur to a much higher degree in telephone than ordinary conversations. There is some disagreement, however, on how telephone conversations really differ from 'ordinary' conversations (Hutchby 2001), and it is also debatable how much general work on telephone conversations applies to the rather peculiar setting of call centres (with the exception, of course, of the aforementioned volume, *Calling for Help*, which is written specifically on the subject). It is possible, however, to interpret the requirement of the agent to signpost, i.e. to keep the customer informed about what they are doing, as a direct

consequence of the conversation being telephonically mediated. As such, signposting can be said to occur in realization of the fact that there are no visual clues, and that the customer consequently needs reassurance that the line is still open. Tellingly, signposting happens frequently in Mermaid calls even though this rule is not explicitly prescribed to Mermaid agents, with agents signposting in the following ways *I'll just check to see what kind of form we have for it just a moment*, *I'll just check that for you*, and *I'll try to have a look for you*.<sup>4</sup> This suggests that when signposting occurs it is down to the medium of the telephone rather than to linguistic regulation.

The intense reliance on technology in call centres may also have some bearing on the interactional structure of the call. IT systems may prompt the agent for information that should be filled out before they can proceed to the next interactional stage. In a way, therefore, the software dictates the course of interaction while constraining the interactional freedom of the interactants. At the same time, it may provide a haven for the agent in that it can be invoked as an excuse for having to ask face-threatening questions. One Thistle agent told me, for instance, that he often dreaded performing the obligatory security check because he felt that this might cast the caller as a potential fraudster. He would resolve this dilemma by saying something along the line of 'Sorry, I have to ask for your date of birth, please, otherwise the system won't let me access your file', thereby blaming the software for being the reason for the face-threatening question. Occasionally, speakers may also invoke technology as a subject matter. In Thistle I was told, for instance, that an agent had apologized to a caller after having left him on hold with music being played, saying 'I am so sorry, I hope the music wasn't too bad', to which the caller had retorted 'what are you talking about, it was Mozart's Piano Concerto number 20 in D minor - the best work in the history of music!'. This suggests a recognition of the presence of technology which becomes a 'player[s] in the structures of interactional conduct' (Hutchby 2001: 98), and as such may be a factor (in addition to linguistic regulation) in explaining agents' language use.

In light of the rather bleak picture of the usefulness and necessity of linguistic regulation which has emerged from the preceding analysis, it seems reasonable to ask whether linguistic regulation has some benefits. A study by Houtkoop et al. seems initially promising in terms of illuminating this issue. The authors report on an experiment they performed in a Dutch Bank. The agents in the bank were not technically trained, so when callers called to report a technical problem, agents had to transfer the call to a technician. However, the technicians often complained that agents were unable to accurately report the problem to them, so the authors, who also worked as consultants for the call centre in question, introduced a script which involved the agent reading back to callers what they had entered as the problem description, thus providing callers with an opportunity to verify this. The script looked like this

The report is registered under number XXX.  
I have noted as the trouble: [read back content free field].  
Add possible additions of client in ticket.  
Close the call  
(2005: 64).

While the authors argue that working aloud and reading back the problem description allowed for the production of a collaboratively constructed problem description, there is nothing in their findings to suggest that reading back from a script actually solved the problem and made agents report more accurately on the technical problems as indeed the authors themselves acknowledge: 'We do not deal here with the question of whether CTs [call takers] follow the script, and to what effect' (2005: 65). They conclude: '[reading allowed from a script] does not guarantee that at the end of the day the problem will be solved' (2005: 87). In the end, then, the study does not provide conclusive evidence that scripts are beneficial.

So is the answer for call centres to abandon overly simplistic regulatory practices in favour of more in-depth analyses of the type exemplified in this research and take into account the accumulated body of sociolinguistic knowledge? Given the centrality of both targets and quantity in call centres, it is difficult to imagine that this would be a viable

option. Discussing the status of 'communication skills' in the new work order, Doloughan writes that there is often 'no real appreciation of the complexities of the communicational process' and that '[i]n a "time equals money" culture, there is little tolerance of those who argue that producing meanings is a complicated, laborious and culturally dependent process' (2001: 24). Rather it seems that a more realistic, though drastic, solution would be to abandon regulatory practices altogether and instead capitalize on agents' innate pragmatic competence.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I set out to answer the question of how (if at all, or to what extent) institutional goals are accomplished when speakers' linguistic agency is restricted. Drawing on examples of authentic call centre interactions, I found that while agents do appear to orient to and to a certain extent accomplish their goals, linguistic regulation simultaneously seems to operate at a level where it sometimes prevents goals from being accomplished. A crucial finding is that the emphasis on quantitative assessment which prevails in call centres often fails to acknowledge when agents accomplish goals in alternative or more complex ways. By measuring aspects of the interaction that are often irrelevant or insignificant, call centres make invisible many cases in which goals are actually accomplished; a case, arguably, of not seeing the wood for the trees. Reflecting on measuring as a managerial strategy, Power writes: '[c]ritical data that cannot be readily quantified are marginalized and rendered invisible, and proxy measures end up representing the thing itself' (2004: 775). It follows that regulatory practices in call centres, and other workplaces, are a factor to be reckoned with for future studies in the area of workplace talk because they seem to influence the ability of organizations and, insofar as these coalesce, employees, to accomplish their goals. Here, conversation analysts may object that there is no evidence that the goals as they are construed in this chapter necessarily align with those of the speakers who are actually engaged in the interaction, and consequently, they may not count

as 'institutionally relevant goals'. To address this very valid point, I will, in the next chapter, turn my attention to how goals, understood as emerging locally in the interaction, more specifically in the form of inquiries raised by the customer, are accomplished, still within the context of agents' language use being subject to regulation.

## Chapter 5

### Accomplishing customers' goals in Thistle and Mermaid

#### *Introduction*

This chapter continues to explore the question raised in the previous chapter about how call centre agents manage to accomplish their institutionally relevant goals when the means by which they are supposed to attain them, i.e. spoken language, is regulated to the extent that it is. The chapter thus takes further issue with the CA emphasis on local agency. While goals in the previous chapter were construed as corporate goals, the focus in this chapter will be on goals defined by the customer. These are defined, more specifically, as the inquiry expressed by the caller sometime early in the interaction, usually congruent with their reason for making a call to either Mermaid or Thistle. My motivation for examining customer-formulated goals in addition to corporate goals is that conversation analysts may object that the goals analysed in the previous chapter were analytically irrelevant because they were defined, not by the speakers engaged in the interaction, but by the analyst (who in turn attributed them to the corporation). As conversation analysts construe 'institutionality' as being endogenous to the talk that unfolds between the conversational participants, and 'goals' as emerging from that talk, they may be more convinced by an analysis which defines goals as customer-initiated inquiries.

At the same time, the chapter feeds into the applied purpose of the thesis because the concern with local agency is echoed in the communication material in both Thistle and Mermaid. This is no coincidence as workplaces in what has been referred to as the 'new work order' to a considerable extent emphasize the need for their workers to be multiskilled, flexible and show agency (Kalantzis and Cope 2000, Gee 2000). In the Thistle *Stepping Up Guide*, there is a section referred to as 'make a personal commitment', and the DBS asks agents to 'avoid blaming the system or others'. The underlying message is that agents must take personal responsibility for their actions. In Mermaid, a significant part of

the induction training session I attended was devoted to reading and discussing the international bestseller, widely used in the corporate world, *Who Moved My Cheese?* (Johnson 1999). This is a motivational story on how to adapt to changes, written in the style of a parable (the protagonists are two mice and two miniature male human beings). The Mermaid material thus communicates to agents that when organizational changes occur, they are ultimately personally responsible for how they respond and adapt to them. What is emphasized in the corporate rhetoric of both Thistle and Mermaid, then, is personal responsibility, flexibility and local agency. Contemporary service workplaces also in theory place the customer in a highly prominent position (du Gay and Salaman 1992, Leidner 1993), something which is echoed in the communication material of both Thistle and Mermaid. Ideally, all three parties involved, directly or indirectly, in the service interaction (the organization, the customer, and the call centre agent) must achieve their respective intended outcomes, a concept referred to as 'win win win' (Korczynski 2001a).

In order to examine the extent to which agents are able to accomplish customer-defined goals, it is necessary to analyse larger stretches of speech than I have done thus far. In this chapter, therefore, I analyse two calls, one from Thistle and one from Mermaid (which I have translated into English), in their entirety<sup>31</sup> to give the caller a more central place in the analysis. I will argue that agents' possibilities to accomplish their goals, i.e. essentially serve the customer, are restricted due to limitations placed on what they can do and, in some cases, on what they can say. In both calls, the agent's inability to accommodate the caller's request leads to some degree of interpersonal friction. In the Thistle call, the antagonism remains somewhat muted while in the Mermaid call it is more pronounced. In both calls, there are points at which the agent becomes flustered or defensive, while the caller becomes frustrated and, in the Mermaid call, occasionally aggressive. Although such calls do not constitute the majority of calls in either Mermaid or Thistle, they are not uncommon either. A Thistle agent told me that he would typically take

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<sup>31</sup> Only minor passages have had to be excluded for space limitations.

two to three complaint or angry calls per week. Despite being relatively rare, the impact left by such unpleasantness may be all the stronger and more long lasting (Korczynski 2001a).

*The Mermaid call: 'my hands are totally tied'*

The caller, who runs his own company, has recently changed network provider from Fono to Mermaid and has, it appears, been informed by Mermaid that the changeover would take effect from that day. This, however, has not happened with the unfortunate consequence that the caller is unable to receive network coverage on either Mermaid, his new provider, or Fono, his old one. The caller calls to resolve the issue but when it gradually becomes clear that the agent is incapable of solving his problem, he becomes increasingly hostile while the agent seems to vacillate between a defensive and empathetic mode. She recurrently refers to the constraints within which she is working, explicitly admitting that she 'cannot do anything'. There is a considerable degree of disalignment between the speakers, where each is keen to emphasize their own predicament, while only occasionally attempting to restore the alignment between them. Inasmuch as 'power' is definable as the ability to get something done, this call aptly illustrates that both caller and agent are essentially 'powerless' as neither of them is able to do anything about the situation. (See Appendix A for transcription key.)

- |   |        |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|---|--------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Agent  | customer service this is Susi Carlsen                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| 2 | Caller | yes hello Kasper Kram from NetLife in<br>Århus (.)I have a problem with my<br>telephone                                                                                                                                                                           |
| 3 | Agent  | yes                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 4 | Caller | I was told today that it was transferred to:<br>what's it called to your network (.) and now<br>it is totally dead (.) now I am not able to go<br>on neither the old nor on your network                                                                          |
| 5 | Agent  | what- before we get further in the system I<br>just- just want to inform you that we in<br>customer service are conducting a erh a- a<br>study (.)concerning our customer and things<br>like that so I hope it is OK that our<br>conversation is recorded on tape |
| 6 | Caller | that's entirely OK                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| 7 | Agent  | OK (.) but then I just need to ask for a<br>mobile number //we just                                                                                                                                                                                               |
| 8 | Caller | //it i:s forty-eight (.) fifty-                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |

four twelve ninety-two

9 Agent yes (.) where erh are you from (.) with regards to company

10 Caller NetLife A P S

11 Agent well I was thinking is it Fono you come from //or

12 Caller //yes (.) yes yes

13 Agent it is Fono you are coming from

14 Caller yes exactly

15 Agent (2) what does it say on the phone when you have HAVE inserted our SIM card

16 Caller nothing (.) it says cannot register SIM-card

17 Agent %OK% the telephone you have (.) did you buy it from Fono

18 Caller no

19 Agent did you buy it from Mermaid

20 Caller yes

21 Agent %yes% (.) as far as I can see here it should have been entered into our system: today the first of October but I will just- or first of December <clears throat> but will just get hold of a technician to see if they may be able to speed it up (.) one moment

22 Caller yes

[Agent calls Network-support but does not get through and returns to the caller.]

23 Agent I am back

24 Caller /yes:

25 Agent you know I: we have actually received an email today saying that- that there is currently a queue on our terminal

26 Caller /yes:

27 Agent because (they are processing) the queue so I cannot tell whether- whether your number will be up and running in an hour or within a couple of hours but in the course of the day it should be up and running

28 Caller what do I do then (.) should I get myself a pay as you go card and charge it to you then: chuck it in there or what (.) because I have a problem people have got to be able to reach me (.) I am dependent on my phone (.) I am never in the office (.)

29 Agent <clears throat>

30 Caller it is costing us money this (.) now we have: (.) if you take a look at the case you'll see that it's been three months since we o- we ordered the transfer

31 Agent do you know what I will- I will try and see if I can push it forward one moment

32 Caller yes

[...]

57 Agent I am back again //apologies for making you wait=

58 Caller ///yes (.) that's alright

- 59 Agent =but no matter what I am unable to get through to that department (.) erh we are experiencing a bit of a queue and th- I know they are working on (it) I have to ask you to be a BIT patient
- 60 Caller that is you are asking me not to get any work done today
- 61 Agent well that's not what I'm asking you to do (.) //specifically but I just cannot-
- 62 Caller //yeah but (.) I- I- I cannot- you know I cannot- you know I cannot you know do anything when I have no phone you know (.) h- how- how- h- how for- is it possible to make a transfer without making- making sure that it goes through (.) it is you know my business tool you know
- 63 Agent I can relate to that but it is just that we have a lot of orderings- orders that are waiting to be processed by the terminal //and we can(not do it)
- 64 Caller //yeah but wh- wh- wh- yeah but why- why is it that the phone is transferred then before being certain that it will go through (.) in other words- in other words you could s- say- I think as a product I buy from you then erh what's it called you know you don't protect it very well //you know=
- 65 Agent //no
- 66 Caller =in reality I'd say it's my lifeline- you know it's my- it's my- it is the business (.) tool I have you know
- 67 Agent well we transfer it you know pase- based on a certain date (.) and we cannot know- (.) and b- w- in advance if that date has a queue on the terminal or what something like that (.) and that is you know- a slight disadvantage about- let me put it like this there are at this exact (moment) a lot of orders waiting to be processed today (.) erh with regards to those //transfers-
- 68 Caller //yeah but that's your structure you know I don't care about that you know I am a customer buy(ing) a product from you and I cannot get (.) that product to- and that means that all of a sudden you incapacitate me for HALF a day (.) that costs me: erh well twenty-five hundred [app. 250 British pounds]
- 69 Agent yes (.) I am just not able to do a whole lot you know I- I can b- I- I //have b-
- 70 Caller //well you could give me a reimbursement for i:t- for the period of time that I don't have my- erh //my lifeline
- 71 Agent //I cannot give you anything at all //(because I)=
- 72 Caller //<deep sigh>
- 73 Agent =am sitting in Customer Services and don't have the possibility to send you a new

registration form or anything like that  
because no matter what it will take a couple  
of days (.) I am just saying //that-

74 Caller //ah you- you are  
not saying- you are not saying to me that it  
will take a couple of DAYS before my phone is  
up and running are you

75 Agent no a couple of HOURS at the most (.) it- it  
is- //what I can tell you=

76 Caller //<frustrated outbreath>

77 Agent =you can be lucky within half an hour (.) you  
can- you can be lucky within a couple of hours

78 Caller in other words when I buy a product from-  
from- I mean- it is very funny you are using  
the concept LUCKY (.) I mean I buy a product  
from you (.) then I don't want to be LUCKY (.)  
I want the product

79 Agent yes

80 Caller //do we agree on that

81 Agent //it comes (.) it comes from Fono (.) it  
needs to be transferred  
//from (one terminal at Fono)

82 Caller //yeah I can- yeah I kn- how w- yes (.) yeah  
that- that's all OK that is (.) but you are  
saying LUCKY to me (.) that is not a very  
fortunate choice- choice of words is it

83 Agent no it isn't but what I am trying to say is  
that our terminal is overloaded at the moment  
it's //all our-

84 Caller //yes (.) but is it a lottery (.) this

85 Agent //it isn't

86 Caller //because- because- I buy a product from you  
and then I want it to work

87 Agent //of course I can understand that

88 Caller //and then I want it to work

89 Agent I- I will do anything to get you- to- get the  
number to work but as I've said it is coming  
from one terminal at Fono (.) to transfer to  
our terminal (.) and that has to do with the  
fact that there's a queue on the terminal and  
unfortunately we cannot do anything right now  
(.) we are WORKing at full power (.) it can be  
now within an hour or in the course of the  
day (.) I cannot tell you (exactly) when

90 Caller hm (.) yes (.) wh- wh- what do I do now then  
//I am without=

91 Agent //well

92 Caller =a phone

93 Agent (.) I don- I really don't know

94 Caller you don't have any suggestion (.) as to what I  
can do (.) when I don't have a phone

95 Agent you may be able to redirect it if the number  
syt- the number is you know actually cancelled  
at Fono and not up and //running with us

96 Caller //<frustrated  
outbreath>

97 Agent //we cannot do a whole (lot)

98 Caller //yeah but where am I going to redirect it to

99 Agent we CANNOT do a whole lot  
 100 Caller no but what sh- what do I do then (.) I have a  
 //problem (that I think-)  
 101 Agent //yeah but I really don't have any ideas as to  
 what you can do (2) I don't I am afraid  
 102 Caller (.) so in other words I: am not going to work  
 today (.) and I can-  
 //and I cannot- I cannot get- h-  
 103 Agent //that's not what I am saying to you  
 104 Caller yeah but it- I cannot- I cannot work without  
 my phone you know  
 105 Agent yeah but (.) I just cannot do very much (.) my  
 hands are totally tied by (ou:r) systems //I  
 cannot-  
 106 Caller yes but- but- but we agree on the fact that my  
 hands are even more tied than yours are  
 107 Agent //I can-  
 108 Caller //because I- I am here with a phone that I  
 can't get ANYthing on  
 109 Agent I understand your problem (.) that is for sure  
 //I just cannot-<sup>A</sup>

[...]

In the initial stage of the call (turns 1-8), the usual preliminaries are completed. A greeting is exchanged followed by the caller stating his problem. Then the agent successfully elicits the caller's consent to have the conversation recorded and the number of the mobile phone that the query concerns is stated. In turns 9-19, the agent, in compliance with the linguistic regulation material, asks a series of questions intended as trouble-shooting devices in order to pinpoint the exact nature of the caller's problem. The string of questions, however, fails to establish the cause of the problem, and the agent puts the caller on hold (21) while trying to reach the department responsible for transferring clients from one network to another, Network Support. The department, however, is unreachable, and the agent is forced to return to the holding caller with the issue still unresolved (23). The agent recalls, and informs the caller, that earlier that day employees have received an email that could, while not solve, then at least explain the problem that the caller is experiencing: There is currently a queue on the company's central terminal which means that customers with new SIM cards may experience a delay of up to a day

before it is functional (25-27). This is when the first signs of dissatisfaction from the caller begin to show and tension sets in.

The caller expresses his dissatisfaction with the situation by threatening to purchase a pay as you go card and charge it to Mermaid (28), since he is dependent on potential clients being able to reach him. He also cites financial loss he is likely to incur because of the situation (*it is costing us money this*) (30). The threat is likely to be intended as much as a strategy to underscore the seriousness of the situation in the hope that this will persuade the agent to go to extra lengths to resolve the issue as a serious suggestion. The caller also points out that the transfer was ordered three months ago (30), thus highlighting the unreasonableness, as he sees it, in the fact that Mermaid has had ample time to prepare for the changeover, but has still failed to deliver. The strategies have the intended effect of getting the agent to have a go at speeding up the process (31), and she tries once more to get hold of Network Support, the department responsible for the delay. When this department remains unreachable, she dials another department, Technical Support. In this passage, which has been omitted for space saving reasons, the technician confirms that the problem is a queue on the central terminal, and that this falls under the responsibility of Network Support. The agent once again tries to call the relevant department, but it is still busy. She thus has no choice but to return to the caller with a message of mission unaccomplished. As a result, the ensuing exchange (from turn 57 onwards) sees a drastically mounting degree of interpersonal friction, which does not abate until the call closes. As we shall see, there is a notable lack of alignment between the speakers; each of them speaks from their own perspective, adamant to convey to the other the regretful predicament that they are in. As we shall see, the CA assumption of local agency is very far removed from a reality in which both the agent and the caller are utterly powerless to do anything about the situation.

The agent, on the one hand, is keen to emphasize that the problem is due to an IT systems fault over which she has no control, while the caller, on the other, wants to get

across that his business is incapacitated by not having a phone. Although the expression of empathy is not as overtly prescribed in the Mermaid as in the Thistle material, interestingly, the agent's contributions are interspersed with bouts of empathy that seem to be intended to restore some of the alignment between the speakers. When the agent returns to the caller (57), still with the issue unresolved, she restates what the caller already knows, i.e. that there is a delay on the terminal, attenuating this with an apology for putting him on hold. At turn 59 she mitigates the seriousness of the situation by deploying the qualifier *a bit of (a queue)*, provides reassurance that Mermaid is working on it and appeals to the caller to be a *BIT patient*. Despite these attempts to mitigate the impact of the bad news, however, the caller is not satisfied and he makes this known to the agent by rephrasing what she has just said in a way that underscores what precisely this entails to him as a customer, i.e. that she is essentially asking him *not to get any work done* that day (60). The agent denies such a dramatic interpretation of her utterance: *that's not what I ask you to do*, and invokes her limited powers *but I just cannot* before she is interrupted (61). In turn 62, the caller is visibly agitated; his many false starts (*I- I- I cannot, h- how- how h- how for- is it possible*) suggest that he is emotionally affected by the situation. He also stresses the fact that he too is powerless, unable to do anything without a phone (*I- I- I cannot- you know I cannot- you know I cannot you know do anything when I have no phone you know*). The agent once again attempts to restore some alignment between herself and the caller by empathizing *I can relate to that*, but also restates what the situation is from her point of view, i.e. that there are a lot of orders that are waiting to be processed and that she cannot do anything about the situation (*and we can(not do it)*) (63).

In the next sequence, the caller becomes even more confrontational which seems to prompt the agent to resort into a defensive mode. At turn 64, recycling a formula used in his previous turn where it was overheard, he issues a piece of criticism in the form of a question (*yeah but wh- wh- wh- yeah but why- why is that the phone is transferred then before being certain that it will go through*). The question form makes this piece of criticism somewhat

muted; the second piece of criticism, by contrast, is more direct: *as a product I buy from you then erh what's it called you know you don't protect it very well you know*. The agent's initial response is a concession of the caller's challenge that Mermaid do not protect their products very well (*no*) at turn 65, thus again seemingly trying to restore some of the threatened alignment between them. Then, when the caller at turn 66 proceeds once more to express his discontentment with not having a phone, invoking highly emphatic language in which he describes his phone as his *lifeline* and his *business tool*, the agent resorts into a more defensive mode (67). She explains that Mermaid cannot know in advance whether there will be a queue on the terminal and that this prevents them from only transferring customers from one network to another when they know for sure that they will go through. The caller responds to this that he does not care about the internal structure of Mermaid; all he wants is for the product he bought to work (68). Thus, we see once more that each speaker is eager to get the other to understand the situation from their point of view. As he has done before, the caller justifies his deprecation by citing financial loss as a result of potential clients being unable to reach him. And as she has done before, the agent invokes her limited empowerment (*I am just not able to do a whole lot you know*) (69), though notably prefacing this with a *yes* in what seems to be an affirmation of the caller's alleged financial loss, presumably another attempt to restore some of the alignment between them. This makes the caller suggest something that would compensate for his lost earnings, which is a reimbursement (70). But just as the agent is unable to do speed up the network transfer process due to IT systems over which she has no control, so too do her limited authorizations prevent her from reimbursing the caller.

Forced to turn down his request, the agent does so by a rather revealing and conspicuously paradoxical admission that it is precisely because of her capacity as a customer service representative that she is unable to help the caller (*I cannot give you anything at all (because I) am sitting in Customer Services* (71)). This paradox reoccurs further on in the call in a piece which is not reproduced here. In the omitted sequence, the agent says *what I*

*am saying to you is I am in an office working at a pc (.) have nothing to do with other things.*<sup>B</sup> Further on, she says *I am telling you I have- I have no giro card- I am saying I have no pay as you go card I can send to you or give you (.) because I am sitting in Customer Services (.) I only have my systems to go by.*<sup>C</sup>

The causality is quite explicitly expressed in the second example: it is *because* the agent is in customer services that she is unable to help the caller. To the first example, the caller understandably responds *why am I supposed to call you then*<sup>D</sup> which is not responded to by the agent. The agent here appears to corroborate what is probably a common, though intriguing, perception among the general public that if one wants to get something done, the last place to call is customer services.

The next passage (77-89) I want to draw attention to further illustrates the lack of alignment between agent and caller, which has been a recurring theme of the call so far. In the passage, each speaker communicates from their own vantage point without much collaboration. The caller cites his unmet expectations as a customer while the agent, in turn, tries to explain facts about the internal workflow of Mermaid. As we have seen before, however, the agent once in a while attempts to restore the alignment between the speakers expressing empathy. The agent's use of the word *lucky* at turn 77 where she informs the caller that if he is lucky, the phone will be up and running in a couple of hours, is immediately picked up on by the caller (*it is very funny you are using the concept LUCKY*) (78). By comparing the act of purchasing a product from Mermaid with a fortuitous and random act, he indirectly communicates his strong disapproval of the service he receives. When he seeks agreement from the agent (*do we agree on that*) (80) on his previous statement (*I mean I buy a product from you (.) then I don't want to be LUCKY (.) I want the product*) (78), he manages to elicit a *yes* from the agent (79). But then the alignment between them stops. When the caller explicitly asks the agent *do we agree on that* (80), she ignores this and instead restates the process that has to be completed before a new number can start working (*it comes (.) it comes from Fono (.) it needs to be transferred from (one terminal at Fono)*) (81). By invoking the name of the company that the caller is transferring from, it is possible that she wants to highlight

their part in the responsibility for the delay. The caller's next contribution rejects this explanation as relevant (*yeah that- that's all OK that is*) but then restates his point from the previous turn, i.e. the agent's *not very fortunate* use of the word *LUCKY* (82). He manages to elicit another agreement from the agent *no it isn't* but she then immediately resorts to her previous strategy of explaining Mermaid's internal work process (*what I am trying to say is that our terminal is overloaded at the moment*) (83), which the caller only briefly acknowledges (*yes*) before he too returns to his previous topic of comparing the service to a lottery (*but is it a lottery (.) this*) (84). There is a struggle over topical control going on here. Where the caller wants an admission from the agent that the service he is receiving is poor, the agent is only willing to gloss over this and wants to explain instead the internal work flow of Mermaid, about which the caller seemingly could not care less.

In the final passage (90-109), the agent seems almost despondent, repeatedly restating that she cannot do anything, while balancing this, as we have also seen before, with bouts of expressions of empathy. The passage starts with the caller, having failed in his previous attempts to either get the agent to speed up his case or reimburse him for lost earnings, appealing to the agent to come up with a solution to his problem (*what do I do now then I am without a phone* (90-92). The agent deflatedly replies *I really don't know* (93). The caller repeats his appeal in the next turn by asking the agent to confirm that she really cannot do anything. A possible interpretation of this is that the caller may want to make the agent expose once and for all what he appears to be an absurdity, i.e. there is no help to get from a customer service department (94). (As I discuss below, the caller asked to have a copy of this conversation sent to him.) The agent starts out by suggesting that the caller diverts calls from his old Fono phone to another phone which is workable, but then realizes that he will not be able to do this because Fono has already cancelled his subscription meaning that he will be unable to access any Fono functionalities (95). This understandably elicits a frustrated outbreath from the caller (96). In the next turn, the agent once again states what is the underlying cause of the misery, i.e. her limited powers: *we*

*cannot do a whole lot* (97), an utterance she repeats with emphasis in her next turn *we CANNOT do a whole lot* (99). The caller tries once more to put back the responsibility for finding a solution to the problem with the agent in the form of a direct question *what do I do then I have a problem* (100) to which the agent, disheartened, once again responds *yeah but I really don't have any ideas as to what you can do*, and after a short pause adds an expression of empathy *I don't I am afraid* (101). The caller then picks up on the agent's proclamation, using words which illustrate what the implications of what she has just said are for him; that is that he is not going to be able to get any work done that day (*so in other words I: am not going to work today*) (102). As she has done before, the agent rejects this rephrasing of her utterance *that's not what I am saying to you* (103), which makes the caller insist in his next utterance that these are the real life consequences of her inability to help him out *I cannot work without my phone you know* (104). As so many times before, the agent once again invokes her restricted powers as a reason for not being able to help *I just cannot do very much* and then immediately restates the content of that proposition in more graphic terms *my hands are totally tied by (ou:r) systems* (105). To this, the caller responds that his hands are even more tied. As we have also seen before, the agent delivers her announcement that her powers are limited couched in displays of empathy (*I understand your problem (.) that is for sure I just cannot-*) (109), though this is not an explicit part of the Mermaid regulation.

The call continues in the same vein for another thirty turns, still without a resolution. The caller has been unsuccessful in both his requests: to speed up the network transfer, and to receive a compensation for lost earnings. Then, before the call closes, the caller asks to have a copy of the conversation sent to him by email seeing, as he says, that he agreed to have it recorded. The agent turns to me who is sitting next to her to ask if that is OK and I agree but say that we don't have a digital recording but that we can send him a copy of the tape. The customer agrees to this and a sequence where the caller's address is elicited follows. It is unclear what the customer needs the recording for, but it is possible that his request is an implicit threat to expose, as he sees it, Mermaid's appalling customer

service to a wider public. When I later recounted the caller's request to my gatekeeper, he said firmly that Mermaid was not going to send the tape out to him, and, since I was never asked for a copy of the tape, I know for a fact that they never did. Let us now have a look at the call taken in Thistle Insurance.

*The Thistle call: 'unfortunately I am not authorized to do that'*

The caller here is a financial adviser working on behalf of a Thistle policyholder who calls Thistle to resolve a problem that has arisen in the processing of his client's affairs. Two weeks after the caller's company asked Thistle to set up a new fund for the client, Thistle has not issued confirmation or collected premiums; the client is holding her financial advisers responsible for the delay, and the caller, representing the advisers, wants Thistle to provide written evidence of what the current situation is (and by implication, of Thistle's responsibility for it) in time for a meeting with the client which has been scheduled for the next day. The caller wants the agent to send this evidence to him in an email to optimize the chances that it will arrive in time for the meeting, a request which places the agent in a difficult position because it can only be accommodated by deviating from standard operating procedures. Moreover, the agent's accomplishment of the caller's goal is further compromised, or delayed, by restrictions placed on what he can and cannot say. The Thistle communication material advises agents to use 'proactive' rather than 'reactive' language (SUG), which essentially means that they are asked to emphasize what they *can* do rather than what they *cannot* do.<sup>32</sup> By having guidelines in place that prohibit agents to use 'negative language', their inability to assist the caller is communicated in an obfuscate and elusive manner. Far from resolving the query, then, such guidance may serve to both confuse and further infuriate the caller. (See Appendix A for transcription key.)

- |   |        |                                                   |
|---|--------|---------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Agent  | good morning Thistle Insurance how may I help you |
| 2 | Caller | hello hi John Reid in Manchester it's             |

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<sup>32</sup> See also Sturdy and Fineman (2001) and Thompson and Callaghan (2002) for similar prescriptions of positive, or proscriptions against negative, language in call centres.

regarding the (.) following erh client (.) you want a: reference

3 Agent yes please

4 Caller t for Thomas

5 Agent uh huh

6 Caller five two oh

7 Agent mhm

8 Caller p for party

9 Agent uh huh

10 Caller seven two three: (.) name a Mrs L Reece:

11 Agent OK for //security- for security John could=

12 Caller //Linda Reece

13 Agent =you confirm the first line and postcode of your business address //please

14 Caller //erh twenty three High Street Manchester M three eight DN

15 Agent fantastic thanks for that you're speaking to Allan today

16 Caller hello //Allan

17 Agent //I have Linda Reece //(xx)

18 Caller //that's right (.) we have a- a note from you dated the fifteenth of July

19 Agent uh huh

20 Caller so we're in the process of setting up a new fund for Mrs Reece

21 Agent //mhm

22 Caller //we will send you confirmation once this has been done (.) now two weeks later we are anxious to know whether it HAS been done erh <CREAKILY> and if so what are you going to send out to evidence it

23 Agent OK it's not been done yet but you will receive policy documents once it HAS been done

24 Caller erh any particular reason fo:r the: delay

25 Agent (2) erhm at this point I'm not aware of- of the delay (.) erhm we ARE working within our standard time frames

26 Caller oh OK can you tell me: have you collected the premiums yet from- from the- the client

27 Agent we've not no not under the revised policy

28 Caller <FRUSTRATED OUTBREATH>

29 Agent the reason being that there were two things we had to do

30 Caller yeah

31 Agent one was (defer) the original benefits

32 Caller yeah

33 Agent and only once that was completed could we then apply the (.) revised premium we ARE working on that now

34 Caller yeah

35 Agent and I WOULD expect this to be complete ANY day

36 Caller <FRUSTRATED OUTBREATH> I'm seeing the client toMORROW (.) if I gave you my email address //right- erh have you got=

37 Agent //uh huh

38 Caller =the facility to email me with what you've just told me (.) it's just that- say if my

colleague sees the client tomorrow right he's got SOMETHING which he can show her FROM Thistle which says (.) YES this is what the situation is YES it's being completed otherwise it's all verbal

39 Agent right that's- the letter you received dated the fifteenth is that not sufficient

40 Caller well unfortunately no because it has two weeks ago (.) is it not possible just for you to repeat what you said to me on an email

41 Agent I would have to arrange for a- a full confirmation to be issued

42 Caller oh dear //God Almighty <IN DISBELIEF>

43 Agent //I can't guarantee that that will happen for tomorrow unfortunately

44 Caller <FRUSTRATED OUTBREATH> right have you got an email address there for a manager

45 Agent %right% we DO have an email address that you can email to

46 Caller yeah but- does it just go into the system and not bothered with or will it be looked at straight away

47 Agent it WILL be looked at straight away these are //quite of=-

48 Caller //wh-

49 Agent =throughout the day (.) and depending on the volume of emails that we receive (.) they'll be actioned in order of receipt

50 Caller right (.) do you have a manager

51 Agent I do yes

52 Caller right (.) c- has he got a personal email

53 Agent %no% I don't have an email I can provide you with no not-

54 Caller <FRUSTRATED OUTBREATH> <FRUSTRATED OUTBREATH> I- I- I know it sounds stupid right but we are being chased one HUNDRED per cent by this client

55 Agent //uh huh

56 Caller //o/kay who: a:re believing that we: a:re fully at fault in what's HAPPENING i e NO premiums have been collected NO policy has been issued et cetera (.) /right

57 Agent //OK

58 Caller //my colleague's got to go SEE this lady tomorrow (.) I would like to provide him with some sort of PHYSICAL evidence (.) /right (.) that everything is proceeding QUITE normally OK //(xx)

59 Agent //I CAN request that FOR you John I'm quite happy to do that but the only thing is I CAN'T at THIS point and that's (.) at THIS PRECISE MOMENT guarantee that we'll have that for you for your meeting tomorrow

60 Caller <INBREATH>

61 Agent but I can CHECK for you

62 Caller y- i- i- would it be possible to handwrite a FAX

63 Agent unfortunately I am NOT authorised to DO that

64 Caller oh dear God who IS authorised I don't believe this <LAUGHS IN DISBELIEF> (.) all I want is somebody just to say you know (.) yeah  
 //(xxxxxxxxxx)

65 Agent //I- I- can arrange that for you John (.) the only thing I'm s- explaining is at THIS point during THIS //telephone conversation

66 Caller //now I- I- I- I understand what you're saying TO me right but you're also saying to me you can't guarantee SOMETHING to be given to us w- within plenty of time for MY colleague to go  
 //speak to the lady tomorrow and we're still=

67 Agent //during- DURING this conversation=

68 Caller =(xxxxxxxxxx)

69 Agent =if you wish- if you wish I'll come back to you in fifteen twenty minutes and I'll tell you if we can do it

70 Caller fantastic

71 Agent that's what I'm trying to //explain

72 Caller //OK that- that'll do me fine //OK then and I'll-  
 //(x) firstly (.)

73 Agent

74 Caller //yeah

75 Agent //when's your meeting

76 Caller my meeting i- or rather my colleague's meeting is with the lady at two o'CLOCK but he's leaving the office tomorrow morning at ten:

77 Agent ten AM

78 Caller //yeah so obvious-

79 Agent //so you would like to have it by then

80 Caller well yeah but basically if we could have it before we close of play today

81 Agent //mhm

82 Caller //i e by- before five o' clock today that's even BETTER

83 Agent //OK

84 Caller //because that means he goes home with it

85 Agent uh huh

86 Caller an:d he's gonna be a happy chappy

87 Agent OK an:d your contact number John

88 Caller it's oh four five oh eight

89 Agent mhm

90 Caller seven two nine

91 Agent uh huh

92 Caller eight one eight

93 Agent (.) OK that's perfect it's Allan Martin you're speaking to at the moment

94 Caller it's OK Allan

95 Agent I WILL check this //for you now

96 Caller //<RELIEVED OUTBREATH>

97 Agent and I will come back to you IMMEDIATELY

98 Caller thank you very much //Allan

99 Agent //o/kay

100 Caller //cheers <LAUGHING PLEASANTLY>

101 Agent (//thank you)

102 Caller bye

When the standard preliminaries 'greeting', 'security check' and 'verbal handshake' have been completed in turns 1-17, the caller begins, in turn 18, to elucidate his problem. In turn 22 he uses an indirect question formulation to state his problem: *now two weeks later we are anxious to know whether it HAS been done erh: and if so what are you going to send out to evidence it*. The question elements (*whether it has been done* and *what are you going to send out to evidence it*) are embedded in a declarative utterance that contains two additional propositions: that it is *two weeks later* [than the original request] and that the caller and his organization *are anxious to know*. These propositions, as well as the contrastive stress on *HAS*, make the utterance hearable (in spite of its 'polite' formulation compared to the more direct 'has it been done?') as a challenge, implying that 'it' ought to have been done by now. Faced with this challenge, the agent admits that *it's not been done yet* (23), but follows up with *but you will receive policy documents when it HAS been done*. The caller then renews the challenge by asking: *any particular reason for the delay* (24). By defining the situation overtly as a *delay*, the caller makes his request for a reason hearable as an invitation to provide a justification. The agent responds by contesting the caller's formulation of what is happening as a *delay*, saying that the case falls 'within our standard time-frames' (25), thereby managing to orient to the DBS advice 'not to blame the system or others'. The caller's next move is to ask for a more specific piece of information, i.e. whether Thistle has taken the first step of collecting premiums under the revised policy. This prompts the agent to elaborate on his negative answer by giving a fuller explanation of the reasons why the case is taking some time to process. He also ventures a prediction (35) that it will not take much longer (*I WOULD expect this to be complete ANY day*), which may also be interpretable as an orientation to deploy the 'proactive language' encouraged in the *Stepping Up Guide*.

The caller has now established to his own satisfaction what the situation is, and his next objective is to get written documentation which he can show to his client to persuade her that his own organization is not at fault. From his point of view this is not an unreasonable or difficult request: all he is asking is that the agent should put the same

information he has just given orally into writing. He is not asking the agent to misrepresent the situation or make new promises to the client on Thistle's behalf. The agent's problem, however, is the division of labour which is a hallmark of hyper-rationalized call centres, in which a single customer's business will be processed by different parts of the organization, each specializing in a particular set of tasks and communicating with one another largely via standard formulas built into computer software. This is economically efficient for companies: each employee need only be trained in a limited range of tasks, and productivity is increased by having each employee do certain tasks repeatedly. But for customers it is frustrating that the only people they can talk to directly are unable to take responsibility for the entire transaction. Unlike the clerks in traditional insurance offices, agents who are employed to handle customer calls can neither do everything necessary to solve a problem themselves nor resolve the problem there and then through direct interaction with colleagues. All they can do is log standard requests for action to be taken by another department. Customers may respond, as in this exchange, by trying to persuade the agent that the circumstances justify some deviation from the standard procedure.

The caller begins this part of the exchange with a highly mitigated request (36-38): *if I gave you my email address right erh have you got the facility to email me with what you've just told me.* This formulation carefully suggests that the issue is not the agent's personal willingness to help but whether he has *got the facility*. It is also followed by a fairly lengthy explanation of why written documentation is so important for the caller. At turn 39, the agent avoids saying no but asks whether a previous letter that has already been sent out is not enough to which the caller replies in the negative on the grounds that this letter is outdated, and repeats his request. The agent again (turn 41) avoids saying *no* and instead responds to the caller's recycled request for an email confirmation with *I would have to arrange for a- a full confirmation to be issued.* In line with the DBS instruction, he alludes to what he can do (arrange for a full confirmation to be issued) rather than putting on record what he cannot do (send an immediate email). Interestingly, however, his formulation suggests he may be

trying subtly to manage the conflicting pressures he is subject to (on one hand to comply with the regime's prescriptions and on the other to maintain rapport with the customer). He does not present what he proposes as a solution by saying, e.g. *I can arrange....* By saying *I would have to arrange....*, he presents it more as an explanation of the constraints he is working within (what he would hypothetically *have to do*) than as a serious suggestion, and so indirectly displays his understanding that the caller is unlikely to perceive it as a solution. This however does not stop the caller from venting his frustration in his next turn, *oh dear God Almighty* (42). The agent then blatantly disregards the proscription not only against negative language but also against the word *unfortunately* and bursts out *I can't guarantee that that will happen for tomorrow unfortunately* (43).

When the caller begins to realize that the agent is not going to be able to sort out his request, his strategy changes and he attempts what is known in call centres as 'escalation', that is, asking the agent to facilitate contact with someone higher up the chain of command. Customers who attempt this may hope that a supervisor or manager will be empowered to do something the ordinary agent cannot, or they may feel reluctant to subject a low-ranking employee to the full force of their displeasure. However, agents are generally instructed to deflect escalation requests in all but the most exceptional cases. He begins with *have you got an email address there for a manager* (44), an indirect request to the agent to provide a manager's email address, and when that fails to elicit the most relevant answer, the agent, again avoiding a direct refusal, offers instead to provide a general email address for customer inquiries. The caller is not content with a general email address as the urgency of his matter requires it to be dealt with not by an anonymous system but by an individual person. He therefore moves on to *have you got a manager* (50) and *has he got a personal email* (52). These bald yes/no formulations seem to be designed to reduce the agent's scope for presenting solutions other than the desired one. And indeed the agent does answer these questions directly (yes to the first and no to the second). The caller has succeeded in getting straight answers to straight questions, but his bid to escalate has failed.

Still without having managed to get the agent to resolve his problem, the caller now tries a different strategy: appealing to the common ground between himself and the agent, who are both, after all, only doing their jobs. The caller constructs himself as someone who is not ordinarily a demanding, egregious, customer, but as someone who is normally reasonable, but whose case on this particular occasion merits a deviation from standardized routines. Prefacing his appeal with the self-belittling *I know it sounds stupid* (54), the caller explains that he and his colleagues too have a dissatisfied customer who is giving them a hard time. He then delivers an indirect request: *I would like to provide him [the colleague who has to meet the dissatisfied customer] with some sort of PHYSICAL evidence (.) right that everything is proceeding QUITE normally OK* (58). The agent's response displays both a degree of empathy for the caller and an orientation to the norm of saying what he can do: *I CAN request that FOR you John I'm quite happy to do that* (59). But there is a catch, which the agent explains using hedges (romanized here) to minimize the apparent unhelpfulness: *The only thing is I can't at THIS PRECISE MOMENT guarantee that we'll have that for you for your meeting tomorrow* (59). He has used the forbidden *can't*, but he then quickly returns to what he can do: *but I can CHECK for you* (61). The caller makes one more attempt to get around Thistle's inflexible procedures, returning to the polite request formulation he used in the opening of this exchange about documentation, *would it be possible to handwrite a FAX* (62). The agent at this point, once again, seemingly pushed into a corner, disregards the DBS entirely and produces a textbook example of the 'negative language' it proscribes: *unfortunately I am NOT authorized to DO that* (63).

The agent's continued powerlessness to assist the caller in this matter elicits another outburst of frustration from the caller, including an utterance which is formally a question (*who IS authorized*) (64) but which does not seem to be intended to elicit any reply, since the caller gives the agent no opportunity to take the floor. Rather he continues with *all I want is somebody just to say you know (.) yeah* (64). The agent treats this as another indirect request for action, replying *I- I- can arrange that for you John* (65), once again orienting to the advice to use

'positive language'. He then tries to explain that the issue is not Thistle's unwillingness to provide written documentation, but his own inability, in the current conversation, to guarantee to provide it within the time-frame the caller has specified. The caller at this point seems to express some confusion over what it is the agent actually can and cannot do, revealing an impression that he is being given two conflicting pieces of information at the same time (romanized) *now I- I- I- I understand what you're saying TO me right but you're also saying to me you can't guarantee SOMETHing to be given to us w- within plenty of time for MY colleague to go speak to the lady tomorrow* (66). Eventually the agent manages to communicate that he is unable to promise anything there and then, but that he can check whether the caller's request is feasible and phone the caller back: *if you wish I'll come back to you in fifteen twenty minutes* (69). The caller accepts this proposal with *fantastic...that'll do me fine* (70, 72). And thereafter, the exchange proceeds smoothly for the remainder of the conversation.

#### *Communication is key?*

The preceding analyses expose the essential vacuity of the official 'communication is the key' ideology. While communication matters, it is rarely the only thing that matters (Cameron 2000a). It is important to make this point emphatically because the dominant view held by industry representatives is still to construe all sorts of problems in call centres as essentially communication problems, and therefore solvable through linguistic regulation. However, what seems to cause many of the problems in call centres has very little to do with agents' linguistic abilities and a whole lot to do with organizational and structural problems. The division of labour, for instance, a hallmark of rationalized systems such as call centres, means that call centre agents are able to deal only with very limited routine queries, and solutions offered are inevitably pre-packed and inflexible. The calls collected for this study contain numerous complaints about delays and errors which are principally down to systems and procedures, and over whose cause and resolution individual agents have absolutely no control. Rationalized organizations are also

characterized by a rigidity of procedures, which is often exacerbated, and made vulnerable, by the intense reliance on IT. As we saw in the Mermaid call, the cause of the problem was that the IT system was overloaded, and the fact that the agent had no control over this was also the reason for her inability to resolve the issue. The Mermaid call is not an isolated occurrence; many calls in both my Thistle and Mermaid corpus are irresolvable because the IT system has crashed, and given that everything needs to be processed electronically, this makes it impossible to proceed. Moreover, despite its purpose being the opposite, it appears that the hyper-rationalized call centre has the potential to generate problems. This happened to a customer in one of the case stories in a recently shown call centre documentary on Channel 4 (2008). The more the customer in question talked to the call centre to try to resolve his issue, the more problems he appeared to get; rather like Heracles who caused two new heads to emerge on the Lernaean Hydra each time he chopped one off. Such problems are what prompt the neo-Weberian sociologist Ritzer (2004) to refer to rationalized systems as irrational and unreasonable.

In the calls analysed, the failure to resolve the caller's query ironically runs counter to the rhetoric of 'customer sovereignty' (Leidner 1993, Hoffman 1998) which is so pervasive in the service sector. Agents, who are, after all, the ones with the most experience in call taking, report that it is far from always possible to reconcile the three goals of the customer, the organization and themselves, referred to as the 'win win win' concept in a call centre studied by Korczynski (2001a). The following exchange between some customer service representatives attending a training course (CSR) and their trainer reveals that the rhetoric of 'win win win' is far removed from reality:

|         |                                                         |
|---------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| CSR     | I disagree with win win win strongly                    |
| CSR     | I agree                                                 |
| CSR     | It's wrong                                              |
| Trainer | Why?                                                    |
| CSR     | Not every customer is going to win e.g. meter-checking. |
| Trainer | It depends on how you educate them                      |
| CSR     | You know that they're not happy                         |
| Trainer | It's up to you to explain it to the customer            |
| CSR     | There will be customers who will complain regardless    |

|         |                                                                                                                                                 |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Trainer | That's still a win to us                                                                                                                        |
| CSR     | No, because they're not happy                                                                                                                   |
| Trainer | You should look at your general approach, then they are going to win from the relationship you are building with them, rather than the solution |
| CSR     | If the customer is not happy, it's very hard to build a relationship                                                                            |
| CSR     | Some customers don't want a relationship with a company                                                                                         |
| CSR     | That's right. Just a service with a bill                                                                                                        |
| CSR     | Some customers expect free service                                                                                                              |
| Trainer | Win win win with as many customers as possible                                                                                                  |
| CSR     | It's a bad way of expressing it (Korczynski 2001: 96-97a).                                                                                      |

As Taylor and Bain argue, in call centres, as in most contemporary service workplaces, the importance of customer service always comes second place after the key rationale of cost reduction.

Ultimately, the interests of customers were, and remain, subordinated to the imperatives of capital accumulation and profit maximization. This does not deny the importance companies may place on service quality, satisfaction and retention, particularly for high-value customers, but to recognize that the customer-management-agent 'triangle' is not equilateral (2005: 264).

So what is the significance of linguistic regulation in all of this? I would suggest that the attention and resources which are devoted to it are nowhere near commensurate to its role in actual interactions. First of all, as I have already suggested in Chapter 4, when agents speak in congruence with the advice given in the communication material, this may be just as much the result of their natural flair for language use than of linguistic regulation. As we saw in the Mermaid call, for instance, the agent expresses a considerable degree of empathy even though this is not explicitly prescribed in the communication material. Secondly, though an apology may serve either to attenuate the impact of bad news, deflect the belligerence of an irate caller or bring some degree of solace to another, it is impugnable that it is a sufficient compensation for the fact that the query remains unresolved. As we saw in the Thistle call, the agent sometimes manages to orient to what is prescribed by the material, at other times he blatantly disregards it, and whatever strategy he chooses, it does not alter the fact that he is unable to resolve the underlying issue. In fact, there is even evidence that linguistic regulation is counterproductive and can create

more problems than it solves. As we saw in the Thistle call, the agent's unwillingness to issue a bald refusal seems to confuse the customer, which, from the point of view of efficiency is far from ideal as it may serve to prolong the call unnecessarily. Linguistic regulation in call centres, then, can never be the whole solution. No matter how much time or effort is devoted to it, it is only ever going to be like polishing a table when the woodwork is not intact. This is still an iconoclastic and marginalized view within the industry. In the process of doing this research, I have only very sporadically come across industry representatives, reporters, or academics who have disputed the quasi-religious status of communication skills. Within the globalized call centre community, it continues to be taken as a concept whose significance is assumed rather than as a basis for inquiry.

It appears that communication in call centres has become a scapegoat; the symbolic instantiation of all sorts of other problems. This, in fact, appears to be a tendency in a wider socio-cultural context in which all sorts of problems are conflated with communication problems. As Cameron suggests, contemporary society is experiencing a 'communication inflation'.

[T]here is a problematic cultural tendency to inflate problems of language and communication to the point where the larger social landscape is completely obscured. Communication matters, but it does not always matter in the same way or to the same extent; and it is almost never the *only* thing that matters (2000a: 181).

No doubt customers expect to be treated with some degree of courtesy, but it is doubtful that the resources devoted to the enterprise of linguistic regulation reflect the actual level of need. As I have argued, most adults are perfectly competent communicators even without having been subjected to communication training, and call centre agents, of course, are no exception to this. From the customers' point of view, it is also highly questionable that they value rapport and empathy over having their query resolved promptly and fully. It is possible that the obsession with communication skills, then, is a red herring which may obfuscate and distract attention from the underlying problems.

There is also an argument that the obsession with communication skills in call centres is a more deliberate managerial strategy to try to improve on the one thing that they *can* improve on. Management must know that the way they have organized the service to minimize expenditure is inconvenient for customers compared to the traditional alternative of dealing with one person who knows your case-history and can execute the whole range of transactions you might need. The strategy is to teach agents to empathize and apologize, which implicitly acknowledges that problems exist. Because the fundamental rationalizing principles and the inconveniences they entail are given and unalterable, call centres seize on communication as the one thing they can do anything about. Thus management can be said to manufacture a fictional customer need to cover up difficulties in meeting actual customer requirements. Arguably, however, what agents need is not subjection to linguistic regulation practices but an entirely different system. Until this happens, the rhetoric of personal responsibility, agency and flexibility is going to remain a sham.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have examined the extent to which call centre agents manage to accomplish their institutionally relevant goals given that their language is subject to regulation. In contrast to the previous chapter, goals were construed as emerging locally in the interaction, in line with the tenet of conversation analysis. Even when this was the case, however, it is difficult to argue that either agent or customer effectively had any significant degree of power over the extent to which they were accomplished. Rather, the power seemed to be located with a party who was not engaged in the interaction *in situ*, i.e. the organization. For the caller and the agent, the interaction occasionally seemed to result in a total deadlock. The analysis questions the degree of agency and local management which is assumed in workplace studies undertaken in the conversation analytic paradigm. While conversation analysts acknowledge that some degree of predetermination of the interaction

is likely to occur in institutional talk (Drew and Heritage 1992), they also stress that everything, in the end, has to be accomplished by the speakers. This is evidently true for the caller and the agent analysed in this chapter as well, but the preceding analysis suggests there is still something to be said for the constraining capacities of linguistic and other types of regulation. Ultimately, the debate about whether to emphasize local agency or restrictive structures, an age-old one traceable to nineteenth century sociology, may well be politically as well as scientifically based. Despite this, however, I hope I have managed to convince the reader that the continued disinterest of conversation analysts, as revealed in many of the contributions to the relatively recent volume on call centres (Baker et al. 2005a), in factors extraneous to the interaction misses out important aspects of what goes on in many contemporary workplaces.

## Chapter 6

### Gender and interactional reality

#### *Introduction*

In this chapter, I examine the relationship of gender and linguistic regulation. There seems to be a widespread belief in the call centre industry that more women than men possess the qualities that they are looking for (Tylor and Taylor 1997, Belt 2002). Part of this reason is to be found in the value call centres place on the 'interpersonal' or 'interactional' level of talk (Leech 1983, Halliday 1985, Kaspar 1990), which was discussed in Chapter 3, and with which women seem be stereotypically associated. In her examination of call centre communication material, Cameron (2000b) found that the speech style prescribed to call centre agents alludes to features of what Robin Lakoff in 1975 identified as 'women's language'. Some thirty years ago, women were expected to engage in a speech style that conveys enthusiasm, use minimal responses, create rapport and empathy, ask questions, and smile, and call centre agents today are required to do the same. This has contributed to a perception of call centre work as 'women's work', and it shows up numerically in that roughly two-thirds of call centre agents are female (IDS 2001).<sup>33 34</sup>

In workplaces where men are, or have historically been, the numerically dominant sex, it has been suggested that women assume the status of 'interlopers' (Eckert 1998). Their marginalized position means that they will have to work harder to prove that they belong; they 'need to show that they know the rules' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 303). For instance, as mentioned previously, Shaw (2000) found that female politicians in the House of Commons, an institution characterized by an extremely adversarial (and

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<sup>33</sup> In Thistle, the figures are 61 per cent female agents and 39 male and in Mermaid, 85 per cent are women compared to 15 per cent men. The larger proportion of women in Mermaid should be understood against the overall higher female labour force participation in the Scandinavian countries.

<sup>34</sup> Another factor which may have contributed to the conception of call centre work as 'women's work' may be a historical association between women and telephone work (Cameron 2000a). Call centre work may also have attracted women because it is amenable to part-time schedules and does not require heavy manual labour or geographical mobility.

arguably 'masculinized') style of interaction, 'legitimized' their presence by obeying the official rules to a greater extent than their male peers, i.e. they did not heckle, interrupt, filibuster, or joke as much. There is as yet only scant evidence of what happens when men enter areas of work that are predominantly associated with women, partly because this is a relatively new phenomenon. We might ask, for instance, whether in an environment where femininity is highly valued, such as the call centre, it is the men who will find it necessary to prove their worth by obeying the rules more. Or put in another way, can male call centre agents be considered 'interlopers'? This is the question I set out to answer in this chapter.

The question starts out from the assumption that 'men' is a legitimate starting point for an analysis. I assume, in other words, that men, as a group, will have certain issues or problems that will be different from those of women, as a group. This is a starting point whose legitimacy has recently been challenged in the field of language and gender studies, and it is necessary, therefore, to devote some space to clarifying how I place myself in relation to current theories.

### *Theorizing the relationship of language and gender*

The approach I take to language and gender in this chapter can be classified as 'modern' (as opposed to 'postmodern') (Cameron 2005b). Firstly, I explicitly take binary sex<sup>35</sup> as the starting point for my analysis, and, secondly, I rely on quantifications to allow for generalizations to be made. As regards the first defining characteristic, this is in contrast to the postmodern paradigm, which does not perceive gender as a variable from which a particular linguistic behaviour flows. Gender has no prediscursive reality, or at least no

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<sup>35</sup> In this chapter I use 'sex' and 'gender' interchangeably. Although conventionally, 'sex' has been understood to be biologically based (to do with genitalia, chromosomes and hormones) and 'gender' to refer to cultural, sociological and psychological constructs, the distinction is usually blurred both in lay man usage and academic writings (Bergvall 1999). This seems to be partly because it is often not theoretically feasible to tease them apart (Butler 1990). Of course, even if a sex-based classification may seem immediately obvious, it might turn out to be wrong. Transsexuals/transgendered individuals, for instance, who have been born and are perhaps still anatomically male, may present themselves as females and vice versa in which case it is not immediately obvious - or may not even occur to the researcher - whether to classify them by birth sex or by self-ascribed gender identity (Cameron personal communication).

significance that is worth studying outside of language. Researchers are at variance as to how radically to interpret such a non-prediscursive reality. Ethnomethodologists such as Speer (2005) and West and Zimmerman (1987) would dispute the relevance of gender entirely unless participants themselves invoke it when speaking. Others are prepared to accept that gender may exist even outside of discourse. Discursive psychologist Wetherell (1998), for instance, acknowledges that when she draws on interview data from real (and, by implication, gendered) people, this means that she locates gender at least partly in a non-discursive and material reality. The former position is usually referred to as 'relativist', and the latter as 'realist'; and there has over the past decade been quite vigorous debates between them (e.g. Schegloff 1997, 1999, Wetherell 1998, Billig 1999, Weatherall 2000, Edley 2001, Speer 2001a, 2001b).

My reasons for taking 'sex' as the starting point for this analysis in spite of what is current practice in the field are twofold. First of all, I believe it articulates with the real world to a greater extent than the postmodern standpoint.<sup>36</sup> The dichotomous views of gender that flourish in the world in general and in call centres in particular pose a challenge to current theories of language and gender, which, heavily influenced by poststructuralist thinking, rely on non-binary and deconstructionist views of gender (see also Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003, Bucholtz and Hall 2004). Rather than ignoring or denying the existence of circulating gender stereotypes from a political standpoint, I suggest that researchers need to investigate them (and possibly refute them) empirically (see also Cameron 2007). My other reason for taking binary sex as the starting point for my analysis is that, despite claims to the contrary, a lot of research undertaken in the postmodern paradigm still does this, an argument I pursue in detail elsewhere (Hultgren in press). The only way in which the research presented here differs from this, then, is that it explicitly acknowledges it.

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<sup>36</sup> This is in some ways a paradox because ethnomethodologists explicitly set out to break with 'grand narratives', which they believed failed to resonate with the concerns of real people. It might be argued, however, that their insistence not to rely on grand narratives has itself become a grand narrative.

The other aspect of my approach which defines it as modern rather than postmodern is that I do have an ambition to generalize my findings. In postmodern approaches, generalizations are often viewed with suspicion and are often deliberately avoided (see e.g. Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002, Mills 2003). Part of the explanation for this may be a highly influential paper by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, published in 1992. In this paper, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet encourage researchers to adopt a 'communities of practice' approach to the study of language and gender, a concept borrowed from education studies (Lave and Wenger 1991). Members of a community of practice are bound together by 'mutual engagement', 'a joint negotiated enterprise', and 'a shared repertoire', linguistic as well as semiotic. By emphasizing speakers' activities, the concept thus perceives gender as something you do rather than as something you have (Holmes and Meyerhoff 1999). Whilst many researchers seem to have taken Eckert and McConnell-Ginet's advice to 'look locally' (1992) as being conterminous with eschewing generalizations, I do not interpret their encouragement as a summons to dispense with generalizations altogether, nor, for that matter, with quantifications. Indeed, Eckert in her own work on pronunciation variation relies heavily on statistics (1989, 2000).

In my opinion, there are compelling reasons for relying on quantifications, and while I realize that this is an unfashionable thing to say, I would argue that this is particularly true when the object of study is gender. This is because gender is so ingrained in our culture that it is virtually impossible to take a fresh and unbiased look at it. Indeed, it has been pointed out that there is an omnipresent risk when analysing language and gender of being victim to a 'hall of mirrors' effect (Cameron 1997, 1998, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003). In other words, people in general (and analysts are not exempt from this) tend to read anything everyone does through gender lenses, i.e. gender is as much in the interpretation as in the production of discourse. Because of this, we need a researcher independent tool for determining which pieces of the data are salient in terms of gender

and which are not, and statistical tests, which I rely on in the quantitative analysis in this chapter (and in the next), are, I suggest, one such tool.

*Male and female call centre agents' adherence to linguistic rules*

In Tables 6.1 and 6.2 below, I present an overview of the quantitative analysis performed for this chapter. It should emerge that most variables examined did not reveal a statistically significant difference between male and female agents (see the high amount of 'NS', which refer to the finding that a non-significant difference was found for the variable in question). More often than not, contextual factors turned out to be more salient than sex in both call centres. These include many of the variables already discussed in Chapter 4, and they will not be discussed at length here. In a way, these results are not surprising. They are congruent with a reoccurring finding in the field of language and gender, namely that what often turns out to be the factor determining linguistic behaviour is not gender, but the task or activity in which the speakers are engaged (see e.g. Freed 1996, Cameron 1997). It is important too to point out that the quantitative results display group behaviour and that within each group there are outliers. One of the most 'obedient' agents in Thistle, for instance, is male. The agent in question was often held up by managers as an exemplary call centre agent, and I was often encouraged to listen in to calls taken by him.

| Rule             | Male agents     | Female agents   | Statistical test (Mann-Whitney U) | Total calls included |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Greeting         | 20.7%<br>(N=29) | 73.8%<br>(N=42) | $p < 0.001^{***}$                 | 71                   |
| Acknowledgement  | 42.9%<br>(N=28) | 63.2%<br>(N=38) | $p = 0.104$ (NS)                  | 66                   |
| Verbal handshake | 55.6%<br>(N=18) | 50.0%<br>(N=30) | $p = 0.712$ (NS)                  | 48                   |
| Thanks/please    | 80.6%<br>(N=31) | 84.4%<br>(N=45) | $p = 0.668$ (NS)                  | 76                   |
| Signposting      | 71.0%<br>(N=31) | 83.3%<br>(N=42) | $p = 0.210$ (NS)                  | 73                   |
| Name             | 41.9%<br>(N=31) | 73.8%<br>(N=42) | $p = 0.006^{**}$                  | 73                   |
| Small talk       | 9.7%<br>(N=31)  | 4.8%<br>(N=42)  | $p = 0.414$ (NS)                  | 73                   |

| <b>Rule</b>             | <b>Male agents</b> | <b>Female agents</b> | <b>Statistical test (Mann-Whitney U)</b> | <b>Total calls included</b> |
|-------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Empathy                 | 60.0% (N=5)        | 92.9% (N=14)         | $p = 0.092$ (NS)                         | 19                          |
| Transfer notification   | 100.0% (N=5)       | 100.0% (N=4)         | $p = 1.000$ (NS)                         | 9                           |
| Hold notification       | 100.0% (N=4)       | 70.0% (N=10)         | $p = 0.234$ (NS)                         | 14                          |
| Summary before solution | 6.9% (N=29)        | 10.8% (N=37)         | $p = 0.586$ (NS)                         | 66                          |
| Questions               | 3.2% (N=31)        | 6.5% (N=31)          | $p = 0.557$ (NS)                         | 62                          |
| Active listening        | 100.0% (N=21)      | 100.0% (N=28)        | $p = 1.000$ (NS)                         | 49                          |
| Offer alternatives      | 15.4% (N=13)       | 5.3% (N=19)          | $p = 0.342$ (NS)                         | 32                          |
| Check understanding     | 32.3% (N=31)       | 33.3% (N=36)         | $p = 0.926$ (NS)                         | 67                          |
| Timescale               | 80.0% (N=5)        | 78.6% (N=14)         | $p = 0.948$ (NS)                         | 19                          |
| Summary                 | 90.9% (N=11)       | 100.0% (N=20)        | $p = 0.178$ (NS)                         | 31                          |
| Anything else           | 9.1% (N=33)        | 17.4% (N=46)         | $p = 0.296$ (NS)                         | 68                          |
| Welcome to call back    | 13.0% (N=23)       | 42.4% (N=33)         | $p = 0.020^*$                            | 56                          |
| Thanks for calling      | 20.8% (N=24)       | 25.6% (N=39)         | $p = 0.666$ (NS)                         | 63                          |
| Personal endnote        | 6.5% (N=31)        | 2.4% (N=42)          | $p = 0.390$ (NS)                         | 73                          |

Table 6.1 Mean rule adherence by male and female agents in Thistle in percentages with sample sizes given in parentheses (NS=non-significant)

| <b>Rule</b>         | <b>Male agents</b> | <b>Female agents</b> | <b>Statistical test (Mann-Whitney U)</b> | <b>Total calls included</b> |
|---------------------|--------------------|----------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Greeting            | 0.0% (N=33)        | 0.0% (N=45)          | $p = 1.000$ (NS)                         | 78                          |
| Offer to help       | 27.2% (N=33)       | 42.2% (N=45)         | $p = 0.177$ (NS)                         | 78                          |
| Acknowledgement     | 15.2% (N=33)       | 36.0% (N=50)         | $p = 0.039^*$                            | 83                          |
| Hold notification   | 0.0% (N=7)         | 16.7% (N=18)         | $p = 0.259$ (NS)                         | 25                          |
| Questions           | 45.7% (N=35)       | 44.0% (N=50)         | $p = 0.876$ (NS)                         | 85                          |
| Active listening    | 94.6% (N=37)       | 96.6% (N=58)         | $p = 0.645$ (NS)                         | 95                          |
| Check understanding | 8.8% (N=34)        | 24.0% (N=50)         | $p = 0.076$ (NS)                         | 84                          |

| Rule                  | Male agents   | Female agents | Statistical test (Mann-Whitney U) | Total calls included |
|-----------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------|
| Summary               | 100.0% (N=13) | 100.0% (N=23) | $p = 1.000$ (NS)                  | 36                   |
| Transitional question | 0.0% (N=28)   | 9.5% (N=42)   | $p = 0.095$ (NS)                  | 70                   |
| Welcome to call back  | 11.8% (N=34)  | 13.6% (N=44)  | $p = 0.808$ (NS)                  | 78                   |
| Thanks for calling    | 0.0% (N=33)   | 0.0% (N=46)   | $p = 1.000$ (NS)                  | 79                   |
| Personal endnote      | 0.0% (N=34)   | 17.0% (N=53)  | $p = 0.012^*$                     | 87                   |

Table 6.2 Mean rule adherence by male and female agents in Mermaid in percentages with sample sizes given in parentheses (NS=non-significant)

I would argue, however, that what is noteworthy about these results is not so much the similarities between the sexes, or even the finding that the particular male agent referred to above superseded many of his female colleagues in terms of rule adherence. Rather, I submit, it is the finding that, although comparatively few, statistically significant differences (and near-statistically significant trends) *do* emerge, and that when they do, the results invariably point in the same direction: female agents adhere more to the rules than their male colleagues (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2 below). Overall, then, the findings presented here do not lend support to the idea that male agents assume the status of interlopers in the call centre and feel the need to work harder to prove their worth. In other words, where we might have expected that the value placed on women and their 'natural' skills would have placed the burden of proving their worth with the male agents, this is not borne out empirically by this study.

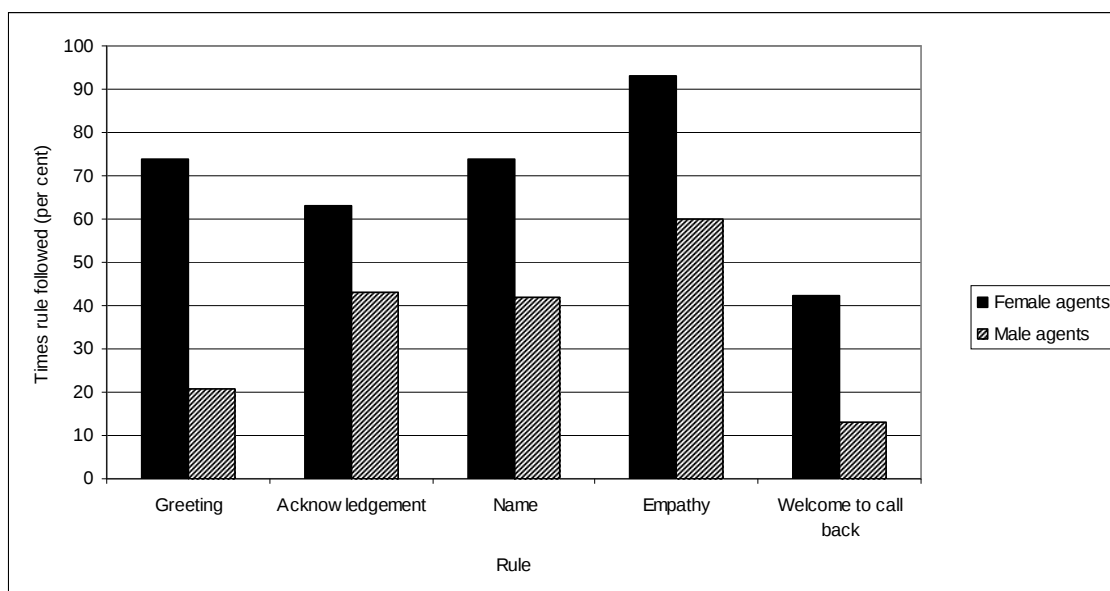


Figure 6.1 Male and female agents' rule adherence in Thistle (only rules with a statistically significant difference or clear non-significant trend included)

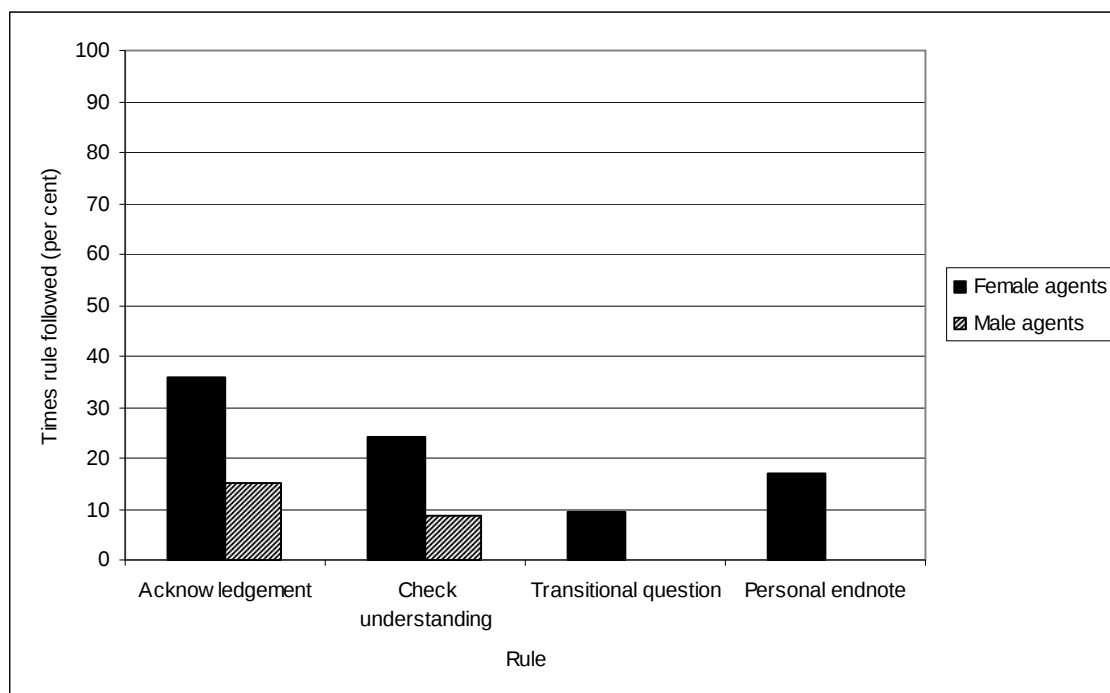


Figure 6.2 Male and female agents' rule adherence in Mermaid (only rules with a statistically significant difference or clear non-significant trend included)

### *Are male agents constructing masculinity?*

What is the explanation for the observed gender differentiated pattern in call centre agents' language use? One possibility is that the stereotypical view of women being 'naturally' suited to this type of work is actually well-founded. As it turns out, women on average are more attuned than their male counterparts to the interpersonal, or relational, level of talk;

they *are* better at creating rapport, showing empathy, and providing customer care in general. Conversely, male agents may find that the stereotypically feminine requirements of the call centre are at odds with their gender identity, and their lesser compliance with the rules could then be interpreted as a way of asserting their masculinity. Is there evidence to suggest that the reason why male agents break the rules is that they attempt to avoid reproducing any femininity that might be encoded in them? Below, I address this question by discussing in more detail each of the variables for which male and female agents differed significantly, or for which there was a clear non-significant trend, in their respective non-adherence and adherence.

The Thistle name rule, which requires the agent to use the caller's name at least twice in any interaction, is analysable first and foremost as a strategy relating to the interpersonal level of talk. As I have argued elsewhere, it has no informational functions since callers are uniquely identified by their insurance policy or national insurance number. Thus, when agents use the caller's name, it is purely for relational purposes, and its associations with femininity may therefore prevent male agents from using it. (There are a few cases in which the use of a caller's name can be said to have informational value, such as for instance when the agent asks for verification that the caller is who they say they are, but these usages have been disregarded from this analysis.) It should be clear from Figure 6.3 below that although male agents are to a greater extent than their female colleagues responsible for the behaviour in which the caller's name is not used at all in the interaction (22.5% compared to 11.0%), they are also to a greater extent responsible for the calls in which the caller's name is used once (35.4% compared to the females' 14.2%). This may suggest that male agents do not perceive of calling a customer by their name as a necessarily femininely gendered activity which must be avoided at all times. Interestingly, however, when we consider who takes the lead in using the caller's name twice or more in an interaction, i.e. what is required to comply with the linguistic prescription, the pattern is reversed, i.e. the female agents display this behaviour to a greater extent than their male

colleagues (73.8% compared to 41.9%). This may be the first indication in support of an argument I will develop in this and the next section, namely that what is at stake here is not so much whether the rule in question is perceived by the male agent as being at odds with their linguistic construction of masculinity, but rather a lesser degree of attentiveness by male agents to rules *per se*.

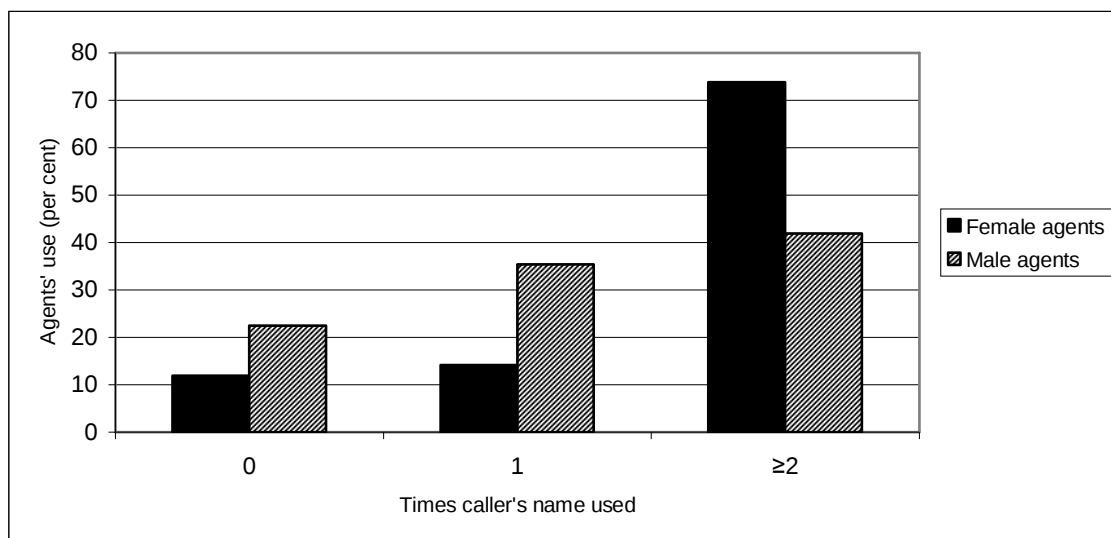


Figure 6.3 Number of times male and female agents use caller's name (73 calls included; 31 taken by male agents and 42 by female)

The welcome to call back rule, which also revealed a statistically significant gender difference in Thistle, is also interpretable as relating first and foremost to the interpersonal level of talk. By giving the option to call back, the agent signals a commitment to making sure that the caller is ultimately satisfied with the service they have received. But is this really why male agents avoid it? In the table below (and in the rest of this section), I will compare some examples taken from male and female call centre agents with the aim of establishing whether male agents break the rule because it is associated with femininity. What is presented in the tables are instances in which male agents break the rule and female agents follow it. Each example analysed is taken from different agents so as to reduce the risk that they represent idiosyncratic linguistic behaviour. It is occasionally necessary to include some explanatory comments to introduce the call extracts. Where it is necessary also to include the caller's preceding contribution, 'caller' is referred to as 'C', and 'agent' as

'A'. Pauses and overlaps have occasionally been edited out for readability. Readers may need to consult Appendix A for a transcription key.

|                                                   | Male agents                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Female agents                                                                                                                                    |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prescribed welcome to call back in Thistle</b> | [The agent] offers the customer a lifeline for future contact, e.g. 'If you do have any further queries, please don't hesitate to call us on this same number (DBS).                                             |                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Actual welcome to call back in Thistle</b>     | [The caller, a financial adviser, wants Thistle to send out a retirement quote for one of their clients, which the agent agrees to do]<br><br>C OK many thanks<br>A not a problem thank you<br>C alright bye bye | as I said if you do have any other queries after once received the fax just give me a wee call on that number and I'll go through it with you    |
|                                                   | [The agent has successfully resolved the caller's query]<br><br>C [...] thanks a lot for your help then Martin<br>A OK no problem<br>C thank you bye<br>A bye                                                    | that's fine Mrs Baker I can give you a reference number too just in case you have any questions then you can quote this if you need to call back |
|                                                   | [The agent has successfully resolved the caller's query]<br><br>A thank you for that Mr Smith enjoy your week<br>C bye bye<br>A bye bye now                                                                      | and if I can just give you a call reference for our call today as well                                                                           |

In the first case in which a female agent follows the rule, she says *if you do have any other queries after once received the fax just give me a wee call on that number and I'll go through it with you*, which is almost a textbook reproduction of the rule. In the second example, the female agent also bids the caller welcome to call back if she needs to, and provides her with a reference number so the case can be easily retrieved. In the third example provided by a female, finally, the offer to call back is not explicitly pronounced but is implied in the act of offering a reference number, which only makes sense from the point of view of the caller

having to call back. In the examples chosen to illustrate the male agents behaviour, they do not bid the caller welcome to call back but proceed straight to closing the call. This could be interpreted as an avoidance of the femininity that might be indirectly associated with the relational aspect of the rule. It is also possible, however, that they avoid saying welcome to call back, not so much because they perceive it as being femininely coded but because it is a rule in and of itself. What might support the latter interpretation is that the male agents could have reduced the risk of coming across as overly attuned to the relational level of talk by merely giving out a reference number, which is functionally equivalent but formally deemphasizes the relational meaning. This is what the female agent in the second and third examples presented here do, and many others too, and I have counted instances of giving out a reference number as adherence to the welcome to call back rule. This is because although it had not been encoded in the written versions of the communication material at the time of my visit to Thistle, observations from call assessments suggest that giving out a reference number was actively encouraged. In other words, where it cannot be excluded that the male agents' overall lesser compliance with the welcome to call back rule is explainable as a way of avoiding the femininity that might be associated with it, there is also evidence to suggest that it is rule adherence *per se* that constitutes the real problem for the male agents.

As regards the personal endnote rule, for which a statistically significant gender difference was found in Mermaid, it seems to serve predominantly or even exclusively interpersonal functions. Wishing the caller a good weekend or a nice trip is not necessary from a transactional point of view, but certainly strengthens the interpersonal level.

|                                               | Male agents                                                                                                                           | Female agents |
|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Prescribed personal endnote in Mermaid</b> | Did the agent give a friendly/polite good-bye, e.g. 'Goodbye, have a nice weekend', 'Goodbye and have a nice trip' (SS). <sup>A</sup> |               |

|                                            | Male agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Female agents                                     |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Actual personal endnotes in Mermaid</b> | [The caller's new mobile phone is not working and the agent promises to register it immediately so that it will be workable]<br><br>A I'll make sure to enter it<br>C many thanks<br>A you're welcome<br>C bye<br>A bye <sup>B</sup> | have a nice day <sup>C</sup>                      |
|                                            | [The caller successfully resolves the caller's query]<br><br>C thanks for your help<br>A you're welcome<br>C fine<br>A by- //bye<br>C //bye <sup>D</sup>                                                                             | have a nice day <sup>E</sup>                      |
|                                            | [The caller successfully resolves the caller's query]<br><br>C thanks very much<br>A you're welcome<br>C fine bye<br>A bye <sup>F</sup>                                                                                              | yes that sounds good have a nice day <sup>G</sup> |

In the examples presented here, the female agents orient to the rule by wishing the caller a nice day whereas the male agents proceed directly to closing the call. In these cases, I do not believe it can be excluded that the female agents' higher use of the prescription is due to it being congruent with their gender identity, and that the male agent's lesser use of it, conversely, may be because they resist the femininity that may be encoded in it. Even if they use it to a lesser extent than their female colleagues, however, it is worth pointing out that they do use it. We saw this above in the examples provided by male agents under the Thistle welcome to call back rule, where one of them said *thank you for that Mr Smith enjoy your week*.

The findings relating to the empathy rule in Thistle provide another case where it cannot be excluded that the male agents' lesser use of it has to do with it indexing femininity. Expressing empathy is certainly not necessary from a transactional point of view, but strengthens the interpersonal level. Since male agents disobey the empathy rule only twice in the corpus, I am able to provide only two examples, which I parallel with two cases in which female agents comply with the rule. In the first example provided by the male agent, there are, I suggest, two places in which it would have been appropriate to show empathy. The first case is when the caller informs the agent that she has been *waiting for weeks and weeks to hear from the solicitor*. This is met with a simple *okay* from the agent. The second case is when the caller expresses dissatisfaction with the lengthy processing time of the case (*it's been dragging on for so long now it's erhm we've been waiting for the information*). Despite the fact that Thistle is not responsible for the delay; rather the solicitor is to blame, it can be argued that this would have been an appropriate place for the agent to display some empathy with the caller's situation. The same is the case with the contributions provided by the second male. In the extracted sequences (for the call in its entirety, see Chapter 5), there are also, I suggest, two opportunities for the agent to display empathy, neither of which he exploits. In response to the caller's first outburst of frustration, he merely says *uh huh*, and in the second he proceeds to say what he can do, but fails to express empathy according to the prescriptions. By contrast, the female agents do empathize with the caller's situation, in the first case by apologizing for the fact that the caller has not received the information they were promised (*I'm sorry that you never received that*). In the second case, the agent conveys to the caller that she understands the distress she experiences from her children not being able to pronounce her foreign-sounding name (*right I under- right I understand*). As was the case with the personal endnote discussed above, I do not believe it can be excluded that the female agents' higher compliance with the empathy prescription is due to it being congruent with their gender identity, and that the male agent's lesser use of it, conversely, may be because they resist such femininity.

|                                      | Male agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | Female agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prescribed empathy in Thistle</b> | [The agent] uses words that demonstrate empathy and understanding when appropriate, e.g. 'I understand that must be really frustrating for you...', 'I do appreciate your patience Mr/Mrs Customer...' 'I'm sorry you've had that experience...' (DBS).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| <b>Actual empathy in Thistle</b>     | <p>C oh good morning<br/>Ivan this is<br/>Linda Tracy here<br/>at Callaghans<br/>Cargo at<br/>Cambridge erhm we<br/>received a<br/>reminder letter<br/>in connection<br/>with an- the late<br/>Mr Ken Wickham<br/>erhm and he- I-<br/>I've been waiting<br/>for weeks and<br/>weeks to hear<br/>from the<br/>solicitor</p> <p>A okay</p> <p>C and we finally<br/>received a copy<br/>of the will and<br/>erhm you know so<br/>we would now find<br/>a claim form and<br/>erh it would be<br/>put in the post<br/>to you today</p> <p>A excellent erhm do<br/>you want me just<br/>to put (xxx)-</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>C it's been<br/>dragging on for<br/>so long now it's<br/>erhm we've been<br/>waiting for the<br/>information</p> <p>A erhm I'll put a<br/>note on his file<br/>just to say that<br/>we are going to<br/>expect the- form<br/>coming in shortly</p> | <p>[The caller calls about<br/>an information pack they<br/>were promised but have<br/>not yet received from<br/>Thistle]</p> <p>A right well I can<br/>organize to get<br/>another one sent to<br/>you Mr Thompson is<br/>that OK</p> <p>C that's fine</p> <p>A OK it'll be five<br/>working days and it<br/>will come to the<br/>company address<br/>alright</p> <p>C that's fine</p> <p>A OK I'm sorry that you<br/>never received that</p> |

|  | Male agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    | Female agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <p>[The caller, an IFA, wants the agent to provide him with written proof that his client's affairs are being processed according to standard routines, something which the agent is not authorized to do]</p> <p>C &lt;FRUSTRATED OUTBREATH&gt;<br/>&lt;FRUSTRATED OUTBREATH&gt; I- I- I know it sounds stupid right but we are being chased one HUNDRED percent by this client</p> <p>A uh huh</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>C oh dear God who IS authorized I don't beLIEVE this &lt;LAUGHS IN DISBELIEF&gt; all I want is somebody just to say you know yeah<br/>(xxxxxxxxxxx)</p> <p>A I- I- can arrange that for you John the only thing I'm s- explaining is at THIS point during THIS telephone conversation</p> | <p>[The caller wants to change the name in which her pension scheme is registered]</p> <p>C right so what I would like to do is actually CHANGE my pension</p> <p>A \mhm</p> <p>C to my married name seeing as my passport's in that and I DO tend to use it the only reason I don't use it in my job is it's so long (and that it's) FOREIGN</p> <p>A \right \okay</p> <p>C and my children just couldn't SAY it (xxx)=</p> <p>A right I under- right I understand</p> <p>C =appalling</p> |

As regards the greeting rule, however, it is far from clear that the reason why male agents do not follow the rule is that it is at odds with their linguistic construction of masculinity.

|                                       | Male agents                                                                                                                                                               | Female agents |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>Prescribed greeting in Thistle</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Correct greeting used by consultant</li> <li>• Good morning/good afternoon Thistle Insurance how may I help you (SC).</li> </ul> |               |

|                                    | Male agents                                                                        | Female agents                                     |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Actual greetings in Thistle</b> | good morning Thistle Insurance Group how may I help                                | good morning Thistle Insurance how may I help you |
|                                    | good a- good morning Thistle Insurance Group you're through to Ivan how may I help | good morning Thistle Insurance how may I help you |
|                                    | good afternoon Thistle Insurance Trevor Jackson speaking how may I help you        | good morning Thistle Insurance how may I help you |

In the first example, the male agent fails to adhere to the rule, which, as has been discussed in previous chapters, must be reproduced verbatim as prescribed, because he adds the word *Group* to the company name. This is a remnant from a time when Thistle was one out of a group of collaborating companies, an arrangement reflected in the company name. This business arrangement has since been dissolved, and the *Group* bit has been scrapped from the greeting. It is difficult to argue that the reason why the male agent maintains it in the greeting is that he wants to avoid reproducing any femininity that might be encoded in the rule without it. The male agent in the second example also adds the bit *Group* to the company name, as well as inserting the phrase *you're through to Ivan*. He also fails to employ the pronoun 'you' in 'how may I help you'. (I have not considered the false start, in which the agent is about to say *good afternoon* instead of the temporally appropriate *good morning*, as a violation of the rule because he interrupts and corrects himself.) Here too it is difficult to make a convincing case for the agent not adhering to the rule because it is femininely coded. On the one hand, the agent does not use the pronoun 'you', which could be interpreted as a strategy to minimize reference to the relational level of talk by refraining from invoking the caller explicitly. On the other hand, however, his choice to introduce himself by name could be analysed as his apparently not having any problems in reproducing the ideal of a personalized service, and, by the same token, the femininity that is presumed to be its gendered instantiation. The choice of giving a personal introduction

in the greeting is replicated also in the final example presented here of a male agent breaking the rule. There is not much to say about the female agents' linguistic behaviour since, in all examples presented above, they reproduce the greeting verbatim as prescribed. All in all, it is difficult to interpret the male agents' failure to adhere to the greeting rule as a strategy to avoid any femininity that might be encoded in it, although this may be the case for certain other rules promoting customer care.

What about the acknowledgement rule which revealed a gender difference in both Thistle and Mermaid? Is there evidence that the reason why male agents use it less is that it might bring about connotations of femininity? The rule prescribes that an acknowledgement should operate on what might be called the metadiscursive level of interaction. It should, as it were, be a comment on the interaction itself. In other words, rather than offering an immediate solution to a caller's request, agents must first signal a commitment to the caller that their request will be dealt with. It is also strongly suggested in the examples listed under the rule in the Thistle and Mermaid communication material that it should contain a pronoun referring to the first person singular ('I' or 'me'), presumably so as to underscore a personal commitment by the agent to assist the caller with their query.

|                                              | Male agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Female agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prescribed acknowledgement in Thistle</b> | [The agent] tells the customer they can help them and offers an apology if applicable, e.g. 'Let me see what's happened', 'Let me see how I can help', 'I apologize for that, let me see what I can do', 'I can certainly help with that' (DBS). |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Actual acknowledgements in Thistle</b>    | <p>C great OK what I need to do is just quickly update please em starting with the start date of that plan please</p> <p>A OK the start date of the policy was the twentieth of May 2004</p>                                                     | <p>C as well as that could you give me a I've probably had one sent out to my old address but the I've got my tax return to do</p> <p>A oh right so you want details for the last tax year oh right that is no problem at all I'll get that arranged for you</p> |

|                                              | Male agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Female agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                              | <p>C right well one of the reasons I'm ringing is to confirm that you have got my new address my first address was eighty-five Albany Street FK eight one DN</p> <p>A and your new one</p>                                                                | <p>[A financial adviser calls Thistle on behalf of a client who has received a letter from Thistle saying that her company has not provided them with some information which is required in order to be able to process her query. The caller, slightly annoyed, claims that she has already provided Thistle with the information in question]</p> <p>A how very strange I'll have a look on the file and see what we think we're doing Amy</p> |
| <b>Prescribed acknowledgement in Mermaid</b> | [The agent must] acknowledge the caller's problem, e.g. 'I understand your problem', 'I will help you with the case/problem' (SS). <sup>H</sup>                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| <b>Actual acknowledgements in Mermaid</b>    | <p>C what- I am calling about- it is not my name on the invoice but it's my address right it's someone called Flemming Stengård</p> <p>A what's the customer number on that invoice<sup>I</sup></p>                                                       | <p>[The caller calls Mermaid in the hope of resolving a case of a new SIM card which does not work]</p> <p>A no but you know what I definitely want to see what I can help you with here<sup>J</sup></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|                                              | <p>[The caller, who has had his phone deactivated, calls Mermaid to ask whether it will be reopened on that day]</p> <p>C and then I just want to hear if it's today that it'll be reactivated</p> <p>A try to give me your mobile number<sup>K</sup></p> | <p>C well I just want to know if you could erh tell me where erh in Glostrup I can find a Mermaid shop</p> <p>A OK let's find out what postcode is Glostrup<sup>L</sup></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |

When we look at the ways in which male agents break this rule, they do not, as is prescribed, signal to the caller that they will help them. Instead they launch themselves into

trying to resolve the caller's query straight away. In the first example provided by a male agent in Thistle, the agent replies to the caller's query to obtain information about the start date of a given plan by offering a straight answer. In the second example provided by a male agent in Thistle, the caller calls to verify that Thistle has their correct address. They state their old address for the agent to verify, and again, instead of reassuring the caller that their query will be dealt with, the agent asks for the caller's new address. Similarly, in both Mermaid examples, the male agents immediately embark on the project to solve the caller's query by employing an utterance designed to elicit, in the first example, the customer number, and, in the second, the mobile phone number, to which the queries relate. This is in contrast to the acknowledgements offered by the female agents in both Thistle and Mermaid, in which they all employ an acknowledgement more in accordance with the prescriptions. Rather than addressing the caller's query right away, they first signal to them that they are going to deal with it (*I'll get that arranged for you, I'll have a look on the file and see what we think we're doing Amy, I definitely want to see what I can help you with here, OK let's find out*). Moreover, in all cases they employ a pronoun in the first person to signal personal responsibility.<sup>37</sup> Verbalizing an intention to help, as the acknowledgement rule prescribes, may reflect a higher degree of subservience than male agents are prepared to accept. Therefore, as far as the acknowledgement rule is concerned, it probably cannot be excluded that the male agents' greater tendency to avoid it is that it is at odds with their gender identity. On the other hand, the acknowledgement rule could also be interpreted as orienting to the value of efficiency, as the agent's deployment of it will signal that they will take charge of the matter. If this is the case, there is no reason to assume that employing an acknowledgement will necessarily constitute a threat to the male agents' linguistic construction of masculinity.

The check understanding rule revealed a non-significant trend in the direction of a gender difference in Mermaid. The communication material prescribes that agents must

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<sup>37</sup> In the last example, the female agent uses the plural form 'us' as in *let's* rather than the prescribed singular. However, although she includes the caller in the pronoun she still refers to herself.

confirm that the decision or solution which they have suggested to the caller's query is satisfactory to them.

|                                                  | Male agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Female agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prescribed check understanding in Mermaid</b> | [The agent] confirms that the decision/solution is satisfactory, e.g. confirm the decision for the solution that has been agreed upon and get the caller's acceptance (SS). <sup>M</sup>                                                                                                                                                                                                  |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
| <b>Actual check understanding in Mermaid</b>     | <p>[The caller has forgotten the password he needs to access his answering machine facility, and the agent provides him with a generic password so that the caller can change his password on the internet]</p> <p>C oh OK well I'll try that</p> <p>A that's OK<sup>N</sup></p>                                                                                                          | <p>[The caller calls because he has received a bill in the post from Mermaid despite the fact that he has already paid the amount due. The agent tells the caller to fax her a receipt to prove that payments have been made, and that she will then record it in the database]</p> <p>A but it does require that I get a receipt for it</p> <p>C yes</p> <p>A is that OK<sup>O</sup></p>                |
|                                                  | <p>[The caller is a Mermaid shop assistant who calls on behalf of a customer who has had her phone disconnected by Mermaid because she is behind with payments. The agent informs the shop assistant how much the customer needs to pay before the phone will be reconnected]</p> <p>C yes OK fine you know what I'll just try to tell her that</p> <p>A that sounds good<sup>P</sup></p> | <p>[The caller calls to obtain information about buying a subscription and phone for her daughter and, having run through some subscription types, the agent suggests to the caller to bring her daughter to a Mermaid shop to have a look at the range of mobile phones on offer]</p> <p>A so bring her along to the shop- then you can have a look at what they have out there alright<sup>Q</sup></p> |

|  | Male agents                                                                                                                                                                    | Female agents                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
|--|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  | <p>[The caller wants to know how to conceal his number when making calls and the agent informs him]</p> <p>C OK that sounds good</p> <p>A that's quite alright<sup>R</sup></p> | <p>[The caller calls to pay the bill on behalf of another person. The agent, however, is not permitted to let him do this as he is unable to provide a customer number or the birth date of the person he is calling for. The agent subsequently tells the caller to get Pernille, the account holder, to call herself, or to call back with the customer number]</p> <p>A so you are welcome or Pe- erh Pernille is welcome to call us back or you are with the customer number alright<sup>S</sup></p> |

The female agents' examples show an orientation to enlist the caller's acceptance of the solution they have just proposed. In the first example, the agent checks with the caller whether her suggestion to send a receipt to prove the fact that he has already paid the bill in question is OK (*is that OK*). In the following two examples, the female agents employ a tag (*alright*) to elicit the caller's approval of what they have just suggested. In contrast, the male agents' contributions do not show the same orientation to elicit the caller's consent in the solution proposed. In the first and second examples, the agents' contributions seem to reflect more of an approval of what the caller proposes to do. In the first case, the agent merely responds *that's OK* to the caller's *oh OK well I'll try that*, and in the second, he similarly replies *that sounds good* to the caller's *yes OK fine you know what I'll just try to tell her that*. In the final example, the male agent's contribution seems to be more an acknowledgement of the fact that he has helped the caller than a verification for approval of the solution offered (*that's quite alright*). Just as was the case for the acknowledgement rule above, the check understanding rule is also analysable as relating to the interpersonal level of talk.

Eliciting the caller's satisfaction with the solution proposed shows an orientation to their wants and wishes. On this ground, it is not impossible that the male agents' lesser use of this rule is a strategy to avoid the customer care aspect reflected in it, and, by implication, any femininity it might index indirectly. On the other hand, just as was the case with the acknowledgement rule above, customer care is not necessarily the only meaning that is encoded in the check understanding rule. It could also be argued that checking whether the caller is satisfied with the solution shows attentiveness to the value of efficiency in that it reduces the possibility for misunderstandings which may ultimately serve to prolong the call.

The last rule for which a gender difference was observed is the transitional question in Mermaid. This rule requires agents to elicit a consent from the caller that they can make a transition from the problem solving aspect to the sales stage of the call, which is a legal requirement in Denmark. For this rule it is exceptionally difficult to make a convincing argument for an interpretation in terms of customer care. If anything, it may reflect the opposite in that engaging in suggestive selling may serve to threaten the social alignment between the speakers. Although the transitional question is employed only four times by female agents, it is not on a single occasion performed by a male agent. In Chapter 4 I exemplified some of the ways in which female agents in Mermaid employed the transitional question and suggested that when they did so their many mitigation strategies, i.e. hedges, false starts and other tentativeness strategies, suggested that they perceived the transitional question as inherently face-threatening, an analysis which was corroborated by interview data. Despite this, on all, albeit few, occasions when the transitional question is used, it is done so by female agents. Male agents appear to simply blatantly disregard the rule.<sup>38</sup> As was the case with the greeting rule, there seems to be no convincing reason why male agents' non-adherence to this rule has to do with the fact that it is marked as femininely

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<sup>38</sup> It may be of interest to know that all of the calls without a transitional question failed to result in the move to a sales stage. The calls were simply brought to an end.

gendered, rather it seems that the relevant explanation is non-compliance with the rule *per se*.

Even if some of the rules for which a gender difference emerge were fully or partially analysable in terms of orienting to the interpersonal level of talk, it does not necessarily follow that agents perceive them as gendered. As Cameron (2000b) herself points out, the gendered associations may be covert rather than overt. Part of the explanation for this may be that 'the same way of speaking signifies both a professional identity and a gendered identity, and in practice these are difficult to separate: the two meanings coexist, and both of them are always potentially relevant' (Cameron and Kulick 2003: 58). In other words, agents may well perceive of their work as partially consisting of providing customer care and making callers feel good, but it does not automatically follow that they will conceive of this as a gendered activity.

Indeed, interview data from Mermaid and Thistle suggests that agents on the whole do not perceive of the work they are engaged in as particularly gendered, rather, they seem to think of it as a professional role, something which is corroborated by other studies as well (Leidner 1991, McElhinny 1998). Nor do agents appear to feel that one gender is more suited to the work than another. On the few occasions where agents did express a preference for one sex, no uniform picture emerged, either in terms of the actual preference or in terms of the reason given. Nor did agents in general express a preference for their own sex. One male agent in Mermaid believed that male agents are better because they are more patient; another male agent believed that women are better because they are able to stand up for themselves.<sup>39</sup> In Thistle, a male agent believed men are better on the grounds that they are more relaxed and do not, as his female colleagues tend to do, take it to heart when callers abuse them. Nor was there any consensus regarding what gender

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<sup>39</sup> This agent statement could be seen to contradict the overall argument which invokes women's subordinate status as an explanatory factor. It is important to point out, though, that the statement does not reflect a general view, and is likely to have as much to do with this particular male agents' experience with (some) women.

preferences agents believed callers had. Some expressed a belief that callers prefer to speak to male agents when the issue is technically complex. Others expressed a belief that male callers prefer to speak to female agents and vice versa, a finding corroborated by Moshavi (2004). Specifically, some suggested that a small minority of male callers prefer female agents because their purpose is sexual harassment, a behaviour which is reported to happen in both Thistle and Mermaid and in call centres in general (Sczesny et al. 2000). The managers themselves, albeit relatively few, did express a slight preference for female agents, but I sometimes got the impression that this was a methodological artefact of the interview, and that they said so to please me or because it was what they thought I expected them to tell me. There was also a strong belief that the ability to provide good customer service is a skill that can be acquired. Even if one sex may have an advantage to begin with, both sexes can improve their skills through courses, and in the long run, any initial gender differences may be neutralized. Indeed, if managers did not believe this, it would be a rather curious enterprise to devote so many resources to teaching and developing agents' communication skills. On the whole, then, in the interview data, no uniform picture emerges when it comes to which agent is better suited. If the reason for female agents' higher rule adherence is not that the variables in question are, overtly or covertly, linked with femininity, the explanation for the observed pattern must be sought elsewhere.<sup>4041</sup>

#### *Female speakers and rule adherence*

There is a major clue, I suggest, in the fact that the Mermaid study replicates the one in Thistle. In Mermaid Mobile, the pattern is exactly the same as in Thistle. Of the four

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<sup>40</sup> I might have come a bit closer to establishing whether female agents are, in fact, doing femininity if it had been possible to include prosodic and paralinguistic variables in the analysis as two of the features which Cameron (2000b) takes to be indicative of the feminized ideal are 'use expressive intonation' and 'smile down the phone'. Unfortunately, however, as already mentioned, I was not permitted to bring recordings offsite and continual access to audio data really is essential for this purpose. However, it would certainly be an interesting question for future research (see, e.g., Orr 2007).

<sup>41</sup> The suggestion in this study that gender identity may not be as salient as initially thought is, incidentally, in line with most recent developments in sociolinguistics. Though his focus is on colonial varieties of European languages rather than on gender, Trudgill's (2008) work marks a departure from traditional sociolinguistic assumptions about the centrality of identity (e.g. Chambers 1995).

variables which revealed a statistically significant difference or non-significant trend, all of them point in the same direction: it is invariably the female agents who adhere more to the rules than their male colleagues. What is particularly revealing about the Danish context is that, ideologically, there is no overtly expressed preference for female agents. In fact, if gender is an issue at all in Mermaid, it shows up as a slight preference for male agents. This may be partly due to a Nordic tradition to strive for a fifty-fifty gender division at work (see as an example many contributors to the volume edited by Von der Fehr et al. 1998). Also, at the time of my fieldwork, Mermaid were in the process of recruiting several cohorts of male agents both because they were trying to achieve more gender balance in the workplace and also because men were believed to possess the technical skills that were needed for the imminent launch of the third generation mobile phones. Another possible reason for the slight preference for male agents is that stereotypically feminine qualities, such as the ability to create rapport and show empathy do not figure as prominently among the rules as they do in Thistle (an issue I shall return to in Chapter 7). And even if they did, it would not automatically follow that they would be coded as 'feminine' to the same extent as they might be in Britain. Some Mermaid managers, however, did mention the importance of showing empathy for the caller and expressed a belief that female agents were better at this than their male colleagues. In spite of this, agent requirements in Mermaid cannot be said to uniformly add up to femininity. Despite this, when gender differences show up in Mermaid, they are of exactly the same type as in Thistle: female agents invariably use more of the prescribed rules than their male colleagues.

Interestingly, this finding is in line with many studies undertaken in the variationist paradigm, which have found that women, regardless of the meaning of the particular variable they are being measured on, have a tendency to make higher use of variables that

are associated with a linguistic norm.<sup>42</sup> Eckert (1989, 2000), for instance, studied phonological variation in a US high school. She found that girls and boys could not be monolithically grouped into separate categories because the social variable 'group affiliation' intersected gender. More specifically, the teenagers self-identified as either 'jocks' or 'burnouts'. The jocks had middle class values and were oriented to school norms whereas burnouts had working class values and tended to rebel against school activities. Eckert found that female jocks used more of the variables that signified school affiliation than their male peers, and burnout girls used more of the variables that signified rebelliousness compared with the male burnouts. Thus, each group of girls used more of the variables associated with their respective social grouping compared to their male peers, irrespective of the meaning of the variable in question. When Labov (1990) correlated the fronting of [ae] with five occupational groups: unskilled, skilled, clerical, managerial, and professionals, he found the same cross-over effect, i.e. that unskilled women's speech was more vernacular than unskilled men's while the speech of female managers and professionals was more standard than their male counterparts'.

The explanation Eckert provides for female speakers' overall tendency to adhere more to whatever variable is particularly valued within their respective social grouping, is that women, given their inferior status in society as a whole, will have to work harder to prove themselves. While it is often claimed that society today is more gender egalitarian than in previous decades, Connell (1995) reminds us that in capitalist countries, men's average income is double that of women's and that men are much more likely to be a chief executive of a company, member of parliament, head of state, university professor and so on. Such differential access to power prompts Eckert (1989, 1998, 2000) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, 1995, 1999, 2003) to suggest that women have to do more than men simply to maintain their place within their respective groupings. Women, in other

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<sup>42</sup> To be precise, women use more standard forms when variables are stable, i.e. when they are not in the process of undergoing a change. If the variable in question is in the process of undergoing a change, then female speakers tend to use it more only if it represents a change from above, i.e. when it is valued positively by the community in which it occurs (Labov 1990, 2001).

words, have to be at the extremes of the linguistic repertoire to solidify their place in whatever grouping it may be. Deuchar (1989), arguing along similar lines, suggests that women's place in society makes them more vulnerable to criticism and therefore their more meticulous use of standard language can be seen as a way of being 'beyond reproach'. That the pattern observed in the call centre has more to do with general attentiveness to rules than with gender identity provides a more unified, and therefore satisfactory, explanation since it accounts for all and not only some of the variables for which a statistically significant gender difference was found.

As it turns out, there is support for such an interpretation in interview data from Thistle and Mermaid and other call centres. In Chapter 3, I discussed ways in which agents reacted to the linguistic rules imposed by the call centre management. Some agents appeared to wholeheartedly embrace the advice given, and admitted to altering their linguistic behaviour to conform with the requirements. Others had strong objections to the attitude that 'you must do it this way' and admitted to deliberately flouting the rules on the grounds that they did not approve of them. These agents were also the ones who told me about cases in which they had appealed rulings made in the call assessments which were unfavourable for them. Since gender was not the explicit focus of Chapter 3, however, I did not report that in cases where rules were met with acquiescence, female agents were responsible, and in all reported cases in which rules were actively resisted, it was male agents who were behind it. Some call centre managers interviewed by the sociologist Vicky Belt seem to have picked up on the idea that female call centre agents are better at their job, not so much because of a presumed link between their gender identity and the job requirements, but because they are more tractable, and 'stick at the job' for longer periods than their male colleagues

I find that the girls do the work better, they stay on-line and like what they are meant to do... where as I think the men are constantly coming off-line to try and do other things (2002: 137-138).

While the association between call centre work and women which has been proposed both by sociologists (Tylor and Taylor 1997, Belt 2002) and sociolinguists (Cameron 2000b) may be partially confirmed, it may not, at least on the balance of the evidence presented here, be the whole picture. In call centres, it is not as much about gender as rule compliance. There is evidence to suggest that, in practice, compliance with targets override concerns with customer care (Korczynski 2001a, Alferoff and Knights 2002, CM 2004). In fact, it has been suggested that the emphasis on rules, targets and control combine to make call centres 'masculinized' environments (Wray-Bliss 2001). Vicky Belt, whose work centres around the position that call centres are feminized workplaces, modifies her standpoint towards the end of one of her papers.

I have argued that managers and most workers tend to assume that women are especially likely to possess the particular kinds of social skills (particularly in 'customer focus' and 'teamworking'), that are viewed as centrally important in most areas of call centre work. However, the highly routine and controlled nature of work organisation in call centres acts to severely constrain the ways in which women are able to utilise and further develop these social skills (2002: 141-142).

On the whole, then, it seems that the preference for female call centre agents may be dually catalyzed by the association (whether overt or covert) of customer care with femininity and by the female agents' tendency to be more rule compliant.

#### *Implications for language and gender theories*

Insofar as the results reported in this study are attributable to women compensating for their inferior position in society, this brings women together in a commonality which does not purely arise from mutual engagement in local practices, but from their overarching status of being a subordinate group. This may have implications for current language and gender theories which, as discussed in the introduction to this chapter, have sought to deconstruct abstract gender polarizations that transcend the local community being studied. Bergvall, however, is against the exclusive use of the community of practice approach to language and gender.

Despite its many virtues, it is not clear how a 'localized' CofP [community of practice] approach can derive a systematic account for gender norms established prior to the local practice of gender, at the more global level of ideology and hegemony (1999: 284).

If these power inequalities translate linguistically into women's higher use of variables that are considered prestigious in whatever community they find themselves, as a lot of previous studies and the evidence presented here suggest, then Bergvall's and others' assertion needs to be taken seriously. Language and gender researchers need to recognize that overarching social structures may carry over into the local communities being studied. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet propose (1992), generalizations in language and gender studies may be explained not in terms of 'women are like this and men are like that' but in terms of the institutionalized inequalities that exist between them, and which position them differentially vis-à-vis the linguistic resources that are available to them. Or, more succinctly, *'the difference arises in a context of unequal gender relations'* (Cameron 1996: 44, emphasis in original).

As I hope to have demonstrated, I believe quantitative approaches are a good supplement to what has sometimes been called an 'over-commit[ment] to the relatively micro' of ethnographic and qualitative approaches, which are particularly widespread in the area of language and gender, and which tend to

neglect[] the larger-scale social and historical processes and systems. Analytically, concentration on the domain of face-to-face interaction may incline researchers to exaggerate the power of human agency and to neglect less visible process of social reproduction (Burawoy 1991: 284-285).

It would not have been possible to show what I have done here using one of the currently fashionable postmodern methods, such as conversation analysis, critical discourse analysis, discursive psychology, or feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis. It is the quantification *per se* that makes generalizations of the kind presented here possible. It is not unlikely that, presented with the same data, a scholar working in the postmodern paradigm would have chosen to focus on the similarities of the sexes, or that they would have given priority to an account of how male or female agents do not conform to gender stereotypes.

As Burawoy aptly writes, however, such studies may 'exaggerate the power of human agency and [to] neglect less visible process of social reproduction'. A quantitative approach, by contrast, might, provided that it follows rigorous methodological procedures, make visible any such less visible yet highly important social structures.

Moreover, comparing two call centres located in two different countries has enabled me to make more general claims. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1999, 2007) have argued, and more recently reiterated, that the way to move forward research in language and gender as it currently stands is to compare different communities of practice as this will enable researchers to tie gender patterns in particular communities of practice 'to more general phenomena, related to the sociolinguistic dynamics of dominant/subordinate groups and to other prestige systems' (1999: 196). Comparing a community of practice in Britain with one in Denmark, as I have done in this chapter,<sup>43</sup> enabled me to relate my findings to overarching social structures that transcend the local communities being studied, and to increase the reliability of the generalizations made.

Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of research currently undertaken in the field of language and gender are qualitative discourse analytic studies, there have been recent calls for complementing these with quantitative approaches (Swann 2002, Holmes and Meyerhoff 2003, Hultgren in press). It is sometimes claimed that quantitative approaches may harm the feminist political agenda which has always underpinned research in language and gender. It is believed, for instance, that by seeking out differences between the sexes, one risks perpetuating and reinforcing stereotypes which ultimately work to the disadvantage of women (Bing and Bergvall 1996, Sunderland and Litosseliti 2002). On the other hand, scholars who are or have been associated with quantitative methods, such as

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<sup>43</sup> Though Holmes and Stubbe (2003) have argued for the usefulness of applying a community of practice approach to workplace studies, it is debatable whether my call centres are in fact communities of practice, first and foremost because the talk I analyse transgress community boundaries in that customers cannot be said to be community members. Scollon and Scollon (1995) argue that communication within a 'Discourse System' (which is theoretically similar to a community of practice) is the rarest form of communication; interaction across boundaries is far more common because of the complexity of human social organisation. Whether or not what I am studying can be classified as communities of practices, however, the important thing is that I am comparing two very similar sorts of settings.

Janet Holmes (1995) for instance, have pointed out that the postmodern turn in language and gender has led to a 'depolitization' of the field. Their claim is that if no generalizations are or can be made, then it is impossible both to discover and point to systematic inequalities between the sexes. Such scholars suggest that the answer to depolitization is Spivak's (1985) notion of 'strategic essentialism' (Holmes 2006b, Hultgren in press), whereby members of a marginalized group benefit from downplaying differences among them for the purpose of social action.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I set out to investigate whether, in an environment where femininity is valued, such as the call centre, it is men who assume the status of interlopers and find it necessary to prove their worth by obeying the rules more. Where we might have expected that the value placed on women within the call centre context might have worked to their advantage and exempted them from the chore of having to prove their worth, this is not corroborated by this study. Female agents on the whole adhere more to the rules than their male colleagues. While it cannot be excluded that the explanation for this pattern has to do with the association of customer care with femininity, I suggest that gender may be relevant not so much as a marker of identity as a status category. Insofar as supra-local gender inequalities influence linguistic behaviour, the research presented in this chapter may be useful for moving forward studies in the area of language and gender. The findings suggest that there are limitations to the currently fashionable localized studies which focus solely on how gender is constructed in interaction, or on particular communities of practice, without relating these to overarching social structures.

Given the promised applied value of the research presented here, and as the 'ethically aware social scientist' (Cameron et al. 1992: 13) that I aspire to be, I feel it is necessary to reflect on how the findings presented in this chapter will be used by the call centres I am obliged to report back to. It might be of some concern, for instance, that I

seem to have empirically corroborated the circulating stereotypes that women make better call centre agents than men. What are the practical implications of this? Will my research contribute to women being over-recruited to the industry, or even to potential male applicants being discriminated against? As Cameron (2000b) points out, it is hardly a cause for feminist celebration that call centres capitalize on women's 'natural' skills. While in the short run, it may benefit individual women who happen to be unemployed, in the long run, and on a more structural level, it will keep women at bay in low prestige jobs where they have no real influence. In other words, the beliefs in female verbal superiority may 'appear to disparage men but at a deeper level [they] defend their privileges' (Cameron 2006: 145). The problem here relates to the point made earlier, namely that feminists risk reproducing gender inequalities by the mere fact of studying them. Even if in the short run these findings may lead to more women being recruited to the industry, in the long run, it might be better to be aware of the inequalities than to conceal potentially damaging or sensitive information. As Hammersley and Atkinson (1995) point out, the public's right to know must outweigh such politically and ethically motivated considerations.

## Chapter 7

### Globalization and interactional reality

#### *Introduction*

In a special issue of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, editor Nikolas Coupland (2003) argues that it is time sociolinguists incorporated themes of globalization into their research activities and start addressing questions about its impact on language. With the call centre community being truly global, it is an ideal candidate for a 'mediating institution' (Blommaert 2003) which might serve as a vehicle for the exportation of a certain type of language to other locales. In this chapter, I draw on call centre communication material collected from four different countries, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Denmark and Britain, to explore possible commonalities between them with the ultimate objective of finding out what, if anything, is being globalized. Next, given that globalization theorists have fervently pointed out that the imposition of one culture onto another is rarely a straightforward or inevitable trajectory but fraught with a mixture of wholehearted acceptance, full-blown resistance and everything in-between (Robertson 1995, Featherstone and Lash 1995, Appadurai 1996), I shall examine reactions to a possible linguistic homogenization, as evidenced in the language use of call centre agents in two of the countries here examined, Denmark and Britain.

#### *The exportation of a globally uniform call centre style*

In order to identify a possible homogenization of the language prescribed in call centres, I draw on communication material from four countries: Britain, Denmark, Hong Kong and the Philippines. Two of the four call centres whose linguistic regulation material I examine here have already been introduced. They are Thistle Insurance, an inbound, onshore call centre located in Scotland, and Mermaid Mobile, also an inbound, onshore call centre, which is located in Denmark. In Thistle, the service interaction is conducted in British

English whereas in Mermaid, it is conducted in Danish. In both call centres, agents communicate with customers in their native language. I have chosen to include two non-European call centres in the comparative analysis as well in the hope that this would make claims about a possible stylistic homogenization stronger. The first is an onshore, inbound call centre located in Hong Kong. The call centre, which is in the financial sector, is a local Asian branch of an American company, and it serves Hong Kong-based customers, who are for the most part Cantonese speakers, but may also be English (5-10 per cent) or Mandarin speaking (1-2 per cent). Agents thus need to be able to communicate with customers in two languages in addition to their native Cantonese, and they are partly recruited because of their trilingual skills. The material drawn on here includes a scorecard used in call assessments (HKScor), the MP3-recorded version of an oral presentation given by a manager at my visit to the call centre (HKOral), and a booklet containing a written version of this presentation (HKBook). The fourth data set consists of training material used to train Filipino call centre agents to communicate with US-based customers (PhilTrain), and my own fieldnotes recorded when observing such a training session in Manila. The Philippine communication material is the only one out of the four sets that is designed for the offshore industry and the fact that it is designed for agents who are not native speakers of English is evident from the many sections it incorporates on pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. These sections tend to be contrastively presented and highlight issues which are believed to cause particular problems for Filipino speakers of English. Despite these differences in call centre location, type (whether on- or offshore), specialization (whether telecommunications, finance or unspecified), and the language in which the service interaction is conducted (parameters are schematically reproduced in Table 7.1), I will argue that the speech style that is prescribed to agents, and, in particular, the type of interpersonal ideal it aspires to, is the same across all four centres.

| <b>Location</b> | <b>Type</b> | <b>Specialization</b> | <b>Language of interaction</b>                           | <b>Agent's native language</b> |
|-----------------|-------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Denmark         | Onshore     | Telecom               | Danish                                                   | Danish                         |
| Britain         | Onshore     | Finance               | UK English                                               | English                        |
| Hong Kong       | Onshore     | Finance               | Cantonese (88-94%)<br>English (5-10%)<br>Mandarin (1-2%) | Cantonese                      |
| Philippines     | Offshore    | Unspecified           | US English                                               | Tagalog                        |

Table 7.1 Overview of call centres analysed in Chapter 7

One analytic concept needs to be introduced before I proceed to the comparison itself, and that is 'positive' versus 'negative politeness'. In conventional politeness theory,<sup>44</sup> devised by Brown and Levinson in 1987, it is assumed that speakers have at one and the same time two separate but related desires, which are summed up in the notion of 'face'. One is to be approved of ('positive face') and the other to be unimpeded in one's actions ('negative face'). In interaction, speakers will strive to attend to one another's face needs. Strategies that are designed to cater for an interlocutor's positive face ('positive politeness') may consist of showing an interest in them and highlighting commonalities between the speakers. Linguistically, they may consist of small talking, expressing sympathy and using jargon or slang to signal in-group membership. By contrast, strategies directed to protect an interlocutor's negative face ('negative politeness') would entail minimizing imposition. Linguistically, this may be realized as hedging or giving overwhelming reasons for requests. While the linguistic regulation material in all four call centres incorporates elements of both positive and negative politeness strategies, it is fair to say that the overwhelming emphasis is on positive politeness.

To begin with, agents in all four call centres are advised to make callers feel as if they are listened to. (The Danish material, which is the only out of the four sets not written in English, has been translated into English to ease comparison.)

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<sup>44</sup> I choose the word 'conventional' advisedly here, because Brown and Levinson's theory, although highly influential, has been substantially criticized and revised particularly from a post-structuralist perspective (Eelen 2001, Watts 2003, Mills 2003). The main points of criticism can be summed up as a too narrow focus on the sentence and the speaker (as opposed to being a discursive phenomena mutually produced and interpreted by the speaker and the hearer) and ethnocentrism. Their theory, however, seems to work very well on examples of linguistic regulation, which are, by definition, narrowly focused on the sentence, the speaker and on one particular culture.

| Britain                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Denmark                                                                                                                                                         | Hong Kong                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Philippines                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p><u>Listening skills:</u> [The agent] verbally nods during customer explanations, e.g. urgh huh, right, OK, I see (DBS).</p> <p>[The agent] uses key phrases that demonstrate active listening (DBS).</p> | <p>[The agent] must engage in 'active listening' by for instance recapping what has been said, or with sounds such as mmm, aha, yes, etc. (SS).<sup>A</sup></p> | <p>Adhere to listening skills (HKScor).</p> <p><u>Identify real needs:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• listen, listen and listen</li> <li>• active listening (verbal, non-verbal) (HKBook)</li> </ul> | <p><u>The specific objectives of the programme are to:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• develop active listening and predictive listening skills</li> </ul> <p>Fillers such as 'um, uh, uh-uh, yeah, I know, OK' all let the caller know that you are still at the end of the phone (PhilTrain).</p> |

It is evident from all four sets of material that listening to the customer is not only construed as a communicative axiom without which it would be impossible to engage in any sort of interaction. More importantly, it is conceptualized as an interpersonal device. This is implied in the phrase 'active listening' which is used throughout the four sets of material. It is not enough, in other words, merely to *passively* listen to the caller; one must *actively* signal to them that one is doing so. This suggests an interpretation in terms of positive politeness, of which showing an interest in the hearer and their needs is a key feature (Brown and Levinson 1987). The four sets of material also propose some strikingly similar devices which agents can deploy to give the impression to the caller that they are being listened to. These include 'minimal responses', such as 'OK', 'mhm', 'yes'. 'Active listening' is a key feature in all four sets of material and the way in which it is presented seems to favour a preference for positive politeness it that it aims at making the caller feel cared for.

Related to making callers feel listened to is the importance of acknowledging their needs and making them feel understood. This is presented in the following ways in the four sets of material.

| <b>Britain</b>                                                                                                                                                                    | <b>Denmark</b>                                                                                                                                                                                     | <b>Hong Kong</b>                                                                                                                                           | <b>Philippines</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>[The agent] summarizes own understanding of situation to ensure everything is correct before offering a solution.</p> <p>Checks own understanding with the customer (DBS).</p> | <p>[The agent must] confirm that the decision/solution is satisfactory, e.g. confirm the decision for the solution that has been agreed upon and get the caller's acceptance (SS).<sup>B</sup></p> | <p><u>Confirming and committing:</u><br/>Check understanding and seek agreement (HKBook).</p> <p>Use of paraphrases to confirm understanding (HKScor).</p> | <p><u>An active listening response can have two parts:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The first 'mirrors' the emotion: 'I understand your frustration'</li> <li>2. The second restates the problem: 'that you haven't received your claim form yet' (PhilTrain).</li> </ol> |

In all four sets of material, understanding is signalled by 'summarizing' (Britain), 'confirming' (Denmark), 'checking/paraphrasing' (Hong Kong) or 'restating' (the Philippines) the caller's situation to indicate that the agent has correctly understood it. One purpose of such confirmations relates to the ideal of efficiency, which was discussed in more detail in Chapter 3. Obviously, making sure that the agent has correctly understood the caller's query will reduce this risk of misunderstandings and thus increase the chances of a smooth and speedy processing of the call. Another possible interpretation of the importance of 'understanding' is its coexisting function as an interpersonal device. As such, it is analysable as a strategy aimed at signalling to the caller that they are being understood, cared for, and attended to, and hence it is interpretable as a positive politeness strategy.

Understanding is presented not only from the point of view of the caller; it is equally important for the agent to make themselves understood. One way of doing this is to avoid the use of jargon and company-internal lingo, which, again, is a feature listed in all four sets of material.

| Britain                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Denmark                                                                                                                             | Hong Kong                    | Philippines                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| [The agent] avoids phrases such as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• back office</li> <li>• delivery area</li> <li>• any dept or team name</li> <li>• processing team</li> <li>• admin team</li> <li>• for additional information refer to good call guide under: Quality page/seamless service/list of taboo words and alternative phrases</li> </ul> (SC). | [The agent must] NOT use technical terms or internal jargon in connection with their explanations of the problem (SS). <sup>c</sup> | Avoid using jargon (HKBook). | <u>Simplifying jargon:</u><br>Every profession has its jargon. These are words and expressions which may be useful for internal use, but will be confusing to the outside customer (PhilTrain). |

Thistle even goes so far as to refer the agent to a list of taboo words. According to Brown and Levinson, mutual use of jargon or slang is a way of signalling in-group membership and of 'claiming common ground' (1987: 103). Thus, by highlighting commonalities between the speakers through the practice of sharing a mutual code, it is considered a positive politeness strategy. Conversely, it can be argued that when speakers do not in fact share the status of in-group members, as is the case with customers and agents who communicate across community boundaries, the *avoidance* of jargon and slang can be seen as a positive politeness strategy. There are other ways in which the material makes clear that making oneself understood to the caller is highly important. One feature, variously referred to as 'signposting', 'summarizing' or using 'headline techniques' has a paramount status in all four sets of material and it entails using metadiscursive devices to make sure the caller understands what the agent is doing.

| <b>Britain</b>                                                                                                                                        | <b>Denmark</b>                                                                                                                                                                               | <b>Hong Kong</b>                                                                                                                                                                | <b>Philippines</b>                          |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| <u>Signpost:</u><br>[The agent] advises the customer what they are going to do, e.g. 'Firstly, I need to look at your details Mr/Mrs Customer' (DBS). | [The agent must] repeat what is important with regard to the conclusion of the interaction, e.g. 'To repeat, I will..', 'We have solved your problem and talked about...' (SS). <sup>D</sup> | <u>Use of appropriate techniques:</u><br><ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Headlining (HKBook).</li> </ul> 'You tell them why you are giving them information' (HKOral). | Just to summarize then, Sir... (PhilTrain). |

It is not enough, in other words, for the agent merely to do what the caller asks them to. They must also actively communicate to the caller what they are doing, or have done. This too is analysable as a positive politeness strategy in that it signals an overtly expressed commitment by the agent to cater for the caller's needs.

In some cases, signalling to the caller that they have been understood is not enough. If the situation warrants it, agents must also empathize with callers. The importance of empathy features prominently across all four sets of material.

| <b>Britain</b>                                                                                                                                                                                 | <b>Denmark</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>Hong Kong</b>                                                                                                                                   | <b>Philippines</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| [The agent] uses words that demonstrate empathy and understanding when appropriate, e.g. 'I understand that must be really frustrating for you', 'I'm sorry you've had that experience' (DBS). | [The agent must] acknowledge the problem, e.g. 'I understand your problem', 'I will help you with the case/problem' (SS). <sup>E</sup><br><br>'It is, largely, about empathy' (Interview with manager). <sup>F</sup> | [There must be a] 'Show of empathy' (HKBook).<br><br>[The agent says] 'We understand that this is difficult, but we are here to help you'(HKOral). | Emotional and frustrated callers want us to empathize with their situation. They want us to see the situation from their point of view. It sounds very insincere and condescending to say to callers: 'Please calm down.' This is likely to inflame the situation! A better way of acknowledging how the customer feels is to reflect their feelings and repeat the content of their emotional statement (PhilTrain). |

The word 'empathy' (and derivatives) is used in all four sets of material, and most provide exemplary phrases on how agents should evoke empathy to callers. Unlike the confirmation strategies analysed above, which I suggested had two coexisting functions of efficiency and positive politeness, it is difficult to analyse empathy as serving anything other than positive politeness functions. According to Brown and Levinson, the signalling of understanding and empathy are classical features of positive politeness in that they appeal to the hearer's 'wants to be liked, admired, cared about, understood, listened to, and so on' (1987: 129).

Questions have a prominent place in all four sets of material, and in all four sets a distinction is made between at least two different types of questions, often referred to as 'closed' and 'open' questions. The general view is that open questions contain an interrogative pronoun and leave the answerer more scope for replying whereas closed questions, being answerable with a simple 'yes', 'no' or 'maybe', are more restrictive. Advice on when to use which type of question varies across the four sets of material. In Thistle, it depends on the stage of the interaction, with the beginning apparently being more suited to open questions and the end to closed questions. In Mermaid it also depends on what stage the agent is at in the interaction. The Mermaid examples reproduced above are taken from the Mermaid sales material, which forms part of the customer service interaction as a whole. This is a procedure that agents need to go through to make suggestive selling. The first part of this suggestive selling procedure consists of 'establishing trust' and 'matching the customer type' to which 'situational questions' or 'wh-words' are deemed suitable. Later on in the sales process, agents must create the illusion of a need in the customer and for this purpose 'problem questions' are deemed appropriate. (I have no information on what exactly situational and problem questions mean more precisely). At the oral presentation given to me in Hong Kong, a manager elaborated on when to use which type of questions. 'Closed' questions are to be used for a certain type of callers (the quiet and shy one)

| Britain                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Denmark                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | Hong Kong                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | Philippines                                                                                                                                                                        |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>[The agent]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>starts questioning with more open and probing questions</li> <li>funnels down with closed questions to clarify and confirm exact details.</li> </ul> <p>(DBS)</p> <p><u>The value of questions:</u><br/>If we don't ask questions, we'll make assumptions about the needs and wants of our customer and our colleagues. These can often turn out to be incorrect and as a result, people may feel misunderstood and uninvolved - and they'll think we're not interested in them [...] There are many ways to ask questions. Whichever one is used, all questions need to be asked in a genuine and interested manner if conversation is to be built, empathy demonstrated and rapport achieved (SUG).</p> | <p><u>Opening and interest</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Welcome</li> <li>Establish trust</li> <li>Match customer type</li> <li>Situational questions</li> <li>Wh-words</li> <li>Listen and note down</li> </ul> <p><u>Creation of needs</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Problem questions</li> </ul> <p>(SW)<sup>G</sup></p> | <p><u>Use of appropriate techniques:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Probing (open-ended questions vs close-ended questions) (HKBook)</li> </ul> <p>The questions we ask really depend on the caller. We can use open-ended questions; we can use close-ended questions. Some people are really quiet and really shy. They probably don't feel comfortable answering open-ended questions [...] Open-ended questions are basically for more sophisticated investors (HKOral).</p> | <p>There are two main types of questions you may ask the caller:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>closed questions</li> <li>open questions</li> </ul> <p>(PhilTrain)</p> |

whereas 'open' questions are to be used for another type of caller (the sophisticated investor). The Philippine material, finally, makes the same familiar distinction between the two question types, but leaves it unspecified as to when to use which type. A theme that pervades all the material, most explicitly acknowledged in the Thistle material, is a

recognition of the potential of questions to serve relational needs. In Thistle, it is suggested that if the agent does not ask questions, the caller may feel 'misunderstood', 'uninvolved' and that the agent is 'not interested' in them. In the other sets of material, the message is that question types must be attuned to individual customers or situations. Adjusting one's linguistic repertoire depending on interlocutor can be seen as a positive politeness strategy in that the speaker shows attentiveness to the hearer. All in all, then, though the exact specifications of when to use which type of question is locally variable, the overall message is the same: one important function of questions is their potential to serve as positive politeness strategies, by adapting different types of questions to different types of callers and situations.

Yet another way in which agents are asked to attend to callers' positive face wants is by engaging them in small talk, i.e. talk about or pick up on issues which are unrelated to the transaction at hand.

| <b>Britain</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <b>Denmark</b>                                                                                                                                    | <b>Hong Kong</b>                                                                                                                     | <b>Philippines</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>There needs to be obvious signs of rapport built into the call by saying or doing something which is not ordinarily [done] in business calls, e.g.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>ask how the caller is at the start of the call</li> <li>enquire about the weather</li> <li>pick up on special events</li> <li>seize the opportunity to make conversation (SC).</li> </ul> | <p>Did the agent give a friendly/polite goodbye, e.g.<br/>'Goodbye, have a nice weekend'<br/>'Goodbye and have a nice trip' (SS).<sup>H</sup></p> | <p><u>Establish trust and rapport:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ease the caller's nervousness (HKBook).</li> </ul> | <p><u>Small talk:</u><br/>Your role as a professional communicator is to build up a relationship with your callers on the phone. You want them to leave the telephone call feeling looked after. [...] you need to find a balance in this as you do not want the phone call to go on for a long time. However, short amounts of small talk will help build a good relationship with your caller (PhilTrain).</p> |

As was the case with question types, there are subtle local inflections in the type and amount of small talk that should be engaged in. By far the most elaborate section on small talk is provided in the Thistle material. The material suggests different topics for small talk, where the Mermaid material contents itself with a couple of formulaic closings. In Hong Kong, small talk does not figure as a topic in itself (at least not in the limited amount of material I was permitted to collect), but rapport, the abstracted and ideational equivalent of small talk, is a frequently reoccurring feature throughout the material, and may be established by 'easing the caller's nervousness'.<sup>45</sup> The Philippine material, in turn, seems to recognize that there is a limit as to how much small talk an interaction can tolerate. This is presented as being in conflict with a smooth and efficient processing of the call ('you do not want the phone call to go on for a long time'), and thus highlights the constant tension in call centres between efficiency and rapport, which was discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Small talk is a positive politeness strategy because it shows a commitment by the speaker to show an interest in the hearer (Brown and Levinson 1987, Holmes and Stubbe 2003).

There are other features in the linguistic regulation material that would support an analysis in terms of positive politeness, such as the requirement to 'match' or 'mirror' the customer, 'avoid interruptions' and 'create an upbeat and enthusiastic tone of voice', all of which feature in all or most sets of material. For reasons of balance, however, I will conclude this section with one last example. This is the requirement in all four sets of material for the agent to state their own and/or use the customer's name in the interaction. Throughout the material, agents are required to state their own name and, with the exception of Mermaid, to elicit and use the caller's name. In the call centre context, use of naming is purely relational. Eliciting the caller's name is not necessary for transactional purposes, as customers are uniquely identifiable by their customer, policy or mobile number. Likewise, the requirement of the agent to state their own name also has a purely

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<sup>45</sup> The advice in the Hong Kong material to 'ease the caller's nervousness' may be culturally salient since no one would normally expect English speakers to be nervous.

relational function; to signal to the caller that their needs are catered for by a real person and not by automata. As such, using the caller's name and stating one's own are interpretable as an orientation to positive face by highlighting mutual familiarity. However, according to Brown and Levinson (1987), only first names are positive politeness strategies whereas titles (and) last names are negative politeness strategies. In the material we see some local variations in preferences of formality. The Thistle material leaves it unspecified as to whether agents should use first name or title and last name to address the caller, and in interviews it was confirmed to me that the choice would depend on the caller type. The Hong Kong material also leaves it unspecified as to whether callers should be addressed with first name or title and last name whereas the Philippine material asks the agent to address the customers either by title and last name or, far more frequently in the material, 'Ma'am/Sir'. The Philippine preference for 'Ma'am' and 'Sir' may be reflective of their communication with customers in the US where these terms are more common than in the UK. Yet even in the US, they are virtually obsolete except in military contexts and some Southern regions, and it is tempting to suggest that the high degree of formality preferred is indicative of an awareness that offshoring is likely to be perceived unfavourably by customers and therefore warrants a more deferential style. On a similar note, the Danish avoidance of encouraging agents to use the caller's name may be reflective of a local dislike of being too personal, an argument I will pursue more fully below. All in all, then, naming in a service context is, I suggest, first and foremost a positive politeness strategy, but there are local variations in degree of formality preferred.

| Britain                                                                                                                                                          | Denmark                                                                                                                                                                                                              | Hong Kong                                                                                                                                                                | Philippines                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <u>Verbal handshake</u><br>[The agent] asks the customer for their name at the first opportunity, e.g. 'You're speaking to X, may I first take your name' (DBS). | [The agent] must answer the phone stating the correct Mermaid greeting, which includes first and last name. It MUST be: 'Welcome to customer services, you are speaking to [first and last name]' (SS). <sup>1</sup> | <u>Establish trust and rapport:</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce self</li> <li>• Ask for the caller's name and make use of it (HKBook).</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 'Thank you for calling customer service. This is... How may/can I help you today?'</li> <li>• 'I understand, Ms Crawford...'</li> <li>• 'Thank you for waiting, Ma'am/Sir'</li> <li>• 'Is there anything else that I can help you with, Ma'am/Sir? (PhilTrain).</li> </ul> |

I have tried in the above to draw attention to the many affinities between the linguistic regulation that is codified in four call centres from different places in the world. While I have suggested that the local inflections of such a global hegemonic norm may differ subtly across the four sites (such as when to use which type of questions, the amount of small talk that is prescribed and whether to use the caller's name, and if so, whether it should be first name or last name or 'Sir/Ma'am'), I hope I have managed to convince the reader that the general format, and the values it seems to embrace, are the same everywhere. While there are obviously features in the material which highlight the importance of negative politeness (such as thanking the caller and apologizing), I have argued that there is a strong preference for positive politeness. Globalization has, it seems, revived the old idea that 'linguistic diversity is a problem, while linguistic uniformity is a desirable ideal' (Cameron 2002: 67). The twist, however, is, as Cameron notes, that the striving for linguistic uniformity does not necessarily aim to make people communicate in the same dominant language, i.e. English (although this is certainly what happens in many call centres offshored to countries such as India and the Philippines), but to make people speak in their own language, but with 'someone else's definition of what is acceptable or desirable in your own' (2002: 69). While on the surface this approach preserves linguistic

diversity, Cameron argues that at a deeper level, the effect is to 'make every language into a vehicle for the affirmation of similar values and beliefs, and for the enactment by speakers of similar social identities and roles' (2002: 69-70).

There is evidence from other studies that Western stylistic ideals and values are incorporated into other languages. Machin and van Leeuwen (2003, 2004), for instance, analyse how the translated UK, Dutch, German, Spanish, Greek, Finnish, Indian, and Taiwanese editions of the women's magazine *Cosmopolitan* try to capture the same 'ironical "cool", "streetwise"' (2003: 497) style in which the original American source is written. Though the authors find that the styles vary subtly locally, the overall generic structure of the magazine and the values it incorporates amount to a globally recognizable 'Cosmo' style. They offer an analogy

McDonalds may sell 'sushiburgers' in Japan and 'curryburgers' in India, but burgers remain burgers, and it is in their 'burger-ness', in the burger format, that the essence of their global cultural significance must be looked for (Machin and van Leeuwen 2004: 99).

So too for the linguistic regulation that occurs in call centres. In the next section, I will argue that the call centre style, which I have identified as global, and described as a preference for positive politeness, is derived from North-America and that it has then been exported via capitalist forces to the rest of the world.

#### *America and the role of capitalism in linguistic globalization*

I have argued that the linguistic rules compared above suggest a preference for positive politeness. This preference, in turn, is not culturally neutral, but can be interpreted as a North-American type of friendliness (Brown and Levinson 1987, Leidner 1993, Cameron 2000a, 2002). Whilst Lakoff (2005) does not regard the type of politeness found in call centres, which she refers to as 'camaraderie', as an unmarked American norm, but as something relatively new even in America, she implicitly acknowledges the role of the new economy as a driving force for the promotion of this ideal. Fairclough (2006) hails

capitalism as one highly significant vehicle in linguistic globalization and reports that the business discourse so familiar in the West, incorporating terms such as 'outsource', 'branding' and 'marketing', is beginning to appear in other traditionally non-capitalist countries, e.g. Romania. As already mentioned, Machin and van Leeuwen's (2003, 2004) work also points to the role of capitalism in linguistic globalization. It is hardly surprising that linguistic 'globalization' is more or less synonymous with linguistic 'Americanization'. Being the world's number one economy, the US has been a motor force in capitalist expansion since the end of the second world war and in the last few decades in particular (Djelic 1998, Sennett 2006).

In offshore call centres, the motivation behind aspirations to an American stylistic ideal are quite obvious. There is an awareness that customers may perceive offshoring unfavourably with possible negative consequences for revenues, and so there are attempts at 'locational masking' (Mirchandani 2004), i.e. endeavours to disguise to the American customer the fact that the agent is sitting in India, the Philippines, or somewhere else. As is well-known, agents in offshore call centres, who serve US-based customers, are asked to adopt American accents, emulate an American conversational style and refer to themselves using American-sounding pseudonyms (Mirchandani 2004, Taylor and Bain 2005). They may also receive 'culture training' which can take the form of subjecting them to the screening of American sitcoms or soap operas and drilling them about American food habits (Landler 2001). Some call centres provide agents with continuous weather, traffic, sports, and news updates to enable them to engage in the required small talk with the customer on these topics. They will also be aware of the local time in the customer country so that each call can be answered with the appropriate temporal greeting ('good afternoon', for instance, when India is already in the dark) (Landler 2001). In some of the Philippine call centres I visited, agents were wearing baseball caps reportedly 'to get into the US mode'. Such aspirations to an American ideal of course require vast resources such as rigid recruitment processes and extensive training programmes, but this is judged to be a price

worth paying with labour costs being up to ten times lower in India, still the cheapest and most popular offshoring country (Beshouri et al. 2005).

Emulating a consistent (American) style of interaction is important also from the point of view of branding. Creating a recognizable name for oneself is, as discussed in Chapter 3, of crucial importance in today's saturated market, as the following management report on offshoring makes abundantly clear

In the offshore contact centre it is the ultimate step in creating a customer experience that spans the cultural divide. Brand aligned conversations create familiarity, because they are consistent with the customer's whole experience of the organisation, and differentiated because they are unlike conversations the customer has with other organisations (2004: 14).

In Thistle, which has branches in Bangalore and Derry in addition to the main site in Scotland, managers informed me that one reason why the greeting had been standardized was to provide callers with a consistent service whether they reached the Bangalore, Derry or Scottish outlet. Offshore call centres, then, tend to aspire to the conversational style of the customer base for reasons of 'locational masking' and branding.

But even when call centres are established onshore, i.e. when agents serve customers in their own country and in their own language (as is the case with Thistle, Mermaid and the Hong Kong call centres analysed above), American influences are quite clear. This is a phenomenon that has hitherto received far less, if any, attention in the literature on call centres. The reason behind the US influence is that setting up new call centres is dependent on the contemporary practice (discussed in Chapter 1) of relying on a call centre blueprint. This blueprint is derived from the US, where the first call centre was reportedly set up in the 1960s (Bagnara 2001). Call centres, based on the North-American organizational template, have since spread rapidly to numerous countries around the world. While it is well-known that, as a consequence of transnational global practices, there tend to be significant similarities between call centres in countries as diverse as Israel, Italy, Greece, France, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, Australia, the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, US, Canada, Colombia, Japan and India (D'Alessio and Oberbeck 1999, Belt et al. 2000,

Buchanan and Koch-Schulte 2000, Korczynski et al. 2001, Tsoukas and Vladimirov 2001, Bain et al. 2002, Buscetto 2002, Bittner et al. 2002, Arbetslivsinstitutet 2003, Mathiesen and Wiegman 2004, Taylor and Bain 2005, Valsecchi 2006, Raz and Blank 2007, Weiss 2007) less attention has been directed at similarities in the linguistic ideal that is aspired to.

Another significant factor in the promotion of a globally uniform call centre style is the management consultancy industry whose cross-national operations are a central concept in today's globalized world (Sturdy 2001a). Since call centres are so concerned with improving their employees' communication skills, they very often rely on external management consultants who specialize in communication and customer service. The knowledge provided by these tends to be supplied by Western anglophone consultants. Mermaid relies on an Australian-based communication consultancy, and evidence of direct anglophone influence is clearly visible in the Mermaid material. For instance, the name of the five core call stages are retained in their English form. (Rather than using the Danish terms 'Indledning', 'Problemløsning', 'Salgsproces', 'Afslutning' and 'Kundetilfredshed', the stages are referred to as 'Initial Interaction', 'Problem Solving', 'Sales Process', 'Close & Farewell', 'Customer Satisfaction'.) Other headings are also given in their untranslated English form, e.g. 'potential score'. The term 'active listening' is translated literally into a Danish equivalent 'aktiv lytning'. Also, the four personality types to which the agents must in principle attune their conversations, and which are summed up in the acronym 'DISC', are literally translated from English. While the starting letter of the concepts 'dominance' ('dominans'), 'influence' ('indflydelse'), and 'stability' ('stabilitet') are the same in English and Danish, the Danish word for 'competence' is 'kompetence'. As the Danish word would alter the acronym, the English one is maintained. In addition, a Mermaid agent revealed that an American communication consultant had paid a visit to the company and that she had imprinted on agents that they use the phrase 'thanks for your call', which

directly calques the equivalent North-American expression.<sup>46</sup> One Danish manager also informed me that she had experimented in her team with introducing the Danish equivalent of the phrase 'is there anything else I can help you with'. Roy (1999) also found evidence in her English-French bilingual call centre in Ontario that some of the expressions listed in the linguistic regulation material intended for Francophone agents parallel established English ones, e.g. 'Merci d'avoir appelé [la compagnie]. C'est [votre nom] a l'appareil. Comment puis-je vous aider?' (Thanks for calling [company] You're speaking to [your name]. How can I help you?). Thistle also relies on external communication consultants, who organize and offer courses and provide them with online and written communication training material and assessment criteria, but I have no precise information on where these consultants are based. In the Hong Kong call centre I visited, the US affiliation was very obvious, since it was a local branch of an enormous investment company with its headquarters in the US. Their US aspirations were discernible in the oral presentation, where the manager openly expressed a preference for 'doing it the US way'.

When multinational corporations export their largely North-American service norms abroad, there is anecdotal evidence that over-familiar or insufficiently formal language is a major source of affront. When McDonald's opened its first restaurant in Moscow, staff members were trained to conform with the preference for American-style friendliness and informality. Unfamiliar to Russians, however, this practice made customers think they were being mocked by the staff (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). There are similar reports that smiles, greetings and formulae like 'have a nice day', with markedly North-American connotations, have spread to the UK, Sweden, France, Hungary, Poland, Japan and Greenland where they seem to evoke various degrees of offence, puzzlement and hilarity (Forman 1998, Jones 1999, cited in Fineman 2000, Cameron 2000a, 2002, Kielkiewicz-Janowiak and Pawelczyk 2006). This is hardly surprising as there is abundant

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<sup>46</sup> I was obviously intrigued by this testimony which so clearly suggested an American influence. When I wanted to find out more about it, however, by asking members of the management to elaborate on it, they were notably elusive about the issue and explicitly refused to ask any questions about the identity and nationality of their consultants.

evidence from interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics that there are significant cultural differences in issues regarding politeness. There is reportedly variation in the degree to which languages tolerate phatic language (Fredsted 2005), use of first naming (Bargiela et al. 2002), in when one says thank you, to whom and in what setting (Coulmas 1981) in levels of directness (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005), types of request and apology strategies (House et al. 1989) and in the use of address terms (Braun 1988) (See Kasper 1997 for an overview).

In the call centre communication material studied above, there is some evidence which points in the direction of sensitivity to such cultural differences. In the Danish material, for instance, despite its extensive affinities with the other three sets of material, there are issues which do not receive the same emphasis. On the whole, the linguistic regulation is not as thoroughgoing as it is in Thistle and the need to create rapport is expressed less explicitly than in the Thistle material. Similarly, while the ability to show empathy is highly valued by many managers in Mermaid, no courses are organized with the explicit purpose of teaching agents the significance of empathy, in stark contrast to Thistle, where agents were asked to come into work extraordinarily on a Saturday to attend an 'empathy course'. Also, the suggestion by the American consultant hired by Mermaid to thank the customer for calling at the end of the interaction, had, according to my interviewee, provoked considerable resistance among the agents who refused to use it on the grounds that it did not come naturally to them. Indeed, despite it being listed in the SS material, it is not used even once in the actual interactions.

In the following section, I explore what happens when the globalized, arguably North-American, speech style identified above is carried over into two local contexts, one British and one Danish. The reason why I focus only on these two languages is a practical necessity as I only have interactional data from these two countries. Needless to say, it would also have been interesting to compare how the US norms were adhered to in the Chinese and Philippine contexts, which, not least in terms of politeness, are even less

similar to the US than other Western countries (Matsumoto 1988, Ide 1989). There is evidence to suggest, for instance, that Chinese and English speakers differ in their handling of complaints (Choi 2006), and when I asked how Chinese customers reacted to the American style in the Hong Kong call centre, the manager replied that the prescribed use of questions seemed somewhat inappropriate in the Chinese context because Chinese callers were reluctant to supply the information that the questions were intended to elicit. Nevertheless, it may be argued that comparing Denmark and Britain makes sense from the point of view that such a comparison may serve as an initial diagnostic of something more major. In other words, if there are differences in how British and Danish agents implement the norms, such differences may be taken to indicate that differences between other less similar cultures are even more elaborate. Let us turn, then, from the level of linguistic ideologies to the level of linguistic practices.

*Cultural variation in adherence to linguistic regulation*

In Table 7.2 below I present in table form a quantitative analysis of the extent to which Mermaid and Thistle agents adhere to the linguistic rules that are prescribed in the two call centres. Four of the nine variables analysed for this chapter did not reveal a statistically significant difference between the two countries. These were active listening, summary, personal endnote, and welcome to call back/thanks for calling. The reason for the non-difference may in some cases have been that there were too few occurrences of the rule in question for a statistically significant difference to emerge (e.g. in the case of personal endnote and welcome to call back/thanks for calling). For summary and active listening, the lack of difference appeared real in that no alternative explanation for the non-difference was apparent. To my knowledge, there is no evidence that such behaviour varies across cultures.

For five of the nine variables, however, a statistically significant difference between the two countries did emerge even after confounding variables of the type discussed in

Chapter 4 had been controlled for. The rules which revealed a difference were: greeting, acknowledgement, hold notification, check understanding and questions. The interesting thing to note about these differences is that, with the exception of one rule which will be discussed below, they invariably point in the same direction. British agents adhere more to the linguistic rules than their Danish counterparts (see Figure 7.1). This is the case even when, on average, calls in Mermaid are longer than in Thistle, which we might expect to create more opportunities to obey the rules.

The only rule which contradicted this pattern was the questions rule where Mermaid agents actually adhered to it more than their British counterparts. This, however, is likely to be due to the fact that the rule is slightly differently formulated in Thistle and Mermaid. In Thistle the rule states to use a wh-question in the beginning of the call and finish with closed questions towards the end. In Mermaid, by contrast, the rule is to employ two questions to identify the caller's problem, and it is left unspecified as to which type. This makes it considerably more difficult for Thistle agents to follow the rule. There was another such case where the formulation of the rules in the respective countries made it difficult to compare. This is the rule referred to as 'welcome to call back/thanks for calling'. In Mermaid, the rule specifies that *either* 'Welcome to call back' ('Velkommen til at ringe igen') *or* 'Thanks for calling' ('Tak fordi du ringede') must be used whereas in Thistle these are formulated as two separate rules, which implies that the agent must *both* welcome the caller to call back *and* thank them for calling in one interaction. I have collapsed the two Thistle rules into one and coded it as having been obeyed only if agents use both expressions in one interaction. In Mermaid, I have coded the rule as adhered to if an agent uses either rule in the interaction. This makes it more difficult for Thistle agents to obey the rule, but since the general finding is that Thistle agents adhere more to the rules, I reasoned that it is more methodologically sound to err on the side of caution. Finally, the hold notification rule was also slightly differently formulated in Thistle and Mermaid, as shall be discussed below, but this did not, in contrast to the other two, strike me as being

consequential for agents' abilities to follow it. All in all, then, with the exception of one rule, the quantitative analysis reveals that Thistle agents adhere more to the rules than their Danish counterparts.

| Linguistic rule                              | Call centre         |                  | Statistical test<br>(Mann-Whitney<br>U) | Number of<br>calls included<br>(Thistle +<br>Mermaid) |
|----------------------------------------------|---------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
|                                              | Thistle             | Mermaid          |                                         |                                                       |
| Greeting                                     | 52.1%<br>(N=71)     | 0.0%<br>(N=78)   | $p < .001^{***}$                        | 71+78=149                                             |
| Acknowledgement                              | 54.5%<br>(N=66)     | 27.7%<br>(N=83)  | $p = .001^{**}$                         | 66+83=149                                             |
| Hold notification                            | 78.6%<br>(N=14)     | 12.0%<br>(N=25)  | $p < .001^{***}$                        | 14+25=39                                              |
| Check understanding                          | 32.8%<br>(N=67)     | 17.9%<br>(N=84)  | $p = 0.034^*$                           | 67+84=151                                             |
| Questions                                    | 4.8%<br>(N=62)      | 44.7%<br>(N=85)  | $p < 0.001^{***}$                       | 62+85=147                                             |
| Active listening                             | 100.0%<br>49 (N=49) | 95.8%<br>(N=95)  | $p = 0.147$ (NS)                        | 49+95=144                                             |
| Summary                                      | 96.8%<br>(N=31)     | 100.0%<br>(N=36) | $p = 0.281$ (NS)                        | 31+36=67                                              |
| Personal endnote                             | 4.1%<br>(N=73)      | 10.3%<br>(N=87)  | $p = 0.137$ (NS)                        | 73+87=160                                             |
| Welcome to call back /<br>Thanks for calling | 10.7%<br>(N=56))    | 11.5%<br>(N=78)  | $p = 0.712$ (NS)                        | 56+78=134                                             |

Table 7.2 Mean rule adherence by Thistle and Mermaid agents in percentages with sample sizes given in parentheses (NS=non-significant)

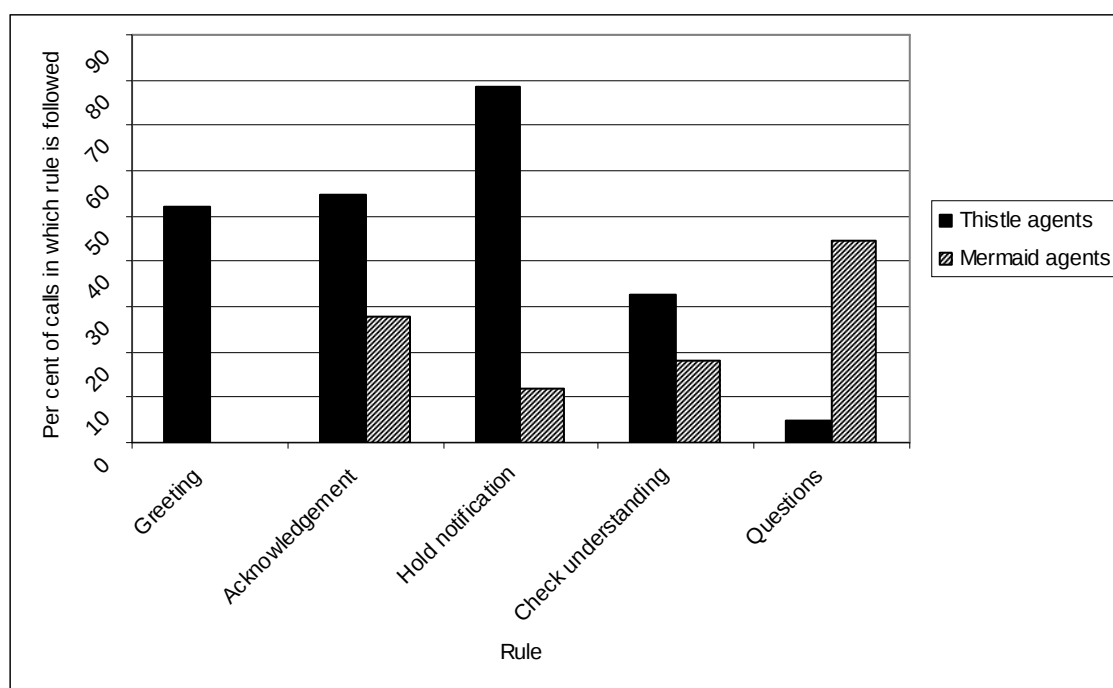


Figure 7.1 Thistle and Mermaid agents' rule adherence (only rules with a statistically significant difference included)

Leaving the quantitative evidence aside, it is also pertinent to ask *how* and *why* Thistle and Mermaid agents differ in their way of doing things. For this purpose it is useful to refer to the distinction between 'transactional' and 'interactional', or 'referential' and 'interpersonal' levels of discourse (Leech 1983, Halliday 1985, Kaspar 1990), which was discussed in Chapter 3. I will start out from the assumption, based on findings of previous studies, that the Danish and the British differ in terms of cultural 'ethos', i.e. in their respective preference for a certain type of interactional style (Brown and Levinson 1987).<sup>47</sup> It has been suggested that Danes have a preference, at least in service transactions, for a straightforward interactional style where speakers do not waste time on excessive verbiage that does not relate directly to the transaction at hand. Comparing service exchanges in German and Danish tourist offices, Fredsted (2005) argues that the Danish exchanges were characterized by a much more direct and 'to the point' style where the German speakers typically engaged in some phatic exchanges and conventional politeness before they proceeded to the actual point of the conversation. She writes: '[in the Danish exchanges r]eferential communication predominates: consideration of other people is by 'getting to the point' and not wasting their time with unnecessary verbiage and beating about the bush' (Fredsted 2005: 173). In contrast, Stewart (2005) compares how British and Spanish speakers give feedback to tutors teaching on a high-level Spanish distance-learning course. She finds that British speakers favour strategies that downgrade criticism, such as '*Just one small point*: Smith's total score should be 72 per cent and not 73 per cent' (2005: 121 emphasis in original), where the italicized preamble deemphasizes the mistake that the tutor has made in their marking. Stewart suggests on this background that this supports Brown and Levinson's (1987), and others', claim that Britain is a 'negative politeness culture', i.e. people in general do not wish to impose on and impede one another's actions. Insofar as

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<sup>47</sup> As Brown and Levinson (1987) themselves point out, cultural generalizations are bound to be overly crude. They may also be relative and depend on whether one observes from within the culture (an emic perspective) or from the outside (an etic perspective) (Wierzbicka 1991, Trosborg 1994). Arguably, my own analytic vision is emic from the point of view of the Danish culture and etic when it comes to the British, and this is bound to a certain extent to affect the things I notice and choose to highlight in this analysis.

the two studies reported above are comparable - the data is taken from different speech events - it would seem that Denmark is a culture which requires less interpersonal work, whether negative or positive, whereas Britain is a culture which requires speakers to oil their interpersonal relationship, and that the preferred strategy, in this case, is negative politeness.

Let us have a look at the first rule for which a statistically significant difference was found to examine the extent to which these cultural assumptions are applicable to the call centre data: the greeting.

|                            | <b>Thistle</b>                                                                                                                                                            | <b>Mermaid</b>                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prescribed greeting</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Correct greeting used by consultant</li> <li>• Good morning/good afternoon Thistle Insurance how may I help you (SC).</li> </ul> | [The agent must] answer with the correct Mermaid greeting which includes first and last name. It MUST be: 'Welcome to customer services, you are speaking with [first and last name]' (SS). <sup>1</sup> |
| <b>Actual greetings</b>    | good afternoon Thistle Insurance how may I help you                                                                                                                       | welcome to customer services Birgitte Lund <sup>J</sup>                                                                                                                                                  |
|                            | good afternoon Thistle Insurance how may I help you                                                                                                                       | customer services it is Martin Brydesen <sup>K</sup>                                                                                                                                                     |
|                            | good morning Thistle Insurance how may I help you                                                                                                                         | customer services Gina Høst <sup>L</sup>                                                                                                                                                                 |

The rule in both call centres is that the greeting must be rendered verbatim as prescribed. As we saw in the quantitative analysis, however, Thistle agents follow this rule to a significantly higher degree than Mermaid agents, who, strikingly, do not obey it even once in the entire corpus of interactions. I have chosen three actual greetings from the Mermaid corpus which exemplify what the agent may say instead. (I have translated these into English to ease comparison, see Appendix B for the Danish transcripts.) They may, for instance, omit the 'you are speaking' bit or the 'welcome' bit, or, indeed, both. Mermaid agents do not seem to be as attuned to the prescriptions as their Thistle counterparts; indeed, when I asked them in interviews to recite the standard greeting to me, I got a range

of different answers. Very few reproduced it in complete accordance with the prescriptions and the majority omitted one part or another. Interestingly, in terms of a tentative explanation, some agents revealed that they would vary their greeting according to how busy they were. Skipping the initial 'welcome' bit, for instance, would save them vital time if they had lots of calls in queue. Since there is no evidence to support that Mermaid agents are on average busier than Thistle agents, such testimonials could be taken to support Fredsted's (2005) finding that Danes are more focused on the transactional than the relational content of discourse. In such highly stressful contexts as call centres, bidding the caller 'welcome' may be regarded as a transactionally vacuous luxury that can be dispensed of for the sake of speeding up call processing.

As regards the acknowledgement rule, the Thistle and Mermaid materials are very similar. Both advise the agent to signal to the caller that their query has been heard and understood and that it will be attended to. Agents are also advised in both sets of material to employ a first person singular pronoun ('I' or 'me'), presumably to signal to the caller that they are taking personal responsibility for their issue. When it comes to how these prescribed acknowledgements are realized in actual interactions, however, it has already been suggested in the quantitative analysis that Thistle agents adhere to the suggested formula to a greater extent than their Danish counterparts. Some examples which illustrate the difference are given in the table below. The examples represent the turn immediately following the turn in which the caller states their problem.

|                                   | <b>Thistle</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   | <b>Mermaid</b>                                                                                                                                  |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prescribed acknowledgement</b> | [The agent] tells the customer they can help them and offers an apology if applicable, e.g. 'Let me see what's happened', 'Let me see how I can help', 'I apologize for that, let me see what I can do', 'I can certainly help with that' (DBS). | [The agent must] acknowledge the caller's problem, e.g. 'I understand your problem', 'I will help you with the case/problem' (SS). <sup>M</sup> |
| <b>Actual acknowledgements</b>    | yeah absolutely well I'll have a look and see if I can trace anything for you                                                                                                                                                                    | try to give me your mobile number <sup>N</sup>                                                                                                  |

|  | <b>Thistle</b>                                                                                                                                      | <b>Mermaid</b>                                        |
|--|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
|  | oh right so you want details for the last tax year oh right that is no problem at all I'll get that arranged for you                                | what erh mobile number do you have on it <sup>0</sup> |
|  | yes o- of course I do apologize you had to phone TWICE for the same matter (.) let me find out what's happening with your information <sup>48</sup> | try to give me your account number <sup>P</sup>       |

In the three examples chosen from each country, the Mermaid agents tend to significantly shorten the prescribed formula whereas the Thistle agents stay close to it. In contrast to their Thistle counterparts, Mermaid agents neither issue an acknowledgement that the caller's problem has been heard, nor do they employ a first person singular pronoun to signal that they are taking personal charge of the matter. Again, it seems that Mermaid agents are more focused on the transactional level of the discourse. Rather than engaging themselves in interpersonal verbiage, they proceed straight to the point and ask for the caller's mobile phone number, which is a first step towards solving the caller's problem, by enabling them to locate the customer record in the database.

In contrast, Thistle agents seem more attuned to the interpersonal level of discourse by engaging, in the examples chosen, in quite extensive face work. This face work seems to be directed, I would suggest, mainly to the caller's negative face wants. When using the phrases *I'll have a look and see if I can trace anything for you*, *I'll get that arranged for you* and *let me find out what's happening with your information*, the agent seems to position themselves in a one-down position in relation to the caller. Apparently, they are eager to bring to the forefront their subservient position: they are there to assist the caller. The strategies thus emphasize power differentials between the speakers, a feature of negative politeness.

<sup>48</sup> See Appendix A for transcription key.

There is support for such an interpretation in the third rule which revealed a quantitative difference between Thistle and Mermaid agents: hold notifications. According to the Thistle material, the agent is required to ask for the caller's permission to put them on hold, and the Mermaid agent is asked to inform the caller that they are being put on hold as well as notifying them that they will listen to some music while on hold. It is reiterated in the material (both in the typological emphasis reproduced below, and elsewhere) that both these components must be present in the agent's announcement for them to score in the call assessment. Already in the regulatory material, it seems that there are some subtle differences in preference of style. The Thistle agent, in further support of an interpretation in terms of negative politeness, is required to ask for the caller's permission to put them on hold. This suggests an asymmetrical relationship between agent and caller in that it falls upon the caller to grant the agent the right to put them on hold. By comparison, Mermaid agents are not requested to ask for permission but merely to inform the caller that they are being put on hold, which frames their relationship as a more egalitarian one.

|                                     | <b>Thistle</b>                                                                                                                  | <b>Mermaid</b>                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prescribed hold notification</b> | [The agent] asks caller's permission to put them on hold (SC).                                                                  | [The agent must] inform the caller that they are being put on hold AND that they will listen to music when on hold (SS). <sup>Q</sup> |
| <b>Actual hold notifications</b>    | OK erhm I'll just check that for you just now (caller: OK) if that's OK (caller: yes certainly) are you OK to hold for a minute | try to wait a moment <sup>R</sup>                                                                                                     |
|                                     | right bear with me and I'll see if I can get him Chris do you mind if pop you on hold a minute                                  | erh hang on a moment <sup>S</sup>                                                                                                     |

|  | <b>Thistle</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <b>Mermaid</b>                            |
|--|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
|  | hold on a second are you<br>OK to hold then I can<br>check your (caller:<br>certainly) erh check the<br>files and see if I can get<br>any further information on<br>this one for you (caller:<br>certainly yes certainly)<br>I'll be back with you as<br>quickly as I can | fine just one moment<br>then <sup>T</sup> |

In actual hold notifications, however, there are significant cultural differences in the extent to which the agents follow the prescriptions. In general, and as we have seen before, Mermaid agents' expressions tend to be briefer than the ones in Thistle. Agents only follow the rule specifying that they must both inform the caller that they are being put on hold *and* let them know that music will be played to them while they are on hold on three occasions. In most cases, they skip the last bit, some examples of which are given above. Once again, then, it seems that Mermaid agents are more concerned with a speedy call processing than with the interpersonally oriented rules that are prescribed by the material. The Thistle agents, also in line with previous suggestions, engage in a more negatively polite style in which they, according to what is prescribed in the material, emphasize the asymmetrical relationship that exists between them and the caller. In all examples given above, they elicit the caller's consent to put them on hold, thus granting the caller the (theoretical) right to deny such a request.<sup>49</sup> Their conversational contributions are also comparatively longer than those of their Mermaid counterparts, occasionally spanning more than one turn of talk. This also points to a style that is more attuned to the interpersonal level of talk simply from the point of view that it requires more words to engage in face work.

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<sup>49</sup> For the sake of completeness, I hasten to point out that the last rule for which a statistically significant difference emerged between the two call centres was 'check understanding'. For this rule even Thistle agents did not stay close to the formula advised in the material, but seemed, as I have argued was typical for Mermaid agents, more concerned with a speedy call processing. As this was discussed in Chapter 4, I shall not be more concerned with it here. Suffice it to say that even Thistle agents are occasionally forced to surrender their preference for excessive relational face work in the highly pressurized environment that is a hallmark of call centres.

Having proposed a qualitative analysis and interpretation of the quantitative findings reported above, I would like to finish this section with one last analysis which may serve as additional support for the argument that Danish speakers, in comparison with British ones, are less concerned with the interactional than the transactional level of discourse. The example relates to the Thistle rule which states that agents must use the caller's name, as I have already argued, a purely interactional, non-referential, strategy. The Thistle communication material advises agents to use the customer's name a minimum of twice in any interaction (but leaves it up to the discretion of the agent whether this should be first name or title and last name). The Mermaid material, by contrast, does not explicitly state any such rule, a finding which initially surprised me since there is overwhelming anecdotal as well as some empirical (e.g. Clyne et al. 2006), evidence that use of first naming in service encounters is on the increase in Scandinavia. One reason why this rule has not been incorporated into the communication documents may reflect a sensitivity to the possibility that first name usage is a source of irritation among the general public.

Whilst calling the caller by their name is not prescribed in Mermaid, it did occur, and some (albeit very few) agents expressed a favourable attitude towards use of first naming, seeing it as a way of imbuing trust. The vast majority, however, professed a profound dislike of it, seeing it as overly familiar and impinging on their co-speaker's privacy.

It does not come naturally to me to use first names. It is too personal. I sometimes hear colleagues use it and think, oh my God, are they already that intimate?<sup>U</sup>

And if the customer uses my first name, which I can't take, I will use theirs, and then they will understand that I don't like them using mine!<sup>V</sup>

You need to have distance, because you don't know the person.<sup>X</sup>

I don't like it when people call me Lene [first name]. It's a slimy type.<sup>Y</sup>

In Thistle, in contrast, I did not come across such explicitly expressed dislikes of the use of first naming. Perhaps this is because British agents, grounded in their cultural ethos of negative politeness, find a way of working around the problem of overfamiliarity.

In the nominal system of address, both English and Danish make a distinction between a formal and an informal form, 'V-form' and 'T-form', respectively, in the terminology of Brown and Gilman (1960), pioneers in research on address term usage. In the pronominal system of address, by contrast, the distinction is maintained only in Danish where the V-form is realized as 'De' and the T-form as 'du', both corresponding to 'you' in English. Since this excluded an examination of possible cultural differences in the pronominal system, the subsequent analysis focuses only on nominal address forms. The nominal V-form in both English and Danish will typically take the form of title and last name, and is interpretable as a negative politeness strategy, whereas the T-form will take the form of first name, and is interpretable as a positive politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987).<sup>50</sup> Comparing the frequency and distribution between British and Danish speakers in their use of nominal address forms, two things emerged. Firstly, I found that Thistle agents use both the T-form and the V-form to a considerably higher degree than their Danish counterparts. Thus, the T-form was used in 51.9 per cent of calls in Thistle in comparison to 26.8 per cent in Mermaid, and the V-form was used in 35.4 per cent of calls in Thistle compared to 1.9 per cent in Mermaid. In the rest of the calls (12.7 per cent in Thistle and 71.3 per cent in Mermaid), no address at all was used (see Figure 7.2). Moreover, when considering all occurrences of nominal address forms (rather than the proportion of calls in which they occur), I found that Mermaid agents use the T-form in 92.5 per cent and the V-form in 7.5 per cent of cases, whereas the corresponding figures for Thistle agents are 58.8 per cent and 41.2 per cent.

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<sup>50</sup> In the V-form I have included combinations of title and last name and title only (such as 'sir' in English and 'herr', roughly equivalent to 'sir', in Danish), though these forms are exceptionally rare in both call centres.

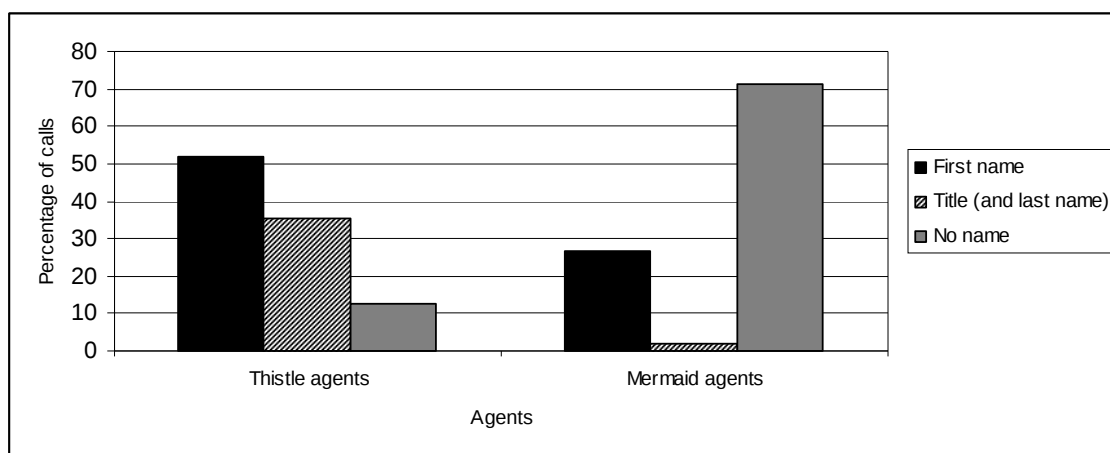


Figure 7.2 Thistle and Mermaid agents' use of address form

Such a cultural difference in terms of frequency and distribution of first and last naming may be because Danish, in contrast to English, has not maintained as sharp a distinction between T-form and V-form. Although the distinction persists in theory, in practice, there is evidence that it seems to be, if not obsolete, then at least significantly less frequent than it used to be. This appears to be the case both in the nominal and the pronominal system. In regards to the latter, a Mermaid agent jocosely claimed that he would use 'De' (the pronominal V-form) only if one of the princes was at the other end of the line, and another professed that '[people addressed with] "De" are an extinct species'. This may be partly explicable in terms of the internal values of the Mermaid organization. As one agent put it: 'We are a modern organization so we do not use "De"'. It may also reflect a larger societal process towards V-form abolition. In Denmark, for the most part of this century, the hegemonic ideology has been egalitarianism in which status and power differentials have been deemphasized (a similar argument for Sweden is made by Clyne et al. 2006). Seemingly, this has made the rather sporadic usage of the nominal and pronominal V-forms become associated with age-grading, arguably the only legitimate (power) difference left in Scandinavia (Fredsted 2005, Clyne et al. 2006).

It is possible, then, that the V-form in Mermaid is dispreferred because it carries the risk of construing the co-speaker as older, something which, in Western societies, has a social stigma attached to it. Faced with the prospect of coming across as overly familiar by calling the customer by their first name, it appears that the Danish and British English

language provide their speakers with different resources to resolve this threat. Where Thistle agents may turn to a negative politeness strategy and employ a V-form, Mermaid agents do not have this possibility available to them but are faced with the irresolvable dilemma of either coming across as overly familiar or as construing the caller as older, both of which are likely to cause affront. The asymmetries inherent in the English and Danish address term system may help explain the overall higher rule adherence in Thistle. Where we might have expected that the general British preference for negative politeness may also have caused problems for the Thistle agents to follow the rules, it seems that this is less the case. This may be because the inherent risk in coming across as overly familiar, through too elaborate use of positive politeness strategies, may be resolved by resorting to negative politeness strategies in the address term system, in this case the V-form. Although it remains a moot point whether the use of V-form is sufficient counterbalance to the threat of over-familiarity, the exceptionally high occurrence rate of address terms in call centre interactions arguably makes them a particularly salient resource to draw on to negotiate social relationships.

Of course, it must be pointed out here that in this case, since use of naming is not explicitly prescribed by the Mermaid material, agents can still avoid either of these strategies and still not actually flout the rules. Yet there is another way in which differences in attitudes about how personal one is permitted to get has an immediate and direct consequence for the extent to which the Danish agents are able to follow the rules. This is the case in the Mermaid greeting, which must, according to the SS be rendered verbatim as

- 'Welcome to customer services, *you* [italics added] are speaking with [first and last name]<sup>12</sup>

We saw in the results of the quantitative analysis that Mermaid agents did not once follow this rule. One possible explanation for this has already been suggested above, i.e. that Danish agents, being less oriented to the interpersonal level of discourse, omit the bits of the greeting that are not strictly necessary from a transactional point of view. An

alternative, and not mutually exclusive, possibility for this ‘disobedience’ is that Mermaid agents find the T-form italicized in the material too personal. In contrast to modern English, Danish has a possibility of drawing a distinction also in the pronominal system between a V-form ‘De’ and a T-form ‘du’, which both refer to the second person singular ‘you’. (As I have already suggested, however, the V-form in the pronominal system too is virtually obsolete.) Rules about which form to use are not phrased in explicit terms but it is implied in the use of examples throughout the material that the preferred form is T, as indeed it is in the greeting rule. In real greetings, however, agents only use the T-form in two out of eighteen cases. In the remaining sixteen cases, they prefer a strategy where a personal pronoun is avoided. All the different possibilities are listed schematically below.

|                                   | <b>Actual greeting</b>                                                           | <b>Number of agents</b> |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>Prescribed T-form used</b>     | Customer services you are speaking to [first and last name] <sup>a</sup>         | 2                       |
| <b>Total T-forms used</b>         |                                                                                  | <b>2</b>                |
| <b>Prescribed T-form not used</b> | welcome to customer services [first and last name] <sup>b</sup>                  | 2                       |
|                                   | customer services [inaudible] are speaking to [first and last name] <sup>c</sup> | 1                       |
|                                   | customer services it is [first and last name] <sup>d</sup>                       | 5                       |
|                                   | welcome to customer services it is [first and last name] <sup>e</sup>            | 5                       |
|                                   | customer services [first and last name] <sup>f</sup>                             | 3                       |
| <b>Total T-form avoidance</b>     |                                                                                  | <b>16</b>               |

Table 7.3 Variants over pronominal usage in Mermaid greeting

Agents on the whole seem to shy away from using the T-form (in all but two cases) and prefer instead to use an impersonal construction either by entirely suppressing the ‘you are speaking’ bit, or by substituting it with an impersonal construction, ‘it is’. One agent suppresses the pronoun to inaudibility, i.e. her articulation is so unclear that it is impossible to decipher whether she uses the T-form ‘du’ or the V-form ‘De’. As the quality of the recording is otherwise good, a possible interpretation of this is that the agent makes the pronoun inaudible as a strategy to avoid making the choice between T- and V-form. This

interpretations is corroborated by findings from another Scandinavian country, Sweden, where Clyne et al. (2006) find that in McDonald's, employees are actively encouraged to avoid direct address, both nominal and pronominal. Instead, they are told to phrase their questions impersonally, using constructions such as 'will there be something to drink?' (rather than 'do you want a drink with that?'). Fredsted (2005) also suggests that in Danish, if speakers are uncertain about whether to use the T-form of the V-form, they can choose an avoidance strategy, such as wait and see what their interlocutor does or use an inclusive 'we'. Such avoidance strategies as the ones reported by Clyne et al. (2006) and Fredsted (2005), however, are less costly when the interaction is not as heavily regulated as it tends to be in call centres, the latter in which rule disobedience may be consequential for salaries and bonuses.

In Mermaid there is plenty of interview data to support the interpretation that agents perceive the business transaction as just that and not, as is intended at least partly by the linguistic regulation material, as an overtly interpersonal exchange. There are testimonials that Mermaid agents are concerned with not becoming too personally involved with callers, whether positively or negatively. Maintaining their privacy in interaction with callers is crucial to many Mermaid agents. A male agent told me that what he likes least about his job is when he has to get angry and discuss with customers, which, he says, cannot be avoided in a customer service situation. Such a statement implies both that the agent in question does occasionally get angry with customers and feels a deep dissatisfaction when this has to happen. In Thistle, agents' talking about losing their temper over the phone would be unheard of (whether or not it happens in reality is uncertain). Thistle organizes courses on how to stay calm and not lose control when confronted with irate callers and a lot of emphasis is placed on how to placate and politely deal with belligerent customers. In contrast, many more Mermaid agents emphasized that what makes agents particularly good is their ability to say no. 'We should not stand for everything', they say, adding 'we do have the right to hang up'. This again suggests an

unwillingness of Mermaid agents to engage interpersonally with the caller, whether negatively or positively, and a perception of the service exchange as purely a business transaction. In short, the globally uniform linguistic regulation that occurs in call centres worldwide has the potential to cause havoc to the cultural ethos that predominates in different countries, and subtle cultural differences in how politeness works, in turn, may present serious challenges to attempts to globalize service interactions.<sup>51</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The sociolinguistics of globalization is still an embryonic field, and with the research presented in this chapter, I hope to move research a little further along. Drawing on call centre communication material collected from four different countries, I have described how one feature of language, in this case, a style, 'needs to be understood as part of some global social system' (Coupland 2003: 466). As far as generating theory for the emerging field of the sociolinguistics of globalization is concerned, this finding highlights the importance for sociolinguists to consider the status of styles or registers in relation to national languages (see also Cameron 2002, 2005a, Machin and van Leeuwen 2003, 2004, Pennycook 2003). Moreover, in this chapter, I identified the 'global social system' which

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<sup>51</sup> Another important explanation for the lesser rule adherence in Mermaid is likely to be the fact that in the Danish call centre the American politeness norm has to transcend not only cultural, but also linguistic borders, in that the service interaction is conducted in Danish. There may also be a more general resistance towards, not just the nature of what is prescribed but the notion of linguistic regulation *per se*. Tykesson-Bergman (2006) argues that the American and British traditions of linguistic regulating in shops and supermarkets do not exist in Sweden, and shorter exposure may lead to more resistance. In general, recalcitrance in Mermaid is rife. At the induction course I attended, agents consistently met what was being taught with a good proportion of irony and sarcasm. For instance, in response to the trainer's initial question about what they expected from the course, one of the things they replied was 'cake' and 'good food'. When the trainer stressed the importance of teamwork and suggested that it would give more time, they retorted: 'the faster we work, the more we have to work!'. Also, when asked whether there would be a possibility of conflict between agents, customers, the society and shareholders, they did not hold back: 'yeah, the shareholders want us to earn less and we want to earn more'. It is also important to note here that linguistic regulation practices are somewhat more elaborate and institutionalized in Thistle than in Mermaid, which may also affect overall rule adherence. In Mermaid, it was difficult to get clear-cut answers as to what happened when agents did not follow the rules. While on the one hand I was told that agents were only assessed collectively, there were certainly also regular individual coaching sessions and annual more in-depth reviews. While my gatekeeper manager related that only quantitative targets, such as number of sales and login time, would impact directly on the salary of the agent, agents themselves told me that rule adherence had a direct impact on salary. As I was denied access to actual assessments, however, incidentally by explicit order of the higher management, there is unfortunately no way of knowing for sure what the actual consequences are when Mermaid agents do not follow the rules and whether their overall motivation for rule adherence is when Mermaid agents do not follow the rules and whether their overall motivation for rule adherence is comparable to that of their British counterparts.

explains the stylistic homogenization taking place as economico-ideologically based in that it derives from and promotes a principle of rationalization and a philosophy of 'customer care'. In addition, I suggested that the system is not culturally neutral, but alludes to a North-American type of interpersonal style, which favours positive over negative politeness. Blommaert (2003), along with many others, has pointed out that the impact of globalization is likely to depend on the local particularities where it strikes. When I examined the uptake of the globally uniform call centre style in Britain and Denmark, I found that there were differences in the degree to which it was adhered to, with Danish agents, on the whole, showing considerably more resistance than their British counterparts. I suggested that this may be explained by a Danish preference for a transactional and more 'to the point' business-oriented style, which might be at odds with the interpersonally oriented style that is prescribed.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusion**

The emergence of a global, hyper-competitive service economy has inextricably interlinked the sociolinguistic areas of workplace talk, language and gender studies, and the sociolinguistics of globalization and raised new questions in them. Examining the linguistic regulation that occurs in call centres, iconic as it is of contemporary social and economic restructuring, I have aimed in this research to address some of these questions. In order to provide a contextual backdrop, I started out, in Chapter 3, by describing the extent of regulatory practices, drawing on data collected from two call centres, Thistle Insurance in Scotland and Mermaid Mobile in Denmark. I showed that not only work practices but also the linguistic behaviour of call centre agents is intensely regulated and controlled. Moreover, I suggested that the nature of what is prescribed is not ideologically neutral but seeks to maximize three principles, all of which have a crucial status in contemporary service workplaces. The first principle relates to 'quantity' and aims to ensure that customers are processed as quickly as possible. The second principle, 'quality', has to do with the requirement to provide a personalized service, and the third, 'branding', seeks to maximize consistency between calls. Whilst I found that managers and agents in their meta-discourse differed to a certain extent in their emphasis on, interpretation of, and reaction to the official ideology, their accounts nevertheless suggested a strong awareness of its existence.

The overriding objective of this research, however, was to investigate the actual language of call centre agents. As already noted, knowledge about call centres has suffered from a severe lack of studies exploring the service interactions themselves. More specifically, it was crucial for me to be able to examine the extent to which the actual language which agents use in interaction with customers conforms to prescribed templates. The short answer to this question is: to a certain extent, but not in a fully-fledged manner.

As we saw in Chapter 4, in particular, agents do seem to orient to the prescribed rules in their interaction with customers. For instance, most of the time (in Thistle) they greet the customer using the correct formula, they acknowledge the caller's problem, say please and thank you, engage in active listening, signpost understanding, and use the caller's name. In some of the cases where agents adhered to the rules, however, it was not always possible to determine whether this was because it was prescribed or because of something else, such as, e.g., the somewhat ritualistic nature of talk in general and of call centre talk in particular, or the fact that it is technologically mediated. While it has not been the aim of the present research to tease such potentially confounding factors apart, it might well be a fruitful area for future research.

I also found cases in which agents did not follow the rules. On many occasions, the failure to comply with a regulation was down to contextual factors over which the agent had no control. The contributions of a co-speaker, for instance, which are conspicuously absent from the communication material, suddenly came into play in the actual conversation and had a bearing on agents' ability to comply with the regulation. Even when there were no immediately obvious contextual factors which constrained the realization of a rule, agents far from always adhered to the linguistic prescriptions. For example, more often than not, Thistle agents failed to engage in small talk with the caller and Mermaid agents consistently failed to use the correct salutation, and they very rarely deployed the transitional question. Thistle and Mermaid agents both more often than not failed to use questions in the prescribed way and to close the call offering a personal endnote, bidding the caller welcome to call back, and thanking them for calling. The research also found clear differences in degree of compliance between different groups of speakers with female agents being more prone than their male colleagues, and Britons being more prone than Danes, to adhere to the regulation. Let us now revisit each of the three sociolinguistic fields to which I aimed to make a contribution and see what the implications of these findings are for each of them, as well as for the applied purpose.

As regards future studies into workplace talk, particularly in the service economy, these findings may need to be considered. The dominant paradigm in the area of workplace talk, Conversation Analysis, explicitly denounces an interest in anything that does not unfold locally, and sets out to document how speakers engaged in the interaction accomplish their institutionally relevant goals. As we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, however, agents' ability to accomplish goals was to an extent compromised by linguistic and other types of regulatory practices. This was the case whether 'goals' were construed as corporate goals, which were likely to correspond at least to a certain extent to those of the agent, or as emerging locally in the interaction, in line with the conversation analytic tenet. Because the findings presented in this research question the degree of agency and local management which is assumed in workplace studies undertaken in the conversation analytic paradigm, I argued that future studies need to incorporate regulatory practices into their analyses.

In the area of language and gender studies, the most interesting finding that emerged from this research is that, contrary to expectation, female call centre agents adhere more to the linguistic rules than their male counterparts. Where we might have expected that the general value placed on women within the call centre context might have worked to their advantage and exempted them from the chore of having to prove their worth, this does not appear to be corroborated by this study. My analysis could not exclude, however, that part of the explanation for the gender difference may be due to female agents finding it easier than their male counterparts to reproduce the femininity that might be encoded in (some of) them. Despite this, I argued that gender appeared to be relevant not so much as a marker of identity as a status category. The most compelling piece of evidence in favour of this interpretation was that female agents exhibited greater rule adherence also in cases where it was extraordinarily difficult to argue that the rule was femininely coded. Nevertheless, determining the correct balance of speakers using language as a means to construct their identity or as a resource to negotiate status may be an interesting, though

challenging, question for future research to explore. Suffice it to say, that insofar as supra-local gender inequalities have the potential to influence linguistic behaviour, this may convince language and gender scholars to supplement their predominantly locally-based studies with quantitative ones which seek to relate linguistic behaviour to overarching social structures.

Thirdly, my contribution to the field of the sociolinguistics of globalization was to show that, in contemporary society, language needs to be understood in the context of a global system. Comparing call centre communication material collected from call centres which differ on a range of parameters including the language in which the service interaction is conducted, whether the call centre is on- or offshore, the vertical markets to which they belong, and in what country they are located, I found that the commonalities of the materials were sufficiently substantial to argue in favour of the existence of a distinctive, globally homogenous, call centre style. The style exported, I further argued, is not ideologically neutral, but driven by principles of rationalization and a philosophy of 'customer care', which is culturally marked as North-American. This finding may contribute a small step to generating theories in the field of sociolinguistics of globalization, still at an embryonic stage, by highlighting the importance for sociolinguists to consider the status of styles or registers in relation to national languages, and explore what sorts of values are exported *qua* language to other locales (see also Cameron 2002, 2005a, Machin and van Leeuwen 2003, 2004, Pennycook 2003). On Blommaert's (2003) and others' recommendation, I went on to examine the uptake of this globally uniform call centre style in Britain and Denmark and found that there were differences in the degree to which it was adhered to, with Danish agents, on the whole, showing considerably more rule resistance than their British counterparts. I suggested that this may be explained by a Danish preference for a transactional and more 'to the point' business-oriented style, which might be at odds with the interpersonally oriented style that is prescribed. A rich area for future research, insofar as it is possible to obtain the data, might be to examine how the globally

uniform call centre style identified here is inflected by speakers of languages which are typologically and culturally further apart from one another than Danish and English, and/or by agents in offshore call centres communicating with customers in a language which is not their first.

I also wanted this research to have an applied purpose; indeed it was part of my obligation to report back to the call centres who kindly agreed to let me take part in their activities. Given the move away from solely decontextualized approaches to the study of linguistics which began to take form in the early 1970s, I asked to what extent linguistic regulation is possible in practice given that there are in theory infinite contextual variables which may influence its implementation. Although there were certainly examples of agents adhering to the prescriptions, the research revealed a myriad of cases in which the prescribed template was far too simplistic to account for the complexity of real interaction and many cases in which the agents' pragmatic competence by far superseded what is implied by linguistic regulatory practices. It also emerged that even when agents did manage to adhere to the principles laid out in the official ideology, this was not always recognized because the compartmentalized nature of scorecards could not account for such more sophisticated displays of pragmatic competence. Moreover, there were cases in which linguistic regulation seemed to have an adverse effect, causing agents to create social dissonance rather than harmony, or prolong the call unnecessarily.

Furthermore, call centres may benefit from the finding that devising a template for language use may affect different groups of speakers in different ways. For example, the finding that female agents adhere more to the rules than their male colleagues might mean in practice that, insofar as speakers who display a higher rule adherence are to some extent working harder, they may be more susceptible to adverse effects, such as stress and 'emotional exhaustion' (Deery et al. 2002, Lewig and Dollard 2003, Deery et al. 2004). Moreover, given that there is not necessarily a correlation between rule adherence and performing the job in a satisfactory way, since linguistic regulation practices often measure

irrelevant things, it is possible that male agents do not get the recognition they deserve. Furthermore, even if call centres in the short run prefer to recruit women, the findings presented here perhaps reinforcing this preference, in the long run, and with the growth in the industry showing no sign of abating (HK 2004, MBD 2007), they will need to consider how to attract more men to the industry. Finally, the call centre industry should seriously consider the potential problems in using globally uniform communication material, whether their plan is to offshore or establish new call centres onshore. While the temptation to do so is understandable precisely because of a realization that the ensuing cross-cultural communication may create problems, there is no guarantee; in fact, there is evidence to the contrary, that using globally uniform communication material will remedy the problems faced.

I asked in Chapter 4 whether the answer for call centres would be to employ more sophisticated methods of linguistic analysis to be able to take account for the complexities of real interactions. I suggested, however, that this was unlikely to be compatible with the high pressure environment of call centres which seems given and unalterable. A more realistic, and drastic, suggestion would be for call centres to discard regulatory practices, encompassing communication courses, customer service manuals, performance statistics, scorecards, call assessments, and scripts in all its shapes and forms. While this suggestion is likely to shake the entire foundation upon which call centres rest, it may also appeal to them, given its potential economic benefits. By eliminating unnecessary or counterproductive linguistic regulation, call centres may potentially release resources which may be put to better use in trying to eradicating some of the fundamental organizational problems which were exemplified in Chapter 5. At the same time, this might provide a better work environment for call centre employees, both agents and managers who are often entrapped by linguistic regulation (Fernie and Metcalfe 1998, Houlihan 2001, Alferoff and Knights 2002). In short, I hope that this research will convince the call centres taking part in this study as well as the wider industry that a better - and cheaper -

alternative to linguistic regulation might be to capitalize on agents' innate capacity for language use.

On a final note, it is worth reminding ourselves that the study of call centres is not just a preoccupation of linguists. As pointed out, the largest bulk of the academic literature on the subject has been contributed by sociologists, including management scholars, and organizational psychologists, whose methodological traditions and topical interests have led to a neglect of the spoken interaction that occurs between call centre agents and their customers. On this background, it makes sense to ask whether the research presented in the preceding chapters alters the existing picture of call centres which emerges from the mainly sociological body of literature. I believe the answer to this question is yes, and below I briefly discuss two areas which may have benefited from being illuminated through an interactional approach to the data.

The first benefit of the preceding interactional approach to call centres has been, I believe, to revise the unassailable belief of call centres in the importance of communication skills, which sociologists, insofar as they engage with it, have all too readily accepted. For example, two of the most influential and productive call centre researchers, industrial sociologists Phil Taylor and Peter Bain, write in relation to the perceived problems in the offshore Indian industry:

Fluency and clarity of speech, and depth of cultural understanding, combined with necessary tacit knowledge, are prerequisites for successful servicing and selling relationships. [...] it appears that cultural and linguistic differences are not readily overcome. Consequently, the call centre with its distinctive labour process may in the long run be offshored less readily than other non-customer facing, backoffice activities (2005: 278-279).

The authors here locate the problems associated with offshore call centres in Indian agents' lack of 'fluency and clarity of speech, and depth of cultural understanding', claiming that such linguistic inadequacies provide a challenge to a successful offshoring. This appears to imply that problems would vanish if call centres simply stayed onshore. Without denying that agents in offshore call centres may face different challenges than their

onshore counterparts, by the mere fact of having to communicate in a language which is not their own, I hope to have shown in the preceding chapters that locating the problem in agents' linguistic inadequacies is too simplistic. When the focus is moved to the interactions themselves, it becomes clear both that call centre agents are no exception to the general rule that most adult speakers need no instructions in how to communicate, and that any problems that do occur in the interaction are more likely to be attributable to factors extraneous to language.

A second benefit of the preceding interactional approach to studying call centres has been to expose the actual nature of 'quality' initiatives in call centres. In the industry itself, there is a general perception that the two aims of 'quantity' (i.e. a quick processing of calls) and 'quality' (i.e. a personalized customer service) are in oppositional tension with one another, and that they constitute a 'central paradox' (CM 2004: 6). This view seems to have been uncritically adopted by sociologists who, similarly, draw a distinction between call centre work which is 'essentially transactional, short and highly repetitive' and that in which 'quality and "empathy" are emphasized and is more "relational"' (Hutchinson et al. 2000: 66, see also Frenkel et al. 1999, Korczynski 2001a, 2001b, 2002). As I hope to have demonstrated in the preceding chapters, however, 'quality' in call centres tends to be construed relatively simplistically, and may involve having agents call the customer by their name a prespecified number of times, engaging in small talk, avoiding negative-sounding language, and expressing empathy and understanding. There is, of course, no guarantee that deploying such strategies will guarantee a satisfactory call resolution, as we saw in Chapter 5. Nor is there any empirical evidence that it is perceived by either customer or agent as actually enhancing service; in fact, there is evidence to suggest the contrary (Finkelstein 1999, Alferoff and Knights 2002).<sup>52</sup> It is possible that the often simplistic and at times celebratory view of 'quality' that pervades the call centre literature stems from a neglect of

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<sup>52</sup> Another possible and important topic for future research will be to examine what customers define as a satisfactory call resolution. It would also be interesting to explore in a more systematic way than what has currently been done the reaction of customers to (some of) the prescribed linguistic elements.

studying call centres from an interactional perspective. The fact that the chief methodology used in call centre studies has been interviews might have meant that the *rhetoric* of 'customer service' has been given priority over the *reality* of 'customer service', and stopped researchers from inquiring into who defines the antecedents of 'quality' (see, e.g., Sturdy 2001b).

All in all, it is my hope that by having illuminated central concerns in the sociolinguistic areas of workplace talk, language and gender studies, and the sociolinguistics of globalization, through an investigation of call centre talk, I hope to have moved research a little further in each of these areas. At the same time, I hope that the interactional approach taken to the data in this thesis may add to our understanding of call centres in general, both as it is held by the industry itself and as accumulated in the academic body of literature.

## Appendix A: Transcription key

%said silently%

SAID WITH AMPLITUDE

/ question intonation

\ / intonation suggesting to co-speaker to continue to speak

that's- unfinished turn or phrase

(1) pause in seconds

(.) pause less than one second

: lengthening of preceding syllable

— followed by an explanation in <> indicating how the underlined passage was said

// overlapping speech

= turn continues on next line

() accuracy of the transcription uncertain

(xxx) inaudible; approximate number of syllables represented by x's

## Appendix B: Original Danish texts

### Chapter 2: Methodologies

<sup>A</sup> ved du hvad må jeg lige spørge dig om noget inden at vi fortsætter <laughter>

<sup>B</sup> Gav kunderådgiveren dig mulighed for at specificere dit problem, uden at afbryde dig?

<sup>C</sup> Velkommen til kundeservice, du taler med [for- og afternavn]

### Chapter 3: Linguistic regulation in Thistle and Mermaid

<sup>A</sup> Gav kunderådgiveren dig tilbud om hjælp?

<sup>B</sup> Stillede kunderådgiveren mindst to spørgsmål for at klarlægge den eksakte problemstilling af din situation? Potential score: 7. For ja, da skal kunderådgiveren stille mindst to spørgsmål for at klarlægge situationen, f. eks. Hvilket nummer forsøger du at sende til? Er du i stand til at lave almindelige opkald?

<sup>C</sup> Gentog (opsummerede) kunderådgiveren det forventede (aftalte) af jeres samtale?

<sup>D</sup> Stillede kunderådgiveren mindst to spørgsmål for at klarlægge den eksakte problemstilling af din situation?

<sup>E</sup> Besvarede kunderådgiveren dit opkald med den korrekte Mermaid-hilsen?

<sup>F</sup> Tit vil man som leder komme med dårlige budskaber. 'I skal nå mere, I skal gøre mere, I skal løbe stærkere'. Og det har jeg da nogle overvejelser omkring om det er det jeg har lyst til.

### Chapter 4: Accomplishing corporate goals in Thistle and Mermaid

<sup>A</sup> Caller ja goddag det er Martin Lund jeg bestilte øh GPRS tillægsabonnement i forgårs

Agent ja

Caller o:g synes ikke li:ge sådan umiddelbart det virker (.)  
endnu

Agent NÅ hvad e:r- hvad telefonnummer drejer det sig om

<sup>B</sup> Udviste kunderådgiveren aktiv lytning gennem samtalen? F.eks.  
ved at gentage hvad der er sagt eller med lyde a la 'mmm',  
'aha', 'ja', etc.

<sup>C</sup> Da dit problem var løst, spurgte kunderådgiveren da om din  
tilladelse til at gennemgå din telefon/abonnement (aftale) eller  
at introducere dig til nye/fremtidige produkt- eller  
servicebehov?

<sup>D</sup> Agent jeg- jeg vil lige høre dig mens jeg har dig er du  
interesseret i ellers at blive kontaktet hvis vi på  
et tidspunkt sådan kommer med et- et nyt abonnement  
der kan være mere fordelagtigt

<sup>E</sup> Agent det jeg lige ville høre om hvis øh hvis jeg lige må  
have lov at stille et spørgsmål //(xx)=

Caller //ja

Agent =det er om- om øh I er interesseret i vi kontakte  
jer hvis vi får nogen tilbud hvor vi kan gå ind og  
se at øh det ville være øh gode tilbud for jer

<sup>F</sup> Det kan man sgu da ikke. Undskyld jeg bander. Men det kan man  
da helt ærligt ikke. Kunden vil da tænke, nå nu skal hun hen og  
prakke mig et eller andet på'.

<sup>G</sup> Caller (.) men øh men de trækker de der (.) fra //igen

Agent //de er- de  
bliver kun takseret for- for en MMS

<sup>H</sup> jeg skal lige prøve at se hvad vi har af skema på den det tager lige et øjeblik, nu skal jeg lige se en gang, nu skal jeg prøve at se her

### **Chapter 5: Accomplishing customers' goals in Thistle and Mermaid**

- <sup>A</sup> 1 Agent Kundeservice det er Susi Carlsen
- 2 Caller ja daw Kasper Kram fra NetLife i Århus (.) jeg har et problem med min telefon
- 3 Agent ja
- 4 Caller jeg har fået at vide idag at den blev porteret ti:l hvad hedder det til jeres net (.) og nu er den helt død (.) nu kan jeg hverken gå på det gamle net eller jeg kan gå på jeres net
- 5 Agent det- inden vi lige kommer videre i systemet så skal jeg lige- lige gøre dig opmærksom på at vi i Kundeservice er i gang med at lave en øh en- en undersøgelse (.) med hensyn til vores kunder og sådan noget så jeg håber det er i orden at vores samtale bliver optaget på bånd
- 6 Caller det er fuldstændig i orden
- 7 Agent okay (.) men så skal jeg lige bede om et mobilnummer //vi lige
- 8 Caller //det e:r otteogfyrre (.) fireoghalvtreds tolv tooghalvfems
- 9 Agent ja (.) hvor øh hvor kommer du fra (.) med hensyn til selskab
- 10 Caller NetLife A P S
- 11 Agent jamen jeg tænkte på er det Fono du kommer fra //eller

- 12 Caller //ja (.) ja ja
- 13 Agent det er Fono du kommer fra
- 14 Caller ja lige præcis
- 15 Agent (2) hvad står der på telefonen når du nu HAR puttet vores SIM-kort i
- 16 Caller ingenting (.) der står SIM-kort kan ikke registreres
- 17 Agent %okay% den telefon du har (.) er det en du har købt i sin tid hos Fono
- 18 Caller nej
- 19 Agent det er en du har købt igennem Mermaid
- 20 Caller ja
- 21 Agent %ja% (.) umiddelbart hvad jeg kan se så skulle den gerne have været tastet i vores system: i dag den første oktober men jeg går lige- eller første december <clears throat> men skal lige have fat i en tekniker for at høre dem om de eventuelt kan rykke for det (.) et øjeblik
- 22 Caller ja
- [Agent calls Network-support but does not get through and returns to the caller.]
- 23 Agent jeg er tilbage igen
- 24 Caller /ja:er
- 25 Agent ved du hvad jeg: vi har faktisk fået en mail om idag at- at vi har kø i vores central i øjeblikket
- 26 Caller /ja:er
- 27 Agent fordi (de afvikler) køen så jeg kan ikke sige dig om- om dit nummer er oppe at køre om en time eller inden for et par timer men i løbet af dagen skulle

den gerne være oppe at køre

28 Caller hvad gør jeg så (.) går jeg så ned og køber et  
taletidskort på jeres regning og så: smækker det  
deri eller hvad (.) fordi jeg har et problem folk  
skal jo kunne få fat i mig jo (.) jeg er afhængig  
af min telefon jo (.) jeg er jo aldrig på kontoret  
jo (.)

29 Agent <clears throat>

30 Caller det koster os jo penge det her (.) nu har vi jo:  
(.) hvis du kigger på sagsmappen så er det også tre  
måneder siden vi h- vi har bestilt porteringen jo

31 Agent ved du hvad jeg skal- jeg skal gøre et forsøg og se  
om jeg kan få rykket det fremad et øjeblik

32 Caller ja

[...]

57 Agent så er jeg tilbage igen //undskyld ventetiden=

58 Caller ///ja:er (.) det gør ikke  
noget

59 Agent =men jeg kan simpelthen ikke komme igennem den  
afdeling (.) øh vi har lidt kø og d- jeg ved de  
arbejder på (sagen) jeg skal næsten bede dig om at  
være LIDT tålmodig

60 Caller det vil sige du skal bede mig om ikke at lave noget  
idag så

61 Agent altså det er ikke det jeg beder dig (.)  
//konkret om men jeg kan bare ikke-

62 Caller //jamen (.) jeg- jeg- jeg kan jo- jeg kan jo ikke-  
jeg kan jo ikke gøre noget når jeg ikke har en  
telefon jo (.) hv- hvordan- hvordan- hv- hvordan

for- kan man foretage en portering uden a:t- at  
sikre sig at den går igennem (.) et er jo mit  
arbejdsredskab jo

63 Agent jeg kan godt følge dig i det men vi har simpelthen  
mange ordringer- ordrer der venter på at blive  
afviklet fra centralen //og vi kan (ikke gøre det)

64 Caller //jamen hv- hv- hv- jamen  
hvorf- hvorfor vælger man så at portere den før at  
man er sikker på den går igennem (.) altså- altså  
man må si- sige- jeg synes som et produkt jeg køber  
hos jer så øh hvad hedder det beskytter I det jo  
ikke særlig godt //jo=

65 Agent //nej

66 Caller =i virkeligheden vil jeg sige det er min livslinie-  
det er jo min- det er jo min- det er det arbejds  
(.) redskab jeg har jo

67 Agent altså vi porterer den jo pag- på baggrund af en  
bestemt dato (.) og vi kan jo ikke vide- og- b- w-  
på forhånd om den dato har kø i centralen eller  
hvad ved jeg (.) og det er jo så en- lidt ulempen  
ved- lad mig sige det på den måde at så er der så  
lige (netop) mange ordrer der afventer at blive  
afviklet idag (.) øh med hensyn til de  
//porterings-

68 Caller //jamen det er jo jeres struktur den er jeg jo  
ligeglad med jeg er kunde køber et produkt hos jer  
og jeg kan ikke få (.) det produkt til at  
du og det vil sige at pludselig nedlægger m- I  
nedlægger mig med en HALV dag (.) det koster mi:g

- øh altså femogtyve hundred
- 69 Agent ja (.) jeg kan bare ikke gøre så meget altså j- jeg kan bi- jeg- jeg //har bi-
- 70 Caller //du kan da give mig en erstatning for de:t- for det tidsrum hvor jeg mister mit- øh //min livslinie
- 71 Agent //jeg kan ikke give dig noget som helst //(for jeg)=
- 72 Caller //<deep sigh>
- 73 Agent =sidder i Kundeservice og har ikke mulighed for at sende dig et nyt oprettelsesskema eller noget som helst fordi lige meget hvad så går der et par dage med det (.) jeg siger //bare
- 74 Caller //ah du- du siger ikke- du siger ikke til mig der går et par DAge før min telefon er oppe at køre vel
- 75 Agent nej et par TI:mer HØJST (.) det- det er- //det jeg kan sige til dig=
- 76 Caller //<frustrated outbreath>
- 77 Agent =du kan være heldig inden for en halv time (.) du kan- du kan være heldig inden for et par timer
- 78 Caller det vil sige når man handler hos- hos- det vil sige- det er meget sjovt du bruger begrebet HELDIG (.) altså jeg køber et produkt hos jer (.) så vil jeg ikke være HELDIG (.) så vil jeg have produktet
- 79 Agent ja
- 80 Caller //er vi enige om det
- 81 Agent //det kommer (.) der kommer fra Fono (.) det skal flyttes //fra den (ene central på Fono)

- 82 Caller //jamen det kan jeg- jamen jeg v- how w- ja  
(.) jamen det- det er fint nok det der (.) men du  
siger HELDIG til mig (.) det er da ikke et særligt  
heldigt ord- ordvalg er det det
- 83 Agent nej det er det ikke men det jeg mener med det er  
vores central er belastet i øjeblikket det  
//alle vores-
- 84 Caller //ja (.) men er det et lotteri (.) det her
- 85 Agent //det er det ikke
- 86 Caller //fordi at- at jeg køber jo et produkt hos jer og  
så vil jeg have det til at du
- 87 Agent //selvfølgelig jeg kan godt følge dig i det
- 88 Caller //og så skal det du
- 89 Agent jeg- jeg vil da også gøre alt for at få dig- at- få  
nummeret til at due men som sagt kommer det fra den  
ene central hos Fono (.) til flytning til vores  
central (.) og det passer fint med at vi har kø i  
centralen og vi kan desværre ikke gøre noget lige  
nu (.) vi ARbejder på højtryk (.) det kan blive her  
inden for en time eller i løbet af dagen (.) jeg  
kan ikke sige dig (totalt) hvornår
- 90 Caller nå (.) ja (.) hv- hv- hvad gør jeg så nu  
//jeg står uden=
- 91 Agent //jamen altså
- 92 Caller =telefon
- 93 Agent (.) jeg v- jeg ved det simpelthen ikke
- 94 Caller du har ingen ide om (.) hvad jeg kan gøre (.) når  
jeg ingen telefon har
- 95 Agent du kan måske viderestille den hvis nummeret syt-

nummeret er jo- l- ligesom nedlagt på nedlagt på  
Fono og ikke oppe at //køre hos os

96 Caller //<frustrated outbreath>

97 Agent //vi kan ikke gøre så (meget)

98 Caller //jamen hvor skal jeg så viderestille den henne

99 Agent vi KAN ikke gøre så meget

100 Caller nej men hvad sk- hvad gør jeg så (.) jeg har et  
//problem (det synes jeg-)

101 Agent //jamen jeg har simpelthen ingen ideer til dig hvad  
du kan gøre (2) det har jeg ikke desværre

102 Caller (.) så det vil sige j:eg skal bare ikke arbejde  
idag (.) og jeg kan-  
//og det kan jeg ikke- det kan jeg ikke f- h-

103 Agent //det siger jeg ikke til dig

104 Caller jamen det- jeg kan- jeg kan ikke arbejde uden min  
telefon jo

105 Agent jamen (.) jeg kan bare ikke gøre så meget (.) mine  
hænder er totalt bundet af (vo:res) systemer  
//jeg kan ikke-

106 Caller //a men- men- men vi kan blive enige om mine hænder  
er endnu mere bundet end dine hænder er

107 Agent //jeg kan godt-

108 Caller //fordi jeg- jeg står her med en telefon hvor jeg  
kan tage INGENTing på

109 Agent ja jeg kan godt følge dig i dit problem (.) det er  
he:lt hundred //jeg kan bare ikke-<sup>A</sup>

[...]

<sup>B</sup> det jeg siger til dig jeg sidder på kontor arbejder med  
computer (.) har inget andet at gøre med

- <sup>c</sup> jeg siger til dig jeg har jeg har ikke nogen girokort- jeg  
siger jeg har ikke nogen taletidskort jeg kan sende til dig  
eller udlevere til dig (.) fordi jeg sidder i Kundeservice (.)  
jeg har kun mine systemer at gå ud fra
- <sup>d</sup> hvorfor skal jeg så ringe ind til jer

## Chapter 6: Gender and interactional reality

- <sup>A</sup> Gav kunderådgiveren et 'venligt/høfligt farvel'/afskedshilsen?

F. eks. Farvel, ha' en god weekend, Farvel og ha en god tur,  
etc.

- <sup>B</sup> Agent så skal jeg nok få den tastet

Caller tak skal du have

Agent velkommen

Caller hej

Agent hej

- <sup>c</sup> Agent fortsat god dag

- <sup>d</sup> Caller tak for hjælpen

Agent selv tak

Caller godt

Agent he- //he:j

Caller //hej

- <sup>E</sup> Agent hav en god dag

- <sup>F</sup> Caller tusind tak for hjælpen

Agent det var så lidt

Caller godt hej

Agent hej

- <sup>G</sup> Agent ja det lyder godt (.) kan du have en fortsat god dag

<sup>H</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal vedkende sig kendskab til problemet, f. eks. Jeg forstår dit problem, Jeg vil hjælpe dig med sagen/problemet.

<sup>I</sup> Caller what- I am calling about- it is not my name on the invoice but it's my address right it's someone called Flemming Stengård

Agent what's the customer number on that invoice

<sup>J</sup> Agent no but you know what I definitely want to see what I can help you with here

<sup>K</sup> Caller og så vil jeg bare lige høre om det ikke er idag at (.) den bliver åbnet igen and then I just

Agent prøv at give mig dit mobilnummer

<sup>L</sup> Caller jamen jeg skal bare høre om du kunne øh hjælpe mig med hvor øh i Glostrup at jeg kan finde en Mermaid-butik

Agent (2) jaer (6) det må vi jo finde ud af (3) hvad postnummer er Glostrup

<sup>M</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal bekræfte at beslutningen/løsningen vil være tilfredsstillende, f. eks. bekræft beslutningen for den løsning der er blevet enighed om, få accept af kundens tilfredshed med samme [...].

<sup>N</sup> Caller nå okay jamen det prøver jeg

Agent det er fint

<sup>O</sup> Agent //men det kræver lige jeg får en kvittering på det

Caller ja

Agent er det okay

<sup>P</sup> Caller ja (.) okay (.) godt jamen ved du hvad jeg prøver lige å snakker med hende

Agent det lyder godt

<sup>Q</sup> Agent //så tag hende med ud i butik- så kan I se på hvad de har derude ikke også

<sup>R</sup> Caller okay (.) det lyder bare godt

Agent det er helt i orden

<sup>S</sup> Agent så du er velkommen eller Pe- øh Pernille er velkommen til at ringe os op igen eller du er med kundenummeret ikke

### **Chapter 7: Globalization and interactional reality**

<sup>A</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal udvise aktiv lyting, f. eks. ved at gentage hvad der er sagt, eller med lyde a la: 'mmm', 'aha', 'ja', etc.

<sup>B</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal bekræfte at beslutningen/løsningen vil være tilfredsstillende, f. eks. bekræft beslutningen for den løsning der er blevet enighed om, få accept af kundens tilfredshed med samme [...].

<sup>C</sup> Kunderådgiveren må IKKE bruge tekniske termer eller en indforstået jargon i forbinde med deres forklaring vedr. sagen/problemet.

<sup>D</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal gentage det vigtige i forhold til konklusionen af samtalen, f. eks. for at gentage vil jeg..., vi har løst dit problem og talt om [...].

<sup>E</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal vedkende sig kendskab til problemet, f. eks. Jeg forstår dit problem, Jeg vil hjælpe dig med sagen/problemet.

<sup>F</sup> Det handler i store træk om empati.

<sup>G</sup> Åbning og interesse

Velkomst

Skabe tillid

Matche kundetype

Situationsspørgsmål

Hv-ord

Lytte og notere

Behovsudvikling

Problemspørgsmål

<sup>H</sup> Gav kunderådgiveren et 'venligt/høfligt farvel'/afskedshilsen?

F. eks. Farvel, ha' en god weekend, Farvel og ha en god tur,  
etc.

<sup>I</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal svare med den korrekte Mermaid-hilsen  
greeting, som inkluderer for- og efternavn, SKAL være: Velkommen  
til kundeservice, du taler med [for- og efternavn].

<sup>J</sup> velkommen til Kundeservice Birgitte Lund

<sup>K</sup> Kundeservice det er Martin Brydesen

<sup>L</sup> Kundeservice Gina Høst

<sup>M</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal vedkende sig kendskab til problemet, f.  
eks. Jeg forstår dit problem, Jeg vil hjælpe dig med  
sagen/problemet

<sup>N</sup> prøv at give mig dit mobilnummer

<sup>O</sup> hvad øh mobilnummer har du på den

<sup>P</sup> prøv at give mig dit kundenummer

<sup>Q</sup> Kunderådgiveren skal både fortælle at kunden bliver sat på  
hold, OG at der vil høres musik i ventetiden.

<sup>R</sup> prøv lige at at vent et øjeblik

<sup>S</sup> øh hæng lige på et øjeblik

<sup>T</sup> godt lige et øjeblik så

<sup>U</sup> Det ligger mig ikke for at bruge fornavn. Det er for personligt. [...]  
Jeg hører af og til nogle kolleger bruge det, og tænker hold da op, er  
de allere på fornavn?

<sup>v</sup> Og hvis kunden bruger mit fornavn, hvilket jeg ikke kan snuppe, så bruger jeg også deres, og så kan de høre jeg ikke kan lide de bruger mit!

<sup>x</sup> Man skal have afstand, for man kender jo ikke personen.

<sup>y</sup> Jeg kan ikke selv lide at blive kaldt Lisa. Det er en slesk type.

<sup>z</sup> velkommen til kundeservice, du taler med [for- og efternavn]

<sup>a</sup> kundeservice du taler med [first and last name]

<sup>b</sup> velkommen til kundeservice [first and last name]

<sup>c</sup> kundeservice [inaudible] taler med [first and last name]

<sup>d</sup> kundeservice det er [first and last name]

<sup>e</sup> velkommen til kundeservice det er [first and last name]

<sup>f</sup> kundeservice [first and last name]

## Appendix C: Consent forms

# INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

## COMPANY

### Communication Styles in Call Centres

#### Project Description

Your company has volunteered to participate in my study on communication styles in call centres. I am investigating this topic in order to further our understanding of what type of communication skills are needed in call centres in different countries, how customer service transactions are carried out and call handlers' own impressions of their work. The study is part of my D.Phil. thesis at the Faculty of English, Oxford University.

#### Description of Procedure

The study involves the researcher

- observing and taking notes of
  - o work routines
  - o communication relevant training
- obtaining copies of communication related written material
- getting access to the company's online courses in communication
- obtaining typists' transcriptions of two calls each carried out by
  - o 10 male call handlers
  - o 10 female call handlers
- sampling and transcribing an additional corpus of calls on location
- interviewing and recording on a mini disc recorder
  - o 20 call handlers
  - o 3 managers
- observing and taking notes at
  - o two call assessments

#### Risks and Inconveniences

The interviews will be carried out during work hours and will require employees to be exempt from their work duties for the duration of the interview. Apart from this, normal work routines will, as far as possible, not be disrupted. The project will also require playing back a pre-recorded message to customers making them aware that their call will be recorded for research purposes.

#### Benefits

The findings of this study will be communicated to the company once the results have been analysed and written up, which is expected to be sometime in 2006.

#### Confidentiality

All information obtained from the company will be kept in a secure place. Names of people and places and the company itself will remain anonymous.

Relevant data may be extracted and referred to in my dissertation and/or published in academic journals and it will not be sold to any third parties or supplied to researchers doing work in unrelated areas. Pseudonyms will be used in all cases. When the interviews have been recorded and the customer service transactions have been transcribed, the company is free to check the tapes and transcripts to make sure that I do not accidentally get any sensitive information about the company or its customers.

**Authorization**

I have read the above information and I confirm that my company will participate in this study.

My signature below confirms our participation and also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant's signature\_\_\_\_\_

Name (please print)\_\_\_\_\_

Job function\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

If you have further questions about this research project, please contact the principal investigator, Kristina Hultgren, at 07817 107 103, email [kristina.hultgren@english.ox.ac.uk](mailto:kristina.hultgren@english.ox.ac.uk)

The participant will be given one copy of this consent form. One copy will be kept by the investigator for at least five years.

Researcher's signature\_\_\_\_\_

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

# **INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT**

## **MANAGERS**

### **Communication Styles in Call Centres**

#### **Invitation**

You are invited to participate in my study on communication styles in call centres. I am investigating this topic in order to further our understanding of what type of communication skills are needed in call centres in different countries, how customer service transactions are carried out and call centre workers' own impressions of their work. The study is part of my D.Phil. thesis at the Faculty of English, Oxford University. Your participation in the research study is voluntary. Before agreeing to take part in the study please read the following information carefully.

#### **Description of Procedure**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be interviewed for approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be recorded on tape.

#### **Risks and Inconveniences**

There is a possibility that some of the questions in the interview may make you feel uncomfortable. This rarely happens, but if you do feel uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer the question, you can take a break and continue later or you can choose to stop the interview entirely.

#### **Benefits**

Through your valuable input, we can heighten our knowledge of the call centre industry and possibly become aware of certain issues that may have been neglected, something which may benefit you indirectly.

#### **Confidentiality**

All information obtained from you during the study will be kept in a secure place and remain anonymous. Some of what you have said may be transcribed and used in my dissertation, published in academic journals and it will not be sold to any third parties or supplied to researchers doing work in unrelated areas. When I present the findings to the company, I will not quote you directly, but I may paraphrase your words. In all cases, pseudonyms will be used. When the interview has been recorded, someone will check the tape to make sure that I am not accidentally getting any sensitive information about the company or its customers.

#### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, it will not have any negative consequences for you. If you begin to participate in the research, you may at any time, for any reason, discontinue your participation without any negative consequences.

**Other Considerations and Questions**

Please feel free to ask any questions about anything that seems unclear to you and to consider this research and consent form carefully before you sign.

**Authorization**

I have read the above information and I have decided that I will participate in the interview.

My signature below confirms my participation and also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form.

Participant's signature\_\_\_\_\_

Name (please print)\_\_\_\_\_

Job function\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

If you have further questions about this research project, please contact the principal investigator, Kristina Hultgren, at 07817 107 103, email [kristina.hultgren@english.ox.ac.uk](mailto:kristina.hultgren@english.ox.ac.uk)

The participant will be given one copy of this consent form. One copy will be kept by the investigator for at least five years.

Researcher's signature\_\_\_\_\_

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

# INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

## AGENTS

### Communication Styles in Call Centres

#### **Invitation**

You are invited to participate in my study on communication styles in call centres. I am investigating this topic in order to further our understanding of what type of communication skills are needed in call centres in different countries, how customer service transactions are carried out and call centre workers' own impressions of their work. The study is part of my D.Phil. thesis at the Faculty of English, Oxford University. Your participation in the research study is voluntary. Before agreeing to take part in the study please read the following information carefully.

#### **Description of Procedure**

If you choose to participate in this study, you will

- be interviewed for approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be recorded on tape.
- have the researcher present and taking notes at your performance appraisal
- have the researcher present and taking notes at your call assessment appraisal

You do not have to consent to all of these. You will be asked to tick the boxes at the end of this form indicating which, if any, activities you agree to participate in.

#### **Risks and Inconveniences**

The interviews will be done during work hours and you will be exempt from your duties for the duration of the interview. Apart from this, your normal work routine will not be unnecessarily disrupted. There is a possibility that some of the questions in the interview may make you feel uncomfortable. This rarely happens, but if you do feel uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer the question, you can take a break and continue later or you can choose to stop the interview entirely.

#### **Benefits**

You will receive £5 as a small token of my appreciation if you participate in (any part of) this study. More generally, through your valuable input, we can heighten our knowledge of the call centre industry and possibly become aware of certain issues that may have been neglected, something which may benefit you indirectly.

#### **Confidentiality**

All information obtained from you during the study will be kept in a secure place and remain anonymous. Some of what you have said may be transcribed and used in my dissertation and/or published in academic journals and it will

not be sold to any third parties or supplied to researchers doing work in unrelated areas. When I present the findings to the company, I will not quote you directly, but I may paraphrase your words. In all cases, pseudonyms will be used. When the interview has been recorded, someone will check the tape to make sure that I am not accidentally getting any sensitive information about the company or its customers.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, it will not have any negative consequences for you. If you begin to participate in the research, you may at any time, for any reason, discontinue your participation without any negative consequences.

### **Other Considerations and Questions**

Please feel free to ask any questions about anything that seems unclear to you and to consider this research and consent form carefully before you sign.

### **Authorization**

I have read the above information and I have decided that I will participate in the following parts of the study

#### **Activity**

Interview  
 Researcher present at performance appraisal  
 Researcher present at call assessment

#### **Yes No**

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

My signature below confirms my participation and also indicates that I have received a copy of this consent form and £5 in compensation.

Participant's signature\_\_\_\_\_

Name (please print)\_\_\_\_\_

Job function\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

If you have further questions about this research project, please contact the principal investigator, Kristina Hultgren, at 07817 107 103, email [kristina.hultgren@english.ox.ac.uk](mailto:kristina.hultgren@english.ox.ac.uk)

The participant will be given one copy of this consent form. One copy will be kept by the investigator for at least five years.

Researcher's signature\_\_\_\_\_

Name\_\_\_\_\_

Date\_\_\_\_\_

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