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The Effect of Gender on Politeness Using Watts' Theory in Customer Service Outsourcing Call Centers: A Socio-pragmatic Study

M.A. Thesis

Submitted 2018 by

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To

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**To the angelic souls of
My Grandma & My Uncle
Who left our world peacefully**

Abstract

The current study explores the language of outsourcing customer service call centers involving Egyptian call-takers and Canadian callers interacting in various types of communicative tasks [e.g., troubleshooting a technical problem or processing/placing orders for products or services] and communicating in English as a Lingua Franca. The main goal of the study is to conduct a corpus based conversation analysis of transcribed calls of outsourcing call center interactions to show to what extent linguistic politeness is applied to the customer/agent interaction according to Watts' (2003) politeness theory. Moreover, it measures the effect of gender on politeness in the interaction. The data for analysis includes 36 calls divided into 4 groups; Female Customer-Female Agent, Female Customer-Male Agent, Male Customer-Female Agent and Male Customer-Male Agent. The data has been collected randomly from an outsourcing call center company located in Cairo, Egypt, as all the subjects are Egyptian Agents and Canadian Customers. The results of the study confirm that the gender factor and the linguistic politeness in outsourcing call centers have important implications for the study of language. The results show that 63% of the calls use the politic behavior, 29.8% use the polite behavior and only 7.2% use the impolite behavior. Thus, agents who depend on the gender to handle their customers tend to use im(polite) behavior, while agents who do not count on the gender factor tend more to use the politic behavior. Finally, the functional features, distribution, and statistical results of linguistic data presented in the current study would have potentially useful application in the design and implementation of training programs for agents in outsourcing call centers specifically those located in Egypt serving Canadian customers.

KEY WORDS: Gender, Politeness, Outsourcing, Customer service, Call centers

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Samar Assem

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A Table of Conventional Phonological Transcription of the Call

Symbol	Meaning
(.), (0.4)	Pause
[the point where overlapping talk starts
]	the point where overlapping talk ends
?	Rising intonation
,	Continuing intonation
.	Falling intonation
AAfrican	Loud voice
Wo-rd	Stressed syllable
☺word ☺	Spoken with smile voice
H	Breathing
°word°	Spoken in softer voice than environment
·h, hhhh	In breath
(h)	Laughter token in word

(Hutchby&Wooffitt, 2002)

Key Definitions

Term	Definition
Call center	An organized system of employees, technologies, and techniques that facilitates an interactional channel between the organization and the customers (Cleveland, 2006)
Sup-call	When the customer asks to talk to a supervisor because he has a problem or a complaint regarding the agent or the company. (Informants) .
Thank you call	It refers to a situation when a customer asks to talk to supervisor to show how much he/she is satisfied with the agent's performance he/she is talking to (Informants) .
Quality	Set of rules and standards set by the company that the agent should follow, and it is the internal evaluation of the company for its agents. Every single call taken by every single agent is monitored by the quality coaches who grade the call. A fall in quality could cause an agent to be fired on the spot. (Informants) .
Outsourcing	Getting goods or services from external providers aiming at reducing cost and raising service quality. In business process outsourcing (BPO), a client's business process is performed by another company. The company takes the responsibility to manage the client's business processes (Lacity &Hirschheim, 1993).
Politic Behavior	The linguistic or nonlinguistic ritual behavior that is appropriate to a specific community of practice (Watts,2003).
(im)polite behavior	The behavior which is beyond what is required by the community of practice, it could be more (polite) or less (impolite) (Watts, 2003).
Gender	It is socially formed through the relationships between the individuals of the society and through an individual's adherence to specific cultural norms. Difference between the term sex and gender is that; the term sex is biological (Meyerhoff, 2011).
C-sat	It is an exterior evaluation sent to the customer after the call in order to measure their satisfaction about the agent's performance and the company in general. The C-sat percentage is divided into green which is above 80%, yellow which is above 50% and red which is less than 50%.According to the company policy both of the red and green surveys are equal and each red or yellow survey needs 4 green surveys to compensate (Informants) .

A LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Description
AHT	Average handling time which is the duration an agent should take to handle customers every day. It should be between 5 to 7 minutes not more. If the agent's AHT is more than 7 minutes, it could be a problem (Bergevin, Kinder, Siegel & Simpson, 2010).
FYI	Stands for "for your information" as some agents specifically who use the robotic style, offer a new device or a new service to the customer using this way of delivering information which is something refused from the quality side and could cause the customer dissatisfaction (Informants).
FCR	Stands for first call resolution as the agent should do his/her best to solve the customer's issue from the call, not to make the customer call back for the same problem within a specific period of time (Bergevin et al., 2010).
HT	Holding time when the agent puts the customer on hold to check some resources or solve an issue to the customer. It should be 2 minutes at a time, even if the agent could talk more than that, he has to refresh the customer every 2 minutes and put him/her back on hold (Informants).
C-sat	Customer satisfaction
D-sat	Customer Dissatisfaction
IVR	Stands for Interactive voice response. A system that automatically responds to customers

1. Introduction

“Customer is a king” and “Customer is always right” are two utterances said by the pioneers of business and marketing many years ago. They have developed to be the main principles of any business that deals with customers. Thus, they are the main engines in the customer service field in general and in the call center field in particular. Although the relationship between the customer and the employee (henceforward, the agent) is a very old kind of relationship all over the world, talking to customers face to face and getting their satisfaction is not an easy task at all. Moreover, handling customers whom they cannot see, and getting their satisfaction only through voice and language use is a more difficult task. The agents should smile, sympathize and show how much they care about the customers only on the phone. Thus, using the proper way of talking to the customer is really worth it. Therefore, politeness plays an essential role in the call center industry.

The notion of politeness goes beyond our daily implications of the term “polite”. In daily life, Politeness behaviors often function as the extra niceties that make an individual’s behavior seem pleasant to others. Accordingly, politeness is often considered to be a kind of interactional privilege in which interlocutors can go beyond the bare obligations of a social situation to become considerate of others. Furthermore, everyone in the society even the agents themselves are customers for a specific product, and need to be treated as kings. Most of the time, customers need help and support from the company of their products whether it is a cell phone, a PC, or any other product. Whatever the product or the service is, a customer may need some help from the company and he/she needs to be treated as gently and courteously as possible to be satisfied. Henceforth, they will keep him/her as a loyal customer or attract him/her as a new one.

As time goes by and with the emergence of technology and globalization, multinational companies have sought to save time and money, on the one hand, and to maintain the customer satisfaction, on the other. Accordingly, call centers have emerged and the customer service field has expanded not only to include face to face customer service, but also to include helping customers on the phone. For the same purpose, large multinational companies all over the world have resorted to outsourcing; a way of handling their work by other companies, often in other countries, to achieve the best profit and customer satisfaction altogether. The outsourcing companies are responsible for the call center, the IT, the back office etc...

Every day, agents handle tens of customers with completely different characters and they should do their best to get the customers satisfied. Some people think that handling a male customer could be different from handling a female customer, as men are from

Mars while women are from Venus (Gray, 1994). Thus, this is a challenge that faces the agent while handling the customer within the call. Some male agents like to be gentle to female customers, while some female agents refuse to feel submissive or shy when they talk to any man including male customers. On the contrary, other agents prefer to talk to customers from the same gender thinking that they can build rapport with them by talking about subjects with mutual interests, as men can talk about sports, women can talk about romance or the kitchen stuff etc... Certain kind of agents, nevertheless, refuse to put gender into their account, and they do not pay attention to it as a factor while talking to their customer. Accordingly, this kind of agents prefer to treat all the customers alike regardless of their gender. Therefore, the current study investigates the effect of gender on politeness in one of the recent fields of conversation analysis, that is, the call center customer-agent interaction.

1.1- Meaning of Call Center

By the development of technology and the achievements of globalization, calling a company for a specific purpose has become more organized in a form of a place that has many phones and employees to interact with the customers, and help them. Call centers have become the most important single source of dealing with customers in the developed information economies since their emergence on the scene in the early 1990s (Russell, 2008). They have also become enormous employment generators, with Millions of job opportunities in America, hundreds of thousands in selected European countries, Australia, India, the Philippine and recently in the Middle East. Henceforth, the call center industry has now its own rules that control a huge business, and it is strongly associated with the industry of outsourcing; one of the transparent indicators of globalization around the world. Call center industry has its specific technical terms such as quality, C-sat, agent, customer, AHT, FCR, and many other technical terms.

The pioneer companies of this field aim not only at getting customer satisfaction during the call but also at keeping the customer loyal to their company forever, and they pay millions of dollars for that. Therefore, the agents have a very complex task in the call, as they should choose the best method to gain the customer satisfaction in a way that does not contradict with the benefit of the company. Thus, using the appropriate language is the key to get the customer satisfaction and consequently the key to a successful business. According to Detz (2000) the art of conversation is not what to say in the situation but it is how to say it. Accordingly, the customer may forget his problem, or forgive a company's mistake because of the agent's behavior and his/her smart techniques of language usage.

In other words, the equation that faces the agents is that, they should get the customer satisfaction (C-sat) and they should apply the standards that the company puts (quality) at