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Globalizing Politeness?

Towards a globalization-sensitive framework of mediated service encounters

Running title: Globalizing Politeness

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Introduction: call centres and mediated service encounters

Call centres are a prototypical example of how service encounters over the years have come to be increasingly “mediated”. At the inception of “service encounters” as a field of inquiry more than forty years ago, a service encounter was defined as “an instance of face-to-face interaction between a server who is ‘officially posted’ in some service area and a customer who is present in that service area, that interaction being oriented to the satisfaction of the customer’s presumed desire for some service and the server’s obligation to provide that service” (Merritt 1976:321). While call centre service encounters are still “oriented to the satisfaction of the customer’s presumed desire for some service and the server's obligation to provide that service”, they are not “face-to-face” but *mediated*. They have been described as

a work environment in which the main business is mediated by computer and telephone-based technologies that enable the efficient distribution of incoming calls (or allocation of outgoing calls) to available staff, and permit customer–employee interaction to occur simultaneously with the use of display screen equipment and the instant access to, and inputting of, information (Holman 2003:124).

Thus, studying call centres can shed light on how language in service encounters is being reshaped by the service encounter being mediated (Contributors to Hernández-López and Fernández-Amaya 2015).

This chapter argues that one consequence of service encounters having become increasingly mediated is that they have also become increasingly globalized, i.e. linguistically and pragmatically similar despite taking place in different cultural and national settings. The chapter argues that globalization – understood here as intensified global competition facilitated by a deregulation of trade and significant advances in technology and communication infrastructure – brings about changes in linguistic politeness. There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence to suggest that novel politeness expressions such as *Hi, how are you today?* and *Have a nice day* are being transported across the globe along with corporate expansion (Sifianou 2013; Cameron 2003). Often American corporations are said to be the main drivers of this, but Swedish multinationals, such as IKEA and H&M, have also been found to engage in this by encouraging the use of informal address pronouns conventionally used in Sweden in their stores across the world (Norrby and Hajek 2011). However, given that “[g]lobalization is not a unidirectional process by which linguistic or cultural elements are diffused and uncritically adopted” (Androutsopoulos 2010: 204, see also Coupland 2010; Blommaert 2003, 2010), it is likely that not all these globally exported politeness conventions will be straightforwardly adopted in local contexts. For instance, when McDonald’s opened its first restaurant in Moscow, the American-style friendliness and informality made customers think they were being mocked by the staff (Ashforth and Humphrey 1993). Similarly, reactions to the first naming conventions used in the American coffee chain Starbucks are said to feel “foreign” in Finland and France, where they are associated, respectively, with “intimacy” and “marketing” (Isosävi and Lappalainen 2015). In

light of a well-established body of cross-cultural pragmatics that politeness conventions vary – sometimes significantly – according to national culture (Kiełkiewicz-Janowiak and Pawelczyk 2004, 2008; Haugh 2011; Reiter 2011; Félix-Brasdefer 2015), such findings should come as no surprise.

The overall aim of this chapter is to explore how politeness is prescribed in call centres in four countries – Britain, Denmark, Hong Kong, and the Philippines – and the extent to which these prescriptions are actually adhered to by call centres agents in two of the countries, Britain and Denmark. Enabled by improved global Internet and communication infra-structures, plummeting costs of data transfer and political and economic deregulation, call centres have grown exponentially since the 1990s as they have proved attractive and cost-effective solutions for organizations to manage their interaction with customers (Holman, Batt and Holtgrewe 2007). While the growth in itself is reason for putting call centres under academic scrutiny, they also provide a window into understanding the more general impact that globalization may have on linguistic politeness and how the language is being reshaped by service encounters being increasingly mediated (see further below).

As for providing a window into the impact of globalization on politeness, call centres are types of organizations which are easily exported to other countries because they rely on an operational prototype, which can be infinitely reproduced (Hultgren 2008). They are thus a hallmark example of the dimension of globalization that assumes that the world is becoming increasingly homogenous. Call centres, regardless of type, sector specialization and geographical location, tend to be extremely similar (Bain and Taylor 2000) and research has shown remarkable similarities in operational procedures, work practices, technology relied on and staff profiles in call centres located in countries as far apart as Israel, Australia, the UK, the US, Colombia, Japan and India (see review in Hultgren 2011). 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. Many call centres also share a common pool of labour. The alignment across country borders and vertical markets is perpetuated through international benchmarks (Bain and Taylor 2000). As we shall see in this chapter, there is also evidence that call centres worldwide share ideologies on how agents should speak to customers, regardless of the country in which they are located and regardless of the language in which the service interaction is conducted.

Politeness in call centres

Call centre service encounters, like service encounters in general, have both a ‘transactional’ and an ‘interactional’ dimensions. ‘Transactional’ talk is that which is oriented to achieving a particular business-related outcome whereas ‘interactional’ talk is that which is oriented to managing the social, interpersonal aspects (Brown and Yule 1983). While this distinction is analytically useful, in practice, the two dimensions coalesce and are not always separable empirically. ‘Politeness’ in this chapter is understood as this latter type of talk: the ‘interpersonal’ or ‘relational’ aspects (Locher and Graham 2010); or what Spencer-Oatey refers to as ‘rapport management’, i.e. the ‘management of social relations’ (2008:12). A key argument to be developed is that the politeness that is prescribed across the call centres studies is remarkably similar, irrespective of the fact that national cultures may differ in their respective preference for a certain type of interactional style (Brown and Levinson 1987).

In order to understand politeness in call centres, it is important to understand the very peculiar context of call centres, which differ in fundamental ways from many other types of service encounters, particularly those that are not mediated. One of the most remarkable aspects of the language of call centre service encounters is that it is not solely managed

between the service worker and the service seeker; superordinate agents play a key role in designing it (Hultgren 2008; Cameron 2008). Such managerial interference consists 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. Forty-three per cent of total training time in a typical European call centre is devoted to “soft skills”, i.e. customer service (Durbin 2006).¹ Call centres devote extensive resources to systematically monitoring and assessing whether agents adhere to these rules in practice. This practice, now widespread in the globalized service economy, of codifying and enforcing rules for employees’ use of language in service encounters has been referred to as “linguistic regulation” (Hultgren 2008:ii). Although agents have scope for agency (Woydack and Rampton 2015; Bain and Taylor 2000), the practice of call centres to intervene in their employees’ language use is arguably one of the most distinctive features of call centres (Hultgren 2008; Cameron 2000; 2008; Archer and Jagodziński 2015).

Given that politeness in call centres is at least partly imposed from above, the conceptualization of politeness adopted in this chapter in a way reverts back to an earlier era of politeness research in which politeness was seen as residing *a priori* in linguistic forms (Brown and Levinson 1987). More recent theoretical developments view politeness as emerging in social practice, making a distinction between first and second-order politeness where first-order politeness corresponds to common-sense notions of politeness whereas second-order is a theoretical construct (Eelen 2001; Watts 2003). In social practice orientations to politeness, politeness is being determined not solely by the speaker’s intention to be polite but also by the hearer’s assessment of whether it *is* polite (Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003; Haugh 2014). While the hearer’s, in this case the customer’s,

¹ In call centre practice, “customer service training” and “soft skills training” are not always considered the same. In certain call centre institutions, “customer service” training is understood to be more product-oriented, whereas “soft skills” training refers mainly to training in communication.

interpretations of politeness is beyond the scope of this study, we will consider both the call centre-prescribed politeness and that which is enacted in actual interactions by the call centre agents. And, as we shall see, there is some mismatch between the two.

Data and analytic methods

Because this study seeks to explore both the call centres' top-down prescriptions of politeness as well as the ways in which call centre agents resist, adopt, or adapt these in actual customer service interactions, two types of data was collected as part of a larger study (Hultgren 2008): institutional prescriptions and agent practices. Data related to institutional prescriptions consists of

- 330 pages of institutional documents (agent training material, customer service manuals, score cards used in call assessments, agent performance reports, memos);
- 56 interviews with call centre managers, agents and customer service consultants;
- 29 days of observations of work practice including call assessments; attendance at industry conferences.

Data related to agent practices consists of:

- 187 audio-recorded and transcribed customer service interactions (79 in Britain and 108 in Denmark);
- field notes from observations of work practices (see above).

Data on institutional prescriptions was collected from call centres in four countries: Britain (UK); Denmark (DK); Hong Kong (HK); and the Philippines (PH) (see Table 1). Data on

agent practices was collected from two of the above countries: Denmark and Britain. Because commercial sensitivities and data protection regulations make it notoriously difficult to gain access to call centres (Cameron 2000), the call centres included in the study represent a convenience sample.

To explore the institutionally prescribed type of politeness, linguistic prescriptions which re-occurred across the institutional documents collected from the four countries were identified and verified through interviews and observations. Data related to agent practices consisted of audio-recorded and transcribed customer service interactions. In the British call centre, the calls were recorded as part of normal operating procedures whereas in the Danish call centre, they were recorded as part of this study. This difference, which might potentially have triggered a different linguistic behaviour on the part of the agents in the two sites, must be borne in mind when interpreting the results. To explore the extent to which agents in the Danish and British call centres complied with the prescriptions, they were scored on a binary categorical division according to whether or not they complied with the institutional prescription. If a prescription did not apply in a particular call, for example, when an agent did not inform the caller that they would be put on hold because they were not put on hold, the call was excluded from the analysis. Mean rule adherence was calculated, and non-parametric (Mann-Whitney U) tests were carried out to verify statistical significance of any differences found between agents in the two countries; and these were then analysed qualitatively.

Despite the call centres differing on a range of parameters - including country of location, whether they are on- or offshore, the sector to which they belong, the language of service interaction and the agent's first language, I will argue that the prescribed style is remarkably similar across the four sets of material. The British and Danish call centres examined in this study were *inbound*, i.e. calls are customer-initiated and deal with customer

inquiries of various kinds (as opposed to *outbound* call centres in which calls are made by the call centre and often have a sales purpose). The British call centre belongs to the insurance sector and the Danish one to the telecoms industry. Both are onshore, which means that the call centre agent and the customer are located in the same country, speaking the same language, U.K. English and Danish, respectively. The Hong Kong call centre is inbound and in the financial sector. It is onshore from the point of view that both agents and customers are based in Hong Kong, but offshore from the point of view that it is a local Asian branch of an American-based company. Although the call centre agents' first language is Cantonese, they are employed for their trilingual skills which enable them to communicate not only with Cantonese customers (who constitute the majority) but also with English- and Mandarin-speaking customers based in Hong Kong. The Philippine material comes from a consultancy firm which provides communication material for inbound offshore call centres with a wide range of specializations. This material is the only part of the set which is aimed at offshore call centres, i.e. the agents communicate in a language other than their first, in this case with customers based in the U.S. In this respect, it differs slightly from the other sets of material in that it incorporates sections on pronunciation, grammar and cross-cultural pragmatics, which is not the case for the material intended for agents communicating in their native language.

@@ Insert Table 1 here: Overview of call centres included in the study @@

Globalizing the language of service encounters: institutional prescriptions

In this section, I present a comparison of the institutional prescriptions in the four call centres that are the focus of this study. The argument I develop is that, despite the fact that the prescriptive material is intended for call centre agents in four different national contexts who,

in combination, communicate in six different languages or language varieties, the prescribed language is remarkably similar. The Danish material, being the only set which is not originally in English, has been translated from Danish by the author. The linguistic prescriptions to be considered are, in turn, “active listening”, “making the customer feel understood”, “avoiding jargon”, “signposting”, “empathizing” and “small talk” (see Tables 2-7). These were prescriptions that leapt out across the four sets of material. Interestingly, these are types of politeness strategies which, in different guises and under different names have been studied by linguists and cross-cultural pragmatics scholars as differing in function, frequency and distribution across cultures. Despite this, however, we shall see how they are prescribed more or less indiscriminately across each of the call centres.

Active listening

To begin with, agents in all four call centres are advised to make callers feel as if they are listened to (see Table 2). 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 epithet “*active listening*” which, notably, is used throughout the four sets of material. It is not enough, in other words, merely to *passively* listen to the caller; agents must *actively* signal to them that they are doing so. Three out of the four sets of material subsequently go on to list some devices which agents may deploy to signal that they are engaged in “active listening”:

- *urgh huh, OK, I see* (UK);

- *um, uh, uh-uh, yeah, I know, OK* (PH); and
- *mmm, aha, ja*, which are the locally adapted devices in the Danish material.

It is arguably conspicuous that the same generic strategy, notwithstanding some minor formal differences, is prescribed indiscriminately across the four sets of material.

@@ Insert Table 2 here: The prescription to engage in “active listening” @@

Making the customer feel understood

Related to making customers feel listened to is the importance of acknowledging their needs and making them feel understood (see Table 3). In the material, “understanding” should be variably signalled by “summarizing” (UK), “confirming” (DK), “checking/paraphrasing” (HK) or “restating” (PH) the customer’s predicament to indicate that it has been correctly understood. Although the terminology used varies slightly across the four sites, the main purpose of this prescription is arguably the same, one of which relates to the principle of efficiency; obviously, making sure that a query is correctly understood will reduce the risk of misunderstanding and thereby increase the chances of a smooth and speedy processing of the call. Efficiency is key in call centres, and a core concept is AHT (Average Handling Time) – a measure used by most call centres as a yardstick of their effective functioning as a business institution. The emphasis on AHT translates into pressure on call centre agents to make their interactions as short as possible. However, making sure that a query is correctly understood is not only important from an efficiency perspective, it is also analysable as an interpersonal device intended to signal that the customer is being understood, cared for, and attended to.

@@ Insert Table 3 here: The prescription to “make the customer feel understood” @@

Avoiding jargon

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 (see Table 4). As can be seen, the UK material goes furthest in this respect, banning words and phrases which are perceived as being jargon, while the other sets of material makes a more general prescription to “avoid” or “simplify” jargon when explaining matters to the customer. As with the other prescriptions, the intended purpose here is probably twofold. On the one hand, avoiding potentially confusing jargon signals a desire to highlight commonalities with the customers by not alienating them; on the other, it reduces the risk of the customer seeking further clarifications which may prolong the call. Thus, the prescription can be interpreted as the intention of the institution to both provide customer care but also make sure that calls are processed efficiently (see Culpepper 1996. for an in-depth discussion of jargon and impoliteness).

@@ Insert Table 4 here: The prescription to “avoid jargon” @@

Signposting

There are other ways in which the material advises that making oneself understood to the caller is highly important. One feature variously referred to as “signposting”, “summarizing” or using “headline techniques” has 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 (see Table 5). 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. While one purpose of this is to reduce the risk of misunderstanding which may prolong the call, it is also analyzable as a strategy which emphasizes the interactional function of language. By signalling an overtly expressed commitment by the agent to cater for the caller's needs, it highlights customer care.

@@ Insert Table 5 here: The prescription to “signpost” @@

Empathizing

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 (see Table 6), and most sets provide exemplary phrases on how agents should evoke empathy with callers. The institutional prescription to show empathy with the customer is probably best analysed as orienting primarily to the customer care aspect of the service encounter. Indeed, volunteering expressions such as *I'm sorry you've had that experience* and *I understand, that must be really frustrating for you* are likely to prolong the interaction and thereby compromise efficiency. At another level, however, it might appease the customer and resolve any call-prolonging hostilities. It is arguably interesting that engaging in empathy is prescribed across the four sets of material with little regard for the extent to which this is a customary and appropriate way of talking to customers in the four locales under study.

@@ Insert Table 6 here: The prescription to “empathize” @@

Small talk

A final prescription to consider is the way in which agents are asked to attend to callers by engaging them in small talk, i.e. talk about, or pick up on, issues which are unrelated to the transaction at hand (see Table 7). 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 British material. The material suggests different topics for small talk, where the Danish 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 relatively limited amount of material I was permitted to collect), but the notion of “rapport” occurs frequently throughout the material. 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 customer service.

@@ Insert Table 7 here: The prescription to “small talk” @@

In the above I have drawn attention to several affinities between the institutional prescriptions in four national contexts intended for speakers of six languages or language varieties. Notwithstanding some slight local variations, particularly in form, I hope to demonstrate that the similarities across the four sets of material, in terms of the positive politeness that has been in focus here, are conspicuous. However, the analysis has also

reaffirmed that the distinction between positive and negative politeness (see. Brown and Levinson 1987) is fairly problematic, as it is usually the case (not only in service encounters) that both aspects of face are at stake in any interaction (see, e.g. Bousfield 2008).

Nonetheless, there does seem to be evidence that the institutionally prescribed type of politeness may, just like call centres themselves, stem from a blueprint which is then recycled and recirculated, if not across the world, then at least across the four national contexts examined here, yielding a distinct call centre-specific type of language, centred on giving the customer a personalized service.

Adopting and resisting globalized prescriptions: employee practices

In this section, I explore what happens when the institutionally prescribed call centre-specific politeness is carried over into two national contexts, Britain and Denmark. This is, I would argue, a worthwhile undertaking since there is abundant 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 (Isosävi and Lappalainen 2015), in levels of directness (Economidou-Kogetsidis 2005), and in the use of address terms (Norrby and Wide 2015). Specifically, in relation to Danish preferences, 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), where the italicized preamble deemphasizes the mistake that the tutor has made in their marking. Insofar as the two studies reported above are comparable – the data is taken from different speech events – it might be the case that Denmark requires less interpersonal work and less politeness whereas Britain requires speakers to oil their interpersonal relationship.

A quantitative comparison of rule compliance by British and Danish agents reveal a statistically significant difference for four out of a total eight rules which the call centres shared: "greeting", "acknowledgement", "hold notification", and "check understanding". The interesting thing to note about the differences is that they invariably point in the same direction: British agents adhere more to the linguistic prescriptions than their Danish counterparts (see Figure 1). This is the case even when, on average, calls in the Danish call centre are longer than in the British one, which we might expect to create more opportunities to obey the rules.

@@ Figure 1 here: British and Danish agents' rule adherence (only rules with a statistically significant difference included) @@

Why do British and Danish call centre agents differ in their degree of compliance with the linguistic prescription? There may be a range of reasons for this, including institutional

sanctions, which appear to be more established in the British call centre. Certainly, there was evidence that agents in the British call centre were under more intense surveillance than their Danish counterparts, which may prime them towards greater compliance with institutional prescriptions. Another explanation may be differences in the cultural “ethos” (Brown and Levinson 1987) of British and Danish speakers and in their preference for different types of politeness. Below, this hypothesis will be explored by looking in greater detail at three examples. The argument that will be developed is that Danish agents prioritize “transactional” over “interactional” talk (e.g. Kasper 1990). Although the distinction is empirically problematic, the former serves to exchange information between speakers whereas the latter serves primarily to maintain social relations.

The first example relates to the “greeting” (see Table 8). The rule in both the British and the Danish call centres is that the greeting must be rendered verbatim as prescribed. As we saw in Figure 1, however, the British agents follow this rule to a significantly higher degree than the Danish agents. The examples from the British agents in Table 8 are identical and in perfect compliance with the prescriptions, despite coming from two different agents. The Danish agents, by contrast, strikingly, do not obey it even once in the entire corpus of interactions. Two actual greetings from the Danish corpus have been chosen to exemplify what the agent may say instead. Danish agents may, for instance, omit the *you are speaking* or the *welcome* bit. They do not seem to be as attuned to the prescriptions as their British counterparts; indeed, when asked in interviews to recite the standard greeting, a range of different answers was provided. 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 large numbers of lots of calls in queue. Since there is no evidence to suggest

that the Danish agents are on average busier than the British agents, such testimonials could be taken to support the idea that Danes are more focused on the transactional than the interactional function 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 with for the sake of speeding up call processing.

@@ Table 8 here: Prescribed and actual greetings in Britain and Denmark @@

As regards the “acknowledgement” rule, the British and Danish prescriptive materials are very similar (see Table 9). 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, the quantitative analysis reveals that the British agents adhere to the suggested formula to a greater extent than their Danish counterparts. In the two examples shown from each country, the Danish agents tend to significantly shorten the prescribed formula, whereas the British agents stay close to it. In contrast to their British counterparts, the Danish 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 the Danish agents are more focused on the transactional level of the discourse. Rather than engaging themselves in interactional 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, British agents seem more attuned to the

interactional level of discourse by engaging, in the examples chosen, in quite extensive politeness work.

@@ Table 9 here: Prescribed and actual acknowledgements in Britain and Denmark @@

There is support for such an interpretation in the “hold notification” rule, which also revealed a quantitative difference between British and Danish agents (see Table 10). According to the British material, the agent is required to ask for the caller’s permission to put them on hold, and the Danish agent is asked to inform the caller that they are being put on hold as well as notifying them that music will be played. Already in the prescriptive material, it seems that there are some subtle differences in style preference, where “asking for permission” 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, the Danish 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. In actual hold notifications, the cultural differences are even more pronounced. In general, the Danish agents’ utterances tend to be briefer than those of their British counterparts and they tend to skip the last bit. Once again, then, it seems that the Danish agents are more concerned with speedy call processing than with the interactionally oriented rules prescribed in the material. The British agents, also in line with previous suggestions, engage in a style emphasizing the asymmetrical relationship between them and the caller. In both examples, they elicit the caller’s consent to put them on hold, thus granting the caller the (theoretical) right to deny such a request. Their conversational contributions are also comparatively longer than those of their Danish counterparts, occasionally spanning more than one turn of talk. This also points to a style that is more attuned

to the interactional level of talk simply from the point of view that it requires more words to engage in face work.

@@Table 10 here: Prescribed and actual hold notifications in Britain and Denmark @@

The above analysis has argued that the globally prescribed politeness is not received with the same level of embracement by Danish and British agents. I have suggested that this may be due to a preference by Danish workers to engage in a more transactional than interactional style of speaking, though other explanations may also be possible. The misgiving about the interactional level of politeness is supported by interview data, particularly in relation to the practice of using first names in the service interaction:

And if the customer uses my first name, which I can't stand, I will use theirs, and then they will understand that I don't like them using mine! (Danish call centre worker 1)

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!

I don't like being called "Lene" [first name]. (Danish call centre worker 2)

Jeg kan ikke selv lide at blive kaldt Lene.

In the British call centre I did not come across such explicitly expressed dislikes of the use of first naming. All in all, then, it may be the case that the globally prescribed preference for politeness, which is exported via globalization, may be at odds with local politeness conventions, at least in the two cultural contexts, Denmark and Britain, explored in this chapter.

Conclusion: globalizing and localizing politeness

Employing a combination of documentary analysis, interviews and observations in four call centres across the world – Britain, Denmark, Hong Kong and the Philippines – this study has found evidence of a type of politeness prescribed across the four call centres examined, and potentially, across the world. This novel – *globalized* – type of politeness appears to reflect a preference for informality, as evidenced in encouraging agents to engage in small talk and making the customer feel understood and listened to. The type of politeness prescribed might be summed up as ‘synthetic personalization’, a way of compensating for the otherwise hyper-rationalised, super-efficient and potentially depersonalized processing of the customer (Fairclough 1989). Examining naturally occurring call centre service encounters in two of the four national contexts, Britain and Denmark, it was further found that this globally and indiscriminately prescribed speech style was complied with significantly less in the Danish call centre than in the British one. It was suggested that this might have to do with a possible Danish preference for a more direct, ‘to the point’ and transactionally oriented speech style

with less attention to phatic and other interpersonal aspects. The extent to which this is actually the case could usefully be explored in future studies.

Arguably, the most significant finding to emerge from the study is that globalization – understood here as intensified global competition facilitated by a deregulation of trade and significant advances in technology and communication infrastructure – appears to have a potential bearing on the language of service encounters, and more specifically on politeness. In terms of theoretical and methodological implications, this suggests that in the age of globalization and mediated service encounters one needs to look beyond the minutiae of linguistic practice that unfolds between the service provider and the customer. If, as has been suggested by this study, politeness in call centres has been prescribed from above by an international network of trainers and communication consultants whose materials have been circulated and recycled globally (Hultgren 2011, 2017), then this is a significant factor that might potentially govern or influence how politeness is managed more locally, in the call centres themselves and between the agent and their customers. This suggests that a wide and globally sensitive perspective needs to be adopted to understand the language of contemporary mediated service encounters. At the same time, as evidenced in this study, there may well be local resistance to and adaptations of these global prescriptions, which suggest that a global perspective in itself is not enough. To truly understand the language of contemporary service encounters, then, it would appear that one needs to look to both global processes in the construal of politeness as well as more locally managed practices mediating it. In other words, research on the language of service encounters needs to move towards an integration of global and local perspectives.

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