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Title

'Building Rapport' with Customers across the World:

The Global Diffusion of a Call Centre Speech Style[1]

Abstract

This paper identifies a particular 'rapport-building' speech style prescribed to call centre workers in four countries, Denmark, Britain, Hong Kong and the Philippines, irrespective of the language being spoken in the service interaction. It then compares Danish and British call centre workers' compliance with the prescribed speech style and finds that Danish workers adhere significantly less to it than their British counterparts. It is suggested that this is attributable to the predominance of different politeness norms in the two cultures. The paper then discusses the indexicality of the prescribed speech style and argues that it is more commercially than culturally marked, despite the American origin of call centres. Overall, the paper draws attention to inadequacies in the paradigm focusing on the global spread of English, while lending support to recent theoretical suggestions to focus instead on how practices and styles are exported globally and potentially independently of language.

Abstract in Danish

Denne artikel identificerer en særlig 'relationsskabende' samtalestil som

foreskrives til callcentermedarbejdere i fire lande, Danmark, Storbritannien,

Hong Kong og Filippinerne, uafhængigt af hvilket sprog der benyttes i

serviceinteraktionen. Herefter bliver danske og engelske

callcentermedarbejderes brug af den foreskrevne samtalestil sammenlignet, og

det vises at danske medarbejdere gør signifikant mindre brug af den end deres

britiske modparter. Det foreslås at dette skyldes at der råder forskellige

høflighedsnormer i de to kulturer. Artiklen diskuterer derefter indeksikaliteten af

den foreskrevne samtalestil, og argumenterer for at den i højere grad er

kommercielt end kulturelt kodet, på trods af callcentres amerikanske oprindelse.

I sin helhed gør artiklen opmærksom på utilstrækkeligheder i det paradigme der

fokuserer på hvordan engelsk breder sig globalt, mens den underbygger nylige

teoretiske forslag om i stedet at fokusere på hvordan praksisser og stile

eksporteres globalt og potentielt set uafhængigt af sprog.

Key words

globalization, style, call centres, politeness

Running title

'Building Rapport' across the World

Word count (excluding abstract, notes and references): 9619

INTRODUCTION

Research into the effects of globalization on language has traditionally focused on the way in which the English language either supplants or increasingly co-exists alongside other local languages in various globalized domains, such as business, politics or higher education (Nettle and Romaine 2002; Phillipson 1992; de Swaan 2001). However, globalization has effects on language which entail neither the replacement of a local language by English nor the juxtaposition of English alongside a local language. Such effects involve the exportation of a particular speech style independently of language. It is a case of people continuing to speak the language associated with their national or ethnic affiliation while engaging in a speech style which does not necessarily allude to the same nationality or ethnicity. What is exported globally is a linguistic style, not the language itself. Moreover, the style which is exported may not necessarily be associated with an English-speaking culture.

This is an important yet still not adequately recognized dimension of the sociolinguistics of globalization. Although sociolinguists are increasingly beginning to make way for some radically different conceptualizations of language, the language endangerment paradigm is still at large based in a conceptualization of languages as fixed systems. They are thus able to incorporate into their analyses only cases where a national or minority language is threatened by being replaced, usually by English, whether entirely within a nation state or within some delimited domains within this nation. What is overlooked is a focus on how a language may be influenced at some level within

the linguistic system without necessarily being replaced entirely. This paper lends empirical support to recent sociolinguist ideas which point out the inadequacies in focusing on language as a bounded system in the era of globalization (Blommaert 2010; Heller 2008; Pennycook 2010). For debates on language endangerment, such insights are crucial because they mean that in the face of the global expansion of English success or failure cannot solely be measured in terms of whether or not a national or minority language is maintained. There may be nuances between this which only emerge when we consider that a national language may well be retained while still being apparently heavily influenced by non-traditional features at the level of style. This paper, therefore, emphasizes the importance of focusing not only on language, but on style.

Despite the importance of the topic, the idea of a particular style or genre being exported independently of a language has not been studied extensively, possibly because it is not as obviously identifiable as the spread of the language itself. Some notable exceptions include Machin and van Leeuwen who examine 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. Similarly, contributors to Alim, Ibrahim and Pennycook (2009) describe how the globalized genre of hip hop is rendered in the local languages of countries such as Brazil, Tanzania, Quebec, Hong Kong and Japan. Kubota (2002), finally, mentions how the Westernized genres of 'debate' and a 'linear logic' style of writing are taught to Japanese learners of English to

adopt even when they write in Japanese. Such work all demonstrates how a style or genre is being exported globally rather than a language per se.

One of the greatest debates in the field of the sociolinguistics of globalization arguably pertains to the way in which globalizing pressures are reacted to locally (Blommaert 2010; Pennycook 2010). Insofar as globalization entails cultural and linguistic homogenization, it may lead at the local level to wholehearted acceptance, full-blown resistance and everything in-between, the latter which is captured in the concept of 'glocalization' (contributors to Featherstone and Lash 1995). In parts, such debates may be down to the data which one chooses to focus on. Two works may serve to exemplify this. Pennycook (2010), an eager proponent of focusing on the local level, uses as data hip hop practices to argue that these are practiced and repeated variously in different locations across the globe rather than deriving from some common globalized core. Machin and van Leeuwen (2003), by contrast, stress that although they do discover variations in the various local editions of the magazine *Cosmopolitan*, the overall generic structure of the magazine is the same. Where one examines the micro-level local practices of sub cultures (Pennycook), the other examines the macro-level activity of a big global media institution, which is subject to editorial processes which deliberately aim to promote a uniform style across the different local editions of the magazine (Machin and van Leeuwen). Thus, the data in certain ways sets the agenda for whether the focus is on the local or the global.

I suggest that the data on which this paper builds – data collected from the globalized call centre industry – provides us with an unprecedented opportunity to focus our attention on the global and the local level at one and the same time and thus understand the complex ways in which they interact. The call centre industry engage in exceptionally wide-ranging activities of prescribing and enforcing rules for the linguistic behaviour of call centre workers in their interactions with customers (Cameron 2000b). At the same time, call centres are now widely diffused in countries across the globe and in each location they contain a rich source of linguistic data as call centre workers do almost nothing else but interacting with customers over the phone. I submit that such prescriptive material in combination with descriptive material, i.e. the extent to which prescriptions are adhered to in reality, provides a unique opportunity to shed light on both the global and the local by seeking answers to the hotly debated questions:

1) Does globalization cause linguistic and cultural homogenization?

2) What are the local interpretations of and reactions to such possible homogenizing pressures?

This paper seeks to shed light on these questions by analysing and comparing linguistic data from the globalized service economy, more specifically call centres located in four countries: Britain, Denmark, Hong Kong and the Philippines. The overall aim is to identify a possible diffusion of a globally prescribed call centre style and what more specifically this might consist of. It also seeks to investigate how such a possibly globally prescribed style may be interpreted and reacted to

in the four countries included in the study. I start by providing some background information on call centres and how their notion of style relates to traditional sociolinguistic conceptions of style. I then describe the data and methods used before I attempt to answer the research questions in the analysis proper. I conclude by considering what the findings presented here might contribute to the ongoing theorization of the sociolinguistics of globalization.

CALL CENTRES, GLOBALIZATION AND STYLING

Call centres are examples par excellence of the tenet that globalization means increased homogenization, and in particular Americanization of the world (Phillipson 1992; Ritzer 2004). It is widely recognized that the US, being the world's number one economy, has been a motor force in capitalist expansion since the end of the second world war and in the last few decades in particular (Sennett 2006). Call centres, as an organizational prototype, derive from the US, where the first call centre was reportedly set up in the 1960s (Bagnara and Marti 2001) as a cost-effective solution to customer interaction. They have since spread rapidly to numerous countries around the world through a process of rationalization, a driving force in globalization (Ritzer 2004). In practice this means that in terms of operational procedures, staff profile and technology reliance, call centres across the world tend to be remarkably similar (Bain and Taylor 2000). Considerable resources are devoted to 'locational masking' (Mirchandani 2004), i.e. endeavours to disguise to the customer that the agent is located in India, the Philippines, or somewhere else. Agents in off-shore call

centres, who serve US-based customers, e.g., may be asked to adopt American

accents (or at least to neutralize their local accent), emulate an American

conversational style and refer to themselves using American-sounding

pseudonyms (Cowie 2007; Mirchandani 2004). They may also receive 'culture

training' which can take the form of subjecting them to the screening of

American sitcoms or soap operas (Landler 2001). In short, being iconic of global

capitalist expansion, call centres are ideal candidates for a 'mediating institution',

i.e. a vehicle which serves as diffusing a particular type of language globally

(Blommaert 2003).

Call centres also engage in very explicit activities of styling (Cameron

2000b), which make them potentially highly illuminating in view of identifying a

possible globalized speech style. Styling involves corporate practices prescribing

to call centre workers how they must speak in interactions with customers. Such

rules are encoded in documents, taught in communication training programmes

and enforced in call assessments and extensive resources are committed to this.

The notion of styling and style in call centres is both different and similar to other

ways of defining style within sociolinguistics. The most important difference is

that it is not the individual speaker who (consciously or unconsciously) engages

in a particular kind of style (Coupland 1984; House 2006; Rampton 1995), rather

it is the corporation to which the speaker belongs which defines it for them. It is

thus a top down, rather than a community-based sort of styling (Cameron 2008).

In terms of substance, it has perhaps least in common with Labov's (1972)

classical understanding of style as representing a speaker's modification of their

speech according to the perceived formality of the situation. It has more in common with those who regard style modification as a (deliberate or not) strategy by workers to advance their commercial interests (e.g. Coupland 1984), bearing in mind, however, that in the call centre the style is specified at a corporate level. In call centres such commercial interests can be boiled down to two: the need for workers to be at one and the same time efficient and provide a good customer service. As we shall see, providing a good customer service is often the overt ideology, whereas being efficient is the covert, though in reality often more important one (Hultgren and Cameron 2010). Finally, the call centre style also bears some points of resemblance with notions of style which involve incorporating features from a different ethnic group, such as a White person mimicking the style of Blacks (e.g. Rampton 1995) or language learners retaining the style of their native language when they communicate in their target language (House 2006), once again considering, though, that the styling in call centres occurs at a corporate level. Based on what we know about call centres and styling so far, we might hypothesize that we are going to find extensive similarities in the corporate style prescribed to call centre workers in Britain, Denmark, Hong Kong and the Philippines.

Yet budding work in the sociolinguistics of globalization has taught us that we cannot take for granted that globalization will necessarily cause the same effects, interpretations and reactions in the particular locales where it strikes (Blommaert 2003; Blommaert 2010). There is no shortage of anecdotal evidence to suggest local resistance to multinational corporations exporting their largely

North-American service norms abroad. When McDonald's opened its first restaurant in Moscow, the American-style friendliness and informality adopted by workers 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 (Cameron 2000a; Fineman 2000; Forman 1998; Kiełkiewicz-Janowiak and Pawelczyk 2008). Furthermore, it may not necessarily be the case that America continues to be the main motor force behind capitalist expansion. Spanish, e.g., has made a comeback in the Philippines as call centres are set up to serve the Spanish-speaking world. On this basis, we might predict that the association between a possible global call centre style and Americanization is not straightforward. Let us bear this in mind, when we now turn to an examination of the data.

DATA AND ANALYTIC METHODS

Data for this article was collected from four countries: Britain (UK), Denmark (DK), Hong Kong (HK) and the Philippines (PH) (see Table 1). In Britain (more specifically Scotland) and Denmark I collected data from inbound call centres, i.e. calls are customer-initiated and are to do with customer inquiries of various kinds (as opposed to 'outbound' call centres in which the calls are made by the call centre often with a clear 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, UK English in the former and Danish in the latter. The Hong Kong call centre is inbound and in the finance sector. The onshore/offshore classification is not straightforward; it is onshore from the point of view that agents are based in Hong Kong and serve Hong Kong-based customers, 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. Finally, the data obtained from the Philippines was created by a consultancy firm specialized in providing communication material for the call centre industry. This material is generically designed to suit inbound off-shore call centres with a wide range of specializations; hence the term 'unspecified' in the column 'specialization'. The material collected from the Philippines is the only out of the set which is aimed at off-shore call centres, i.e. the agents communicate in a language other than their first, in this case with customers based in the US. 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. Nevertheless, as we shall see, the prescribed style is remarkably similar across the four sets of material.

[Table 1 here]

Since the aim of this study was to explore both the possible globalization of a call centre style as well as local reactions to it, two types of data were collected: prescriptive and descriptive. The prescriptive data consists of written material (communication training material, customer service manuals, score cards used in call assessments, agent performance reports, memos), interviews with call centre managers, agents and customer service consultants (56 in total), field note observations of call assessments and participation in three call centre conferences worldwide. The descriptive data consists of audio-recorded and transcribed customer service interactions (79 in Britain and 108 in Denmark) and field notes from observations of work practices. The above-mentioned interviews also served to gain a more in-depth understanding of behaviour. Where prescriptive data has been collected from all four countries, descriptive data was obtained from Britain and Denmark only, due to constraints on access.

In the analysis of the prescriptive material, stylistic features which re-occurred across the country-specific material were identified. The method used to analyse the descriptive data involved identifying rules which were prescribed to call centre agents in both Britain and Denmark, operationalizing these and then scoring agents on a binary categorical division according to whether or not they complied with the prescription. If the nature of a call made a particular rule irrelevant, which would be the case for example when a caller not being put on hold would annul the possibility of the agent informing the caller that they would be put on hold, the call has been excluded from the analysis. Mean rule

adherence by British and Danish agents was calculated and non-parametric (Mann-Whitney U) tests were carried out to verify statistical significance. The rationale for the statistical tests was to provide a reliable and objective warrant for any differences that might emerge between the two cultures (for a more elaborate defence of quantitative methods, see Hultgren 2008). In cases for which a statistically significant difference between British and Danish agents was found, subsequent qualitative analyses were carried out in search of an explanation for the observed difference.

Before I proceed to the analysis proper, it is necessary to introduce a couple of analytic concepts. The first is a theoretical distinction between 'interactional' talk (talk which serves to maintain social relations) and 'transactional' talk (talk which serves to exchange information between speakers) (Kaspar 1990) (though in reality the distinction is not tenable). It shall become clear in the analysis to come, that although the prescribed speech style can be analysed as serving both functions, there is considerable emphasis on the interactional level. Another analytic concept which I will draw on is 'positive' versus 'negative politeness'. In conventional politeness theory (for suggested revisions of this theory, see e.g. Eelen 2001; Mills 2003; Watts 2003), devised by Brown and Levinson in book-form 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. We shall see that while the

prescriptions in all four countries incorporate elements of both positive and

negative politeness strategies, the overwhelming emphasis in on positive

politeness.

BUILDING RAPPORT WITH CUSTOMERS ACROSS THE WORLD

In this section, I present a comparison of the stylistic prescriptions in the four call

centres that are the focus of this analysis. The main argument I develop is that

despite the fact that the prescriptive material is intended for call centre agents in

four different countries who in combination communicate in six different

languages or language varieties, the prescribed speech style is remarkably

similar. While it incorporates both transactional and interactional functions, the

focus on the interactional level is particularly noticeable. The concern with the

interactional function corroborates the well-documented shift to a preference

for informality or positive politeness in public discourse (Cameron 2000a;

Fairclough 1992); or 'building rapport' which is the call centre industry's own way

of putting it. A secondary point which will emerge is that although it is possible

to identify a distinct global call centre style, there is also evidence of subtle local inflections of this style.

To begin with, agents in all four call centres are advised to make callers feel as if they are listened to (see Table 2; the Danish material, being the only set which is not originally in English, has been translated from Danish by the author). 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. Moreover, the interpersonal function which is preferred appears to be positive politeness, of which showing an interest in the hearer and their needs is a key feature (Brown and Levinson 1987). 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.

[Table 2 here]

Related to making callers feel listened to is the notion 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. One purpose of such confirmations relates to the previously mentioned principle of efficiency; obviously, making sure that a query is correctly understood will reduce this risk of misunderstandings and thereby increase the chances of a smooth and speedy processing of the call. Another possible interpretation of the importance of 'understanding', however, is its coexisting function as an interpersonal device, more particularly one that is intended to signal to the customer that they are being understood, cared for, and attended to. Hence, this too is interpretable as a positive politeness strategy.

[Table 3 here]

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). 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.

[Table 4 here]

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 (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 analysable 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 emphasizes positive politeness.

[Table 5 here]

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). 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).

[Table 6 here]

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 (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 rapport, the abstract equivalent of small talk, is a frequently reoccurring feature throughout the material, and may be established by 'easing the caller's nervousness'. 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. 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).

[Table 7 here]

In the above I have drawn attention to the many affinities between the prescribed speech style in call centres located in four different countries. While I have suggested that there may be slight local inflections of the global norm, I hope I have managed to convince the reader that the general format is largely the same everywhere. There is a strong emphasis on the interactional level of talk, and, more specifically, an apparent preference for positive politeness. To a sociolinguist, what is particularly noteworthy about this analysis are the similarities in the prescribed speech style irrespective of the language being spoken. Globalization has, it seems, revivified 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 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, see also Machin and van Leeuwen 2003, 2004). In sum, then, the answer to the first research question appears to be yes. If one focuses on the level of style in the service sector, globalization does seem to equate linguistic and cultural homogenization.

The focus so far has been on the extent to which the linguistic features under analysis are globally prescribed. No doubt, it is also relevant to examine the extent to which these prescriptions, and their possible local variations, are appropriate in each locality outside of the call centre context. In the 'fast-paced commercial society' of Hong Kong (Liu 2009: 91), for instance, the principle of efficiency makes elaborate facework inappropriate, which is in line with traditional Chinese politeness conventions in interactions between strangers (Scollon and Scollon 1991, Kong 1998). In the Philippines, on the other hand, Friginal exemplifies how a Filipino call centre agent draws on Filipino cultural norms of deference and respect which makes him come across as overly apologetic towards an American customer who impatiently retorts: 'Don't apologize, just fix it!' (2008: 61). The reaction of the American customer ironically suggests a preference for a prompt and efficient service to excessive and superficial verbiage. The next section analyses in more detail the extent to which the global prescriptions are deemed to be compatible with the larger socio-cultural conventions of the specific localities. Because of constraints on access to research sites, however, which in call centres are known to be particularly draconian (Bain and Taylor 2000; Cameron 2000a), the discussion will focus on data collected from Scotland and Denmark only.

LOCAL REACTIONS TO THE GLOBALLY PRESCRIBED SPEECH STYLE
In this 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. A quantitative analysis which compared rule compliance between British and Danish agents revealed a statistically significant difference for four out of a total eight rules which these two call centres shared. The reason for the non-difference in four of the cases could be attributable to the rule in question being complied with too infrequently for a statistically significant difference to emerge. This was the case for two of the rules which prescribes to agents to end the transaction with a 'personal endnote' (e.g. 'Have a nice day!') or thanking the customer for their call. For the other two rules with no difference between the two countries (the prescriptions to 'provide a summary of the interaction' and to engage in 'active listening') the lack of difference appeared real in that there is, to my knowledge, no other evidence that such behaviour varies across cultures. For four of the eight variables, however, a statistically significant difference between the two countries did emerge: 'greeting', 'acknowledgement', 'hold notification', and 'check understanding'. The interesting thing to note about these differences is that they invariably point in the same direction. British agents adhere more to the linguistic rules 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 British one, which we might expect to create more opportunities to obey the rules.

[Figure 1 here]

Why do British and Danish call centre agents differ in their degree of compliance with the linguistic prescription? One explanation for this could be differences in the cultural 'ethos' (Brown and Levinson 1987) of British and

Danish speakers, more specifically a difference in their respective preference for a 'transactional' and 'interactional' speech style (Kaspar 1990), bearing in mind that cultural generalizations may be overly crude (Brown and Levinson 1987; Rampton 1995). More specifically, Danish agents appear unwilling to engage interpersonally with the customer and seem to perceive the service exchange as purely a business transaction. British speakers, by contrast, do not appear – at least not in the specific context of a service exchange – to shy away from an interactional speech style. In addition, it could be the case that the British speakers' cultural 'ethos' of negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987; Stewart 2005) enables them to work around a potential problem of over-familiarity. More precisely, they may compensate for possibly excessive use of positive politeness by simultaneously engaging in a high degree of negative politeness strategies.

In a paper which basically argues for the deconstruction of an essentialist understanding of 'language', it may come across as ironical that cultural categories of 'Danishness' and 'Britishness' are invoked to account for an observed difference in linguistic behaviour. However, people still talk about both languages, nations and cultures as fixed and nameable which suggests that these entities clearly still exist on a representational level. It is not thereby clear, of course, that they necessarily influence (linguistic) behaviour, and if so how. Nevertheless, the comparative analysis in this paper revealed some striking and statistically significant differences in parts of the linguistic behaviour of the Danish and the British call centre agents, which must be accounted for. While it

cannot be excluded that these differences are attributable to other potentially confounding variables, the most convincing explanatory factor seems to be ethnoculture. Because call centres worldwide, including the two under scrutiny here, tend to be remarkably similar in terms of both staff demographics and work procedures (Belt, Richardson and Webster 2000; Taylor and Bain 2005) other potentially confounding variables are held constant. Below, three examples will illustrate the idea of cultural differences (A=Agent; C=Caller.)

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, who, 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. Danish agents do not seem to be as attuned to the prescriptions as their British 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 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 of for the sake of speeding up call processing.

[Table 8 here]

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 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 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, British 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* 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.

[Table 9 here]

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 preference of style 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 by their British counterparts and they tend to skip the last bit. Once again, then, it seems that the Danish agents are more concerned with a speedy call processing than with the interpersonally oriented rules prescribed in the material. The British agents, also in line with previous suggestions, engage in a more negatively polite style in which they emphasize the asymmetrical relationship that exists 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 interpersonal level of talk simply from the point of view that it requires more words to engage in face work.

[Table 10 here]

The data presented here seems to indicate that the globally prescribed call centre style is not received with the same level of embracement in Denmark and Britain. I have suggested that this may be because of a preference by Danish workers to engage in a more transactional than interactional style of speaking, which was 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.

I did not in the British call centre come across such explicitly expressed dislikes of the use of first naming. Perhaps this is because the British agents, grounded in their cultural ethos of negative politeness, may draw on negative politeness strategies to counterbalance the requirement to engage in positive politeness, as was suggested in the analysis above. When British agents are required to use the customer's name, they have the possibility to use title and last name to reduce the risk of coming across as too personal while still complying with the regulation. This option is not available to the Danish agents, as the use of title and last name is virtually obsolete in Denmark. There is overwhelming evidence from interlanguage and cross-cultural pragmatics that cultures vary extensively in issues regarding politeness, not least the degree to which they tolerate phatic communication (Fredsted 2005) or use of first naming (Bargiela, Boz, Gokzadze,

Hamza, Mills and Rukhadze 2002). It appears, then, that the globally prescribed preference for positive politeness, which is exported via capitalist expansion, may be at odds with local customs.

While it is clear that there are remarkable similarities in the style prescribed in the four call centres, it is not clear how this style is best understood, i.e. what social category it indexes. Cameron (2000b), e.g., has argued that it has many features in common with the style that Lakoff identified as an ideal 'women's way of speaking'. For instance, call centre agents today are expected to engage in a speech style that conveys enthusiasm, use minimal responses, create rapport and empathy, ask questions, and smile, as were women nearly forty years ago (Lakoff 1973). This gendered association, however, need not be the only thing that this style indexes. In another discussion, Cameron (2000a) suggests that US preferences for informality are being exported to Britain both because many US companies do business in the UK and because many perceive of US service as superior to that of the UK. This was clearly the case in the Hong Kong call centre in this study where a manager openly expressed a preference for 'doing it the US way'. Indeed, as mentioned, call centres as an organizational blueprint originated in the US in the 1960s and have since spread rapidly to the rest of the world through a process of global rationalization (Ritzer 2004). This, then, would suggest that the style originated in the US.

On the other hand, just as Cameron (2000b) found was the case for gender, the link between the prescribed speech style and its indexicality, in this

case 'Americanization', is not, on the whole, explicitly made by those who work in the call centres. In the Danish call centre, the only time the US was referred to was when I myself brought it up in an interview with a worker. This prompted her to reveal that a US customer service expert, who had been consulted by the management, had instructed agents to use the phrase 'tak for dit opkald', which directly calques the North-American expression 'thanks for your call'. (Though, of course, the fact that a US expert was consulted in the first place does at one level reaffirm the provenance of the identified style in the US.) Nor did the agents in the British call centre apparently perceive of the prescribed style as originating from a particular country. Here, the opening greeting had just been changed from 'Can I help you' to 'How may I help you?', arguably an Americanism (Cameron 2000a). The cultural association, however, went unremarked in interviews where the reason for the change was said to be because the latter is more polite. It is revealing too that the customer service material used in the Danish call centre was created by a consultancy based in Australia and the one intended for the Philippine call centre industry was created by a British-owned company in the Philippines. (The national identity of the consultancy used by the Scottish call centre was confidential.) This seems to suggest that if the style ever indexed Americanization, it may have lost (some of) its cultural association along the way and is now better understood as a style which is specific to the globalized service economy (see also Cowie 2007; Sonntag 2009). All in all, then, and in answer to the second research question 'What are the local interpretations of and reactions to homogenizing pressures?', it appears that

while there does seem to be a global agreement on what constitutes an appropriate 'call centre style', it is not received with the same level of embracement in the two countries. Nor is its association with a particular culture, or any other social category, overtly recognized by the people working in the industry.

CONCLUSION

This paper has described the way in which a particular linguistic style is diffused globally and interpreted and reacted to locally. What is most noteworthy is that the style is being exported independently of language. It is not a case of making everyone speak the same dominant language, but rather to let them speak their own language in a style not necessarily alluding to the same ethno-cultural identity. In this paper, which focuses on the globalized service industry, the particular way of speaking is perhaps not as culturally as economico-ideologically marked, promoting a particular philosophy of, at one and the same time, rationalization and 'customer care'. This philosophy overtly promotes a 'Customer is King' philosophy, while covertly favouring rationalization, cost-effectiveness and profit generation. Although this style may originally derive from North-American cultural preferences for informality and rapport, it may have lost some of its cultural association along the way and now seems to be considered more a 'call centre style' in its own right. For the branch of language and globalization which deals with the global spread of English, whether from a perspective of linguistic imperialism, linguistic rights or language endangerment

(Nettle and Romaine 2002; Phillipson 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas 2009) this means bearing in mind that the spread of English need not entail the complete annihilation of a local language, but influences at the level of style. If we base our analysis on a mere enumeration of languages, then we lose something vital. Yet the data presented here very much corroborates the assumption in this body of literature that the spread of English is attributable to a great extent to capitalist forces. In sum, a sociolinguistics of globalization needs to both shift its attention away from language as a fixed system while at the same time retaining its hallmark critical capacities to enable it to accurately identify the forces behind the exportation of a particular global style.

NOTES

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TABLES

Table 1 Overview of call centre types included in the study

Call centre location	Speciali- zation	On/ Offshore	Language of service interaction	Agent's first language
Britain	Insurance	Onshore	UK English	English
Denmark	Telecom	Onshore	Danish	Danish
Hong Kong	Finance	On- /offshore	Cantonese (88-94%) English (5-10%) Mandarin (1-2%)	Cantonese
Philippines	Unspecified	Offshore	US English	Tagalog

Table 2 The prescription to engage in 'active listening'

Britain	Denmark	Danish language version	Hong Kong	Philippines
Listening skills: The agent verbally nods during customer explanations, e.g. urgh huh,	The agent must engage in active listening, for instance by recapping what has been said, or	Kunderådgiveren skal udvise aktiv lytning, f. eks. ved at gentage hvad der er sagt, eller med lyde a la: 'mmm', 'aha', 'ja', etc.	Adhere to listening skills. *Identify real needs:* • listen, listen	*The specific objectives of the programme are to:* • develop active listening

Britain	Denmark	Danish language version	Hong Kong	Philippines
right, OK, I see. The agent uses key phrases that demonstrate active listening.	with sounds such as 'mhm', 'uh-huh', 'yes', etc. Did the agent give the customer the opportunity to specify their problem without interrupting them?	Gav kunderådgiveren kunden mulighed for at specificere sit problem uden at afbryde vedkommende?	and listen • active listening (verbal, non-verbal).	and predictive listening skills 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.

Table 3 The prescription to 'understand the customer'

Britain	Denmark	Danish language version	Hong Kong	Philippines
The agent	The agent	Kunderådgiver	Confirming	*An active*

summarizes own understanding of situation to ensure everything is correct before offering a solution.

Checks own understanding with the customer. | must confirm that the decision/ solution is satisfactory, e.g. confirm the decision for the solution that has been agreed upon, get the caller's approval [...]

Did the agent ask at least two questions to establish the exact problem of the customer's situation? | en 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 [...]

Stillede kunderådgiver en mindst to spørgsmål for | and committing: Check understanding and seek agreement.

Use of paraphrases to confirm understanding. | *listening response can have two parts:*
1. The first 'mirrors' the emotion: 'I understand your frustration'.
2. The second restates the problem: 'that you haven't received your claim form yet'. |

		at klarlægge den eksakte problemstilling af kundens situation?		'I totally understand your anxiety, I'd be XXX too'.

Table 4 The prescription to 'avoid jargon'

Britain	Denmark	Danish language version	Hong Kong	Philippines
The agent avoids phrases such as • back office • delivery area • any dept or team name • processing team • admin	The agent must *not* use technical terms or internal jargon in connection with their explanations of the issue/problem.	Kunderådgiveren må *ikke* bruge tekniske termer eller en indforstået jargon i forbindelse med deres forklaring vedr. sagen/problemet.	Avoid using jargon. Avoid being too technical.	*Simplifying jargon:* 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.
team. The agent mirrors the customer's language and terminology, e.g. 'cash in your policy' rather than 'you wish to surrender the your policy'.				

Table 5 The prescription to 'signpost'

Britain	Denmark	Danish language version	Hong Kong	Philippines
Signpost: The agent advises the customer	The agent must repeat what is important	Kunderådgiveren skal gentage det vigtige i forhold til konklusionen	Use of appropriate techniques: • Headlining.	'Just to summarize then, Sir…'

what they are going to do, e.g. 'Firstly, I need to look at your details Mr/Mrs Customer'. 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...'	with regard to the conclusion of the interaction, e.g. 'To repeat, I will...', 'We have solved your problem and talked about...' If the customer was put on hold, did the agent inform them that • They	af samtalen, f. eks. 'For at gentage vil jeg...', 'Vi har løst dit problem og talt om...' Hvis kunden blev sat på hold, underrettede kunderådgiveren om: • At han/hun satte kunden på hold? • Kunden vil høre lidt musik, mens han/hun bliver sat på hold/venter.	You need to tell [the customer] why you are giving them information.	Make sure you give feedback on the phone to let the caller know you are there!

	would
	
	be put
	
	on hold?
	
	• That
	   music
	   would
	   be
	   played
	   while
	   they
	   were on
	   hold.			

Table 6 The prescription to 'empathize'

Britain	Denmark	Danish language version	Hong Kong	Philippines
The agent uses words that demonstrate empathy and understandin	The agent must acknowledge the problem, e.g. 'I understand	Kunderådgiveren skal vedkende sig kendskab til problemet, f. eks. 'Jeg forstår dit problem', 'Jeg	[There must be a] 'Show of empathy'. [The agent	Emotional and frustrated callers want us to empathize with their

g when appropriate, e.g. 'I understand that must be really frustrating for you', 'I'm sorry you've had that experience'. Check customer accepts the solution and now understands the action they/the advisor will take, e.g.	your problem', 'I will help you with the case/problem'. It is, largely, about empathy.	vil hjælpe dig med sagen/problemet' Det handler i store træk om empati.	says] 'We understand that this is difficult, but we are here to help you'.	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.' 'Oh that's too bad. I understand your frustration. Let me see what I can do to help.'

'Does that make sense now, Mr/Mrs Customer?', 'How do you feel about that now?'				

Table 7 The prescription to 'small talk'

Britain	Denmark	Danish language version	Hong Kong	Philippines
There needs to be obvious signs of rapport built into the call by saying or doing something which is not ordinarily	Did the agent give a friendly/polite good-bye, e.g. 'Goodbye, have a nice weekend', 'Goodbye	Gav kunderådgiveren et 'venligt/høfligt farvel'/ afskedshilsen? F. eks. 'Farvel, ha' en god	Establish trust and rapport: • Ease the caller's nervous-ness.	Small talk: Your role as a professional communicator is to build up a relationship with your callers on the phone. You want them to

[done] in business calls, e.g. • ask how the caller is at the start of the call • enquire about the weather • pick up on special events • seize the opportunity to make conversation. Where there is no obvious opportunity	and have a nice trip', etc.	weekend', 'Farvel og ha en god tur', etc.		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. Use warm phrases, e.g. 'You're most welcome'

then you must give your name and use caller name a minimum of twice during the call.				

Table 8 Prescribed and actual greetings in Britain and Denmark

	Britain	Denmark	Danish language version
Prescribed greeting	• Correct greeting used by consultant. • Good morning/good afternoon [company name] how may I help you.	The agent must answer with the correct [company name] greeting which includes first and last name. [It] *must* be: 'Welcome to customer services, you are speaking with [first and last name]'.	Kunderådgiveren skal svare med den korrekte [firmanavn]hilsen, som inkluderer for- og efternavn, *skal* være: 'Velkommen til kundeservice, du taler med [for- og efternavn]'.
Actual	good afternoon	welcome to customer	velkommen til

greetings	[company name] how may I help you	services Birgitte Lund	Kundeservice Birgitte Lund
	good afternoon [company name] how may I help you	customer services it is Martin Brydesen	Kundeservice det er Martin Brydesen

Table 9 Prescribed and actual acknowledgements in Britain and Denmark

	Britain	Denmark	Danish language version
Prescribed acknow-ledgement	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'.	The agent must acknowledge the caller's problem, e.g. 'I understand your problem', 'I will help you with the case/problem'.	Kunderådgiveren skal vedkende sig kendskab til problemet, f. eks. 'Jeg forstår dit problem', 'Jeg vil hjælpe dig med sagen/problemet'.
Actual acknow-ledge	C: erhm and I'm just curious that there's no sign of this fifteen thousand [a lump	C: I have erh or my mobile phone has been locked	C: jeg har øh eller min mobiltelefon er

ments	sum payment promised by the company for which the caller no longer works] and when I spoke to your colleague yesterday afternoon he *confirmed* that there's no sign of it in your system now that bothers me slightly because... **A:** yeah absolutely well I'll have a look and see if I can trace anything for you	because I've reached the call limit **A:** yes **C:** and then I just wanted to check that it's going to be reopened today **A:** try to give me your mobile number	spærret på grund af jeg har saldomaks **A:** ja **C:** og så vil jeg bare lige høre om det ikke er i dag at den bliver åbnet igen **A:** prøv at give mig dit mobilnummer
	C: oh hello erhm I was speaking to Lucy Welsh last week **A:** yes **C:** who was gonna get some figures out to me and erh I'm just trying to find out **A:** alright **C:** what happened with them	**C:** it [making calls] is not working and I don't have any money left on my phone because I come from Choice [another phone	**C:** det virker ikke og jeg har ikke flere penge på min telefon for jeg kommer fra Choice **A:** hvilket øh mobilnummer har du på den

	please	company]
	A: yes o- of course I do apologise you had to phone *twice* for the same matter let me find out what's happening with your information	**A:** what erh mobile number do you have on it

Table 10 Prescribed and actual hold notifications in Britain and Denmark

	Britain	Denmark	Danish language version
Prescribed hold notifica-tion	The agent asks caller's permission to put them on hold.	The agent must inform the caller that they are being put on hold, *and* that music will be played while they are on hold.	Kunderådgiveren skal både fortælle at kunden bliver sat på hold, *og* at der vil høres musik i ventetiden.
Actual hold notifica-	**A:** OK erhm I'll just check that [the timeframe for receiving	**A:** what's the customer number on that invoice	**A:** hvad er kundenummeret på den regning

tions	an insurance claim] for you just now	C: the customer number I'll just find it here it- it's 344	C: kundenummeret skal jeg lige finde her den h- det hedder 344
	C: OK	A: yes	A: ja
	A: if that's OK	C: 393	C: 393
	C: yes certainly	A: yes	A: ja
	A: are you OK to hold for a minute	C: 909	C: 909
		A: just a moment	A: lige et øjeblik
	A: hold on a second are you OK to hold then I can check your …	A: that's fine then if you take the mobile	A: det er godt så hvis du tager mobilen
	C: certainly	C: yes	C: ja
	A: erh check the files and see if I can get any further information on this one for you	A: and press […] then it should say something there that I need to know	A: og trykker […] så skulle der gerne stå noget der jeg lige skal bede om
	C: certainly yes certainly	C: it does	C: det gør der også
	A: I'll be back with you as quickly as I can	A: yes	A: ja
		C: it says V space 03 dot 14	C: der står V mellemrum 03 punktum 14

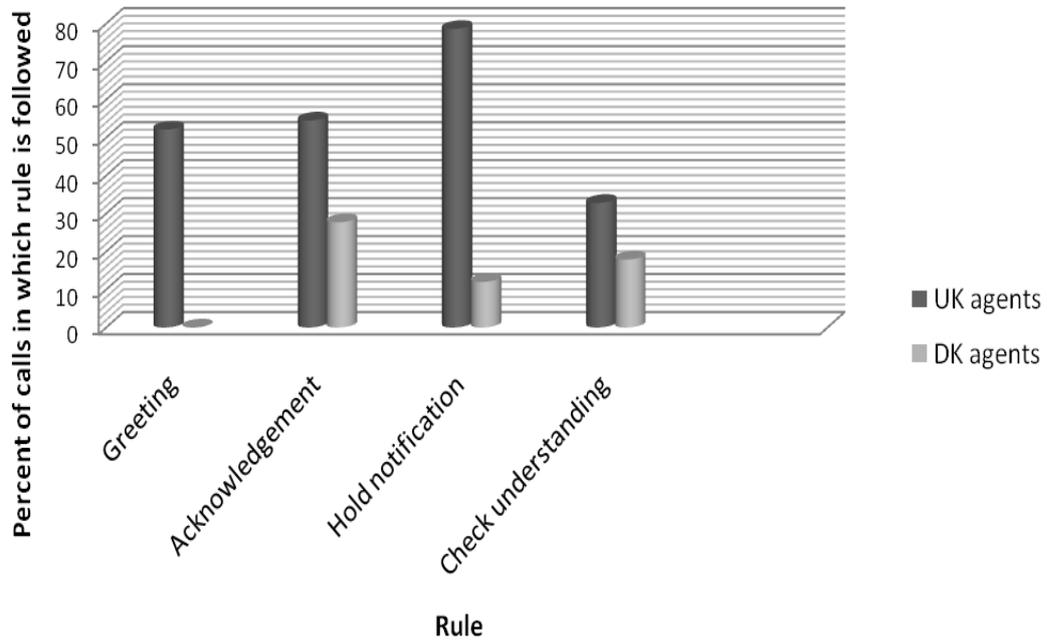|		**A:** fine just one moment then	**A:** godt lige et øjeblik så

FIGURES

Figure 1 British and Danish agents' rule adherence (only rules with a statistically

significant difference included)