



The Language of Outsourced Call Centers

*A corpus-based study
of cross-cultural interaction*

Eric Friginal

Studies in Corpus Linguistics
34

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The Language of Outsourced Call Centers

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The Language of Outsourced Call Centers. A corpus-based study of cross-cultural interaction
by Eric Friginal

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A corpus-based study of cross-cultural interaction

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Preface

Call center discourse has become a normal part of everyday life: making a phone call to order a product, request a replacement part, ask for technical assistance, etc. In recent years, many of these call centers have been 'outsourced' to countries like India and the Philippines. As a result, most callers from the U.S. or U.K. have experienced cross-cultural telephone interactions, sometimes with major communication difficulties.

So it is natural to wonder what the discourse of call-center interactions is like. What discourse patterns are practiced by callers and customer service agents in cross-cultural call-center interactions, and how do those interactions differ from everyday conversations?

This book by Eric Friginal answers that question, based on the first large-scale corpus analysis of call-center interactions. By applying a corpus-based approach, the study can tell us what typically happens in call-center discourse, as well as detailed descriptions of particular interactions. Friginal shows that there is actually considerable variation within call-center discourse, associated with the agent's experience, the gender of caller and agent, and the communicative goals of the interaction (e.g., technical support versus sales). Against this background, Friginal is also able to identify instances of communication breakdown, describing how those interactions differ linguistically from more successful service encounters.

The study is also ground-breaking in more general ways, being one of the first books to undertake a comprehensive linguistic description of an emerging text variety. In the present case, that description considers the language of call-center discourse at multiple linguistic levels, including a survey of lexico-grammatical features, detailed descriptions of stance features, separate chapters on inserts (including discourse markers) and dysfluencies, and a multi-dimensional analysis that captures the underlying parameters of variation.

In sum, *The Language of Outsourced Call Centers: A Corpus-Based Study of Cross-Cultural Interaction* will be of interest to descriptive linguists generally, as a model for how a new text variety can be described from a corpus perspective, as well

as scholars interested specifically in cross-cultural communication and the dynamics of spoken interaction among speakers with differing conversational styles.

Douglas Biber
Regents' Professor
Northern Arizona University

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 Cross-cultural communication in outsourced customer service

Outsourcing call centers from the United States (U.S.) to countries like India and the Philippines has grown extensively since the 1990s. The considerable increase in the number of companies employing offshore call center representatives (or “agents”) has affected the structure and quality of spoken interactions in telephone-based customer service in the U.S., as well as the outcomes and satisfaction levels of customers utilizing these services. A growing number of Americans have now experienced communicating with “foreign” agents having varying levels of fluency in English. The quality of customer service interactions, including the overall customer service experience over the telephone, continues to evolve because many participants in these service encounters now often come from different national and cultural backgrounds and speak different varieties of English.

The nature of business communication in outsourced call centers entails a mix of factors that include (1) language proficiency in English, (2) cultural awareness, (3) knowledge and skills in transferring and understanding technical and specialized information, and (4) sociolinguistic skills in accommodating requests or complaints and the potential performance limitations of speakers. Interactants in this type of service encounter are constantly dealing with a combination of these factors that generally affect the conduct and outcomes of the transactions. Until the mid-1990s, Americans have had a different view of customer service facilitated on the telephone. Calling helpdesks or the customer service departments of many businesses mostly involved local call-takers who were able to provide a more personalized or localized service, and with immediate access to needed information. Interactants shared typically the same “space and time” and a great deal of common awareness of current issues inside and outside of the interactions. In most of these service interactions, there were not very many language-based communication factors speakers had to deal with in accomplishing their specific goals. Of course callers had common concerns about overall quality of service, comprehension of technical and specialized information, wait times, and the agents’ content knowledge or personality and service persona; however, there were minimal

cultural divides and speakers were able to clarify or negotiate, often successfully, in their exchanges.

Over the last decade, considerable managerial and technological developments in the call center operations of many businesses have transformed the telephone-based customer service experience in the U.S. and the expectations about the types of communication exchanges involved in these transactions. Advanced fiber-optic and satellite telecommunication technologies allowed businesses to move to countries offering viable alternatives to the high cost of the maintenance of these call centers in the U.S. and hire trainable foreign agents for very cheap salaries by current U.S. standards (Friedman, 2005; Vashistha & Vashistha, 2006). Routing a call or transferring an issue to another group of call center agents in India or the Philippines is apparently now even cheaper than maintaining service calls from Phoenix, Arizona to Chicago, Illinois in the U.S. This is possible because countries like the Philippines and India offer tax breaks to many outsourcers allowing these companies to significantly reduce technical and operational expenses (Tuchman, 2006).

Because of these call-routing procedures frequently followed to identify groups of inshore or offshore agents supporting specific customer issues, most call centers have used machine routing steps that often add longer wait times before callers get connected to the right agents. American callers have obviously found these wait times, as well as the additional steps required by various automated prompts, frustrating even before an actual transaction begins. Consequently, the callers' impressions and reactions to these procedures and related business practices affect the nature and conduct of interaction in outsourced call centers. In this instance, it is very evident that "globalization" has altered the traditional concept of telephone-based customer service in the U.S. to include newer service procedures and call-takers who may or may not be completely ready to meet the typical expectations of many Americans.

Unlike in other cross-cultural business interactions such as teleconferencing in multi-national company meetings, the communication in outsourced call centers has defined roles and standards against which the satisfaction levels of customers during and after the transactions are evaluated. American callers can demand to be given the quality of service they expect or can ask to be transferred to an agent who will provide them the service they prefer. The foreign agents' performance in language and explicit manifestations of cultural awareness naturally are in the forefront in defining "quality" in these outsourced call center interactions. In contrast, for a foreign businessman in many cross-cultural business meetings, there is limited pressure to perform following a specific native-speaker standard, as many business partners are often willing to accommodate the linguistic and cultural limitations of their counterparts in negotiations and performance of tasks.

What we have in this context of outsourced call centers, then, is a relatively new register of cross-cultural communication involving a range of variables (e.g.,

quality standards, accuracy in task performance, focus on oral skills, etc.) not present in other globalized business or international and interpersonal communication settings. In addition, the political and economic issues related to the outsourcing of American jobs have now saturated the media and the realm of public opinion in the U.S. prompting calls from some sectors for policy changes and possible restrictions in business outsourcing practices. It is, therefore, important to study these outsourced call center interactions and look at the role of language use, cultural awareness, and related sociolinguistic factors that could describe, extensively, the discourse of speakers as well as their attitudes and behaviors in the transactions. This description and analysis of discourse characteristics used by speakers in outsourced call centers contribute to the field of applied linguistics, particularly in identifying and understanding the unique features of the discourse vis-à-vis other types of spoken interactions. In addition, results from the analysis of forms and functions of speech in call center transactions have pedagogical applications for the training of overseas agents in using English effectively to assist their American customers. Potentially, such analysis could also be applied to produce materials for American callers to understand further the characteristics of foreign agents' speech in these transactions.

In 1994, Gumperz, in his foreword to Young's (1994) book, "Crosstalk and Culture in Sino-American Communication" (Cambridge University Press) commented that, "intercultural communication is well on its way to becoming an everyday phenomenon, so that, regardless of whether we live abroad or in our own familiar environment, we are more and more likely to come into direct contact with others who do not share our basic assumptions and perspectives" (p. iv). This observation is certainly a current reality for Americans in the many customer service transactions they engage in everyday. To this point, however, there are still relatively very limited data and published material available on this context of cross-cultural, telephone-based service encounters, or at least nothing that provides a more generalizable set of linguistic information that accurately represents the various demographics of speakers engaged in outsourced customer service transactions. It is clear that studies exploring the language of outsourced call centers will provide the data and insights that could help agents and callers to successfully accomplish their goals in the transactions and, as Gumperz pointed out, address issues that will continue to breach communication gaps and slowly develop common assumptions and perspectives between speakers of varying cultural backgrounds.

1.2 Analysis of cross-cultural interaction

There is quite an overwhelming range of sociolinguistic and anthropological studies that are directly related to the investigation of the language of outsourced call

centers. It is very clear that the communication exchanges in this setting illustrate cross-cultural (mis)communication or crosstalk (Gumperz, 1982b; Connor-Linton, 1989; Gumperz & Roberts, 1991; Bailey, 2000; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2001), the role of relative content knowledge in interactional negotiation between native and non-native speakers of English (Hatch, 1992; Zuengler, 1993), as well as task-based interactions between native speakers and non-native speakers and how these native speakers perceive non-native accent and intonation (Lippi-Green, 1997; Pickering, 2001; Lindemann, 2002; Sharma, 2005). In addition to various interactional studies that focus on the demographics of speakers, the analysis of outsourced call center interactions could also cover various discourse strategies (Gumperz, 1982a; Heller, 2001) and issues of national and social identity (Gumperz, 1982b; Edwards, 1985; Clyne, 1994; Taylor & Bain, 2005). All these, and other related research in interactional sociolinguistics, provide a solid theoretical grounding that helps exemplify the dimensions of interaction between participants in outsourced call center talk. The interplay of the factors and concepts mentioned above explicitly highlights the influence of speakers' cultural and various contextual backgrounds in defining their linguistic preferences and differences.

There have been numerous studies investigating cross-cultural spoken interactions between speakers participating in various kinds of communicative tasks. The wide variety of topics in these studies often includes the interface between linguistic features of speech, explicit purpose of talk, and social factors that influence the nature and conduct of the interactions (Trudgill, 1972; Labov, 1990; Cameron, 2001; Warren, 2004). For example, Bailey (2000) describes the communicative behavior and the presence of conflict in face-to-face interaction between Korean immigrant retailers and African-American customers in Los Angeles engaged in service encounters. He argues that the differing forms of communication and associated behaviors in these encounters are brought about mainly by the cultural awareness and social assumptions that Korean storekeepers and African-American customers bring into the interactions. Common social factors frequently associated with the analysis of cross-cultural interaction comprise variables such as the speakers' demographic information, language proficiency, and power relationships. Studies of such demographic categories as gender in professional settings (e.g., Tannen, 1984, 1990; Cameron, 2000; Kendall & Tannen, 2001; Swan, 2002; Koller, 2004) power and speaker roles, (e.g., Scollon & Wong Scollon, 2001), or age and educational background of speakers (e.g., Clyne, 1994; White, 1994; Drescher, 2004) have helped in describing the formulation of speech patterns necessary in carrying out purposeful, cross-cultural interactions successfully. One of my goals for this book is to pursue this general line of research, investigating the many linguistic features that are characteristic of different speaker groups in outsourced call center interactions.

These days, because of the global nature of many business transactions, among other reasons, there is an increasing interest in cross-cultural competence and in understanding the communicative norms and customs which influence participants speaking in a second language (Hung, 2002; Korhonen, 2003). The outsourcing phenomenon, not only in customer service but also in many types of technical, high-stakes jobs, has opened the doors for professionals outside the mainland U.S. to work with Americans using English as the medium of communication. Over the years, the teaching of English as the *lingua franca* of international business or “English for Globalization” (Phillipson, 2001) has likewise emphasized the need to focus on intelligibility in oral communication instead of fluency for non-native speakers of English. Linguistic data from pragmatic observations of spoken discourse are utilized in the training of non-native and native English-speaking professionals to achieve mutual comprehension in business interactions. Furthermore, studies of the discourse of the multi-cultural workplace (e.g., Forey & Nunan, 2002; Forey, 2004), sales negotiations (Charles & Charles, 1999), and corporate meetings (e.g., Charles, 1996; Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997; Bilbow, 1997) have pursued specialized analytical approaches to identify related features contributing to the quality of talk in cross-cultural interaction and the success or failure of communication. These approaches provide comprehensive descriptions of spoken discourse involving participants coming from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. However, in outsourced call centers, the emphasis upon English for Globalization in the contexts mentioned above has not yet been directly applied or felt. It appears that expectations about the language abilities of English as a second language (ESL) speakers are high, and, notwithstanding globalization, American customers are not yet prepared to accommodate oral performance mistakes and limitations evident in the communication of non-native speakers of English, as noted previously in Section 1.1.

1.3 Corpus-based analysis of cross-cultural interaction in this book

Because of currently prevailing expectations for language use of agents in outsourced call centers, newer analytical approaches in the description of linguistic characteristics of this register are needed to supplement the predominantly qualitative focus of existing research. Correlational data between patterns of speech, language ability, and success or failure of transactions contribute valuable insights that can be used to improve quality of training, and, consequently, of service. Generalizable information derived from a representative corpus of call center transactions will better inform and direct language training programs and possibly support (or not) the viability of call centers outside of the U.S.

The study of cross-cultural communication typically makes use of qualitative analytical approaches to describe the linguistic features of speech relative to the influence of cultural values on discourse (Clyne, 1994). Qualitative observations of spoken interactions, based on recorded data, especially in the context of professional discourse, are commonly utilized by researchers following established traditions from conversation and discourse analysts. For example, turn-taking and adjacency pairs (e.g., Wardhaugh, 1985; Tannen, 1986), repair and action formation (e.g., Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1988; Sacks, 1995), and initiation-response-elaboration (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Fox, 1987) have been used over the years to explore the various implications of a given utterance about the grammar of spoken discourse and the influence of speakers' cultural background and awareness during the interaction. In contrast, the present study uses corpus analysis to describe the patterns of linguistic variation among the different speaker groups in the call center discourse. The corpus approach represents the domain of outsourced call centers more distinctively than studies based on only a few interactions. I consider a range of discourse in the domain instead of focusing on one specific setting. The combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in the present study, against studies based primarily on impressions, provides a comprehensive linguistic description of spoken interactions and documents the overall patterns of variation in this domain. I then attempt to provide a framework for subsequent, more detailed corpus-based investigations.

1.4 Corpus-based research on spoken discourse

Recent advancements in the development of computational tools needed to process huge volumes of data make it possible to investigate salient linguistic features of discourse and compare their distribution across internal and external categories of transcribed text. Moreover, corpus tools and corpus-informed approaches facilitate the acquisition of data that can illustrate the statistical co-occurrence of these linguistic features in a corpus. Results from the analysis and interpretation of linguistic patterns in a corpus may lead to conclusions about the functional parameters influencing the linguistic choices of speakers. A combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses of outsourced call center language provides valuable information not extensively explored in previous research.

Although quantitative, corpus-informed methodologies remain underexploited in the analysis of spoken corpora (Reaser, 2003; Rühlemann, 2007), Biber's (1988, 1995, 2006) works that examine the frequency distribution and statistical co-occurrence of linguistic features from various registers suggest a myriad of possibilities in the exploration of spoken data. Similar corpus-based discourse studies

(e.g., Aarts & Meyer, 1995; Baker & McEnery, 2005; Leech & Smith, 2005; Baker, 2006) also offer directions for empirical investigations that attempt to generalize factors explaining the linguistic patterning in corpora. Sinclair's (2000) study of the interaction of lexis and grammar in association patterns, Rayson, Leech, and Hodges's (1997) corpus-based analysis of language use that is differentiated socially and contextually, and Rühlemann's (2007) corpus-driven approach in the study of conversation in context add to the body of research that makes use of corpora and corpus-approaches in discourse analysis and the analysis of the lexis and grammar of conversation. McCarthy and Handford (2004) investigate the structure of spoken business English (SBE) using the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Business English (CANBEC). They present the different dimensions of business talk in relation to everyday casual conversation, similar to earlier corpus-based methods followed in studies such as television talk shows and interviews (Scannel, 1991; O'Keeffe, 2006) and professional discourse (Boden, 1994; Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997; Nelson, 2000).

The publication of the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (heretofore "LGSWE") (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999) helped tremendously in introducing corpus-based data to "mainstream" applied linguists as well as the general audience composed of language teachers and language learners. The LGSWE shows the distributional data of the lexico/syntactic features of written and spoken registers of British and American English and presents corpus findings that explain the functional parameters of language based on frequencies and statistical patterns of usage. In this book, I utilize many of the LGSWE's findings about the grammar of conversation to identify the list of related linguistic features in my analysis of the corpus of call center transactions.

A methodical description of specific register features has been achieved through corpus analysis. Various comparisons across similar corpora have also shown significant variations in the use of lexical and syntactic choices of participants in spoken interactions. For example, Quaglio (2004) investigates the linguistic characteristics of speech from a television situational comedy or sitcom (NBC's *Friends*) and compares these characteristics with real-world conversations from selected spoken corpora. His analysis reveals important functional differences between sitcom dialogues and naturally-occurring "real-world" conversation. Adolphs, Brown, Carter, Crawford, and Sahota (2004) explore the application of corpus methodologies in health care encounters in order to describe the characteristics of communication events in clinical settings. Although their corpus of "staged telephone conversations" between patients/callers and advisers is rather small, the researchers are able to show several characteristics concerning the strategies used by advisers and their specific situational contexts in addressing caller concerns. Other related studies may focus on a particular linguistic feature or

groups of features in a register, e.g., stance expressions in classroom management (Biber, 2006), *so* and *oh* in social interaction (Bolden, 2006), politeness markers in call center transactions (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005), or features of accommodation and involvement in class lectures (Barbieri, 2006). Results from these analyses show distributional data of speech characteristics which allow the researchers to draw conclusions about the register and interpret the linguistic strategies employed by speakers.

1.5 Research on call center discourse

Service encounters conducted on the telephone have been analyzed by researchers typically by looking at the flow of interaction through the exploration of sociophonic structures of speech (Orr, 2003); transactional and interactional dialogues (Cheepen & Monaghan, 1990; Cheepen, 2000); and how speakers accomplish specific tasks through turn-taking and related turn features such as interruption, latching, and overlaps (Schegloff, 2001; Gardner & Wagner, 2004). In addition, pragmatic and sociolinguistic issues in telephone interactions are examined with substantial degree of interest by many discourse or conversation analysts. For example, Economidou-Kogetsidis (2005) investigates directness and politeness social variables between Greek and British callers in telephone service encounters. She finds that Greek callers are more direct in their requests than British callers; this directness through the use of *parakalo*, the Greek equivalent of *please*, potentially achieves social distancing and negative politeness in Greek requests. Cameron (2008) considers “top-down talk” in call centers also based in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and investigates the flow of talk and the use of language that is “highly regulated and standardized.” Poster (2007) and Taylor and Bain (2005) look at labor practices in Indian call centers that require Indian agents to pose as Americans for American call centers, or British for those that serve companies located in the U.K. These two studies focus on the effects of globalization in social and national identity and the managerial processes related to language use and language policies in specific settings.

With the continuing growth of call centers in the U.S. and the consequent outsourcing of these call centers overseas, the study of service encounters expands to merge corporate practices and strategies and language-based research approaches. Cowie (2007) conducts an ethnographic study that investigates accent training practices from a third-party agency that handles language courses for a major call center serving American callers in Bangalore, India. She reports some successes in accent recognition and “neutralization” especially for younger trainees. Cowie also provides an interesting illustration of the accent training scenarios experienced

by Indian applicants and trainees before being hired or before they handle their first actual customer call, on the job. In my previous study (Friginal, 2007), I also describe some of the management practices related to language use and language training of a call center company in Manila, Philippines. I present an analysis of the micro and macro language and managerial policies that directly influence the way Filipino agents are hired, employed, and, at times, terminated from the company based on different sets of performance expectations. These intertwined policies informed by business and language training practices produce the current prevailing set of standards and expectations in many outsourced call center settings and influence future plans and directions.

Many outsourced call center companies conduct their own data analyses to evaluate the success or failure of transactions handled by their offshore agents. It appears, however, that their data are limited in that they describe success and/or failure of transactions without providing the level of analysis necessary to identify those factors responsible for the relative success or failure. There are opportunities to further understand the relationships between linguistic characteristics of agents' turns and outcomes of service calls. Understanding quality of service as defined by linguistic and task performance parameters is largely recognized in business operations and in the training and the monitoring of performance of newly-hired call center agents, but there are still many options and opportunities to enhance and expand the scope of research in this area.

Currently, language-based research focusing on outsourced call center interactions in the Philippines is still limited, but its importance has always been recognized by many stakeholders. There is an understandable, urgent demand for effective, high-level language and phone handling skills for Filipinos engaged in assisting American callers. Because of this demand, outsourced call center companies in the Philippines invest a considerable amount of money to train their employees and support measures to acquire data and information that would lead to the production and/or improvement of language training and assessment materials. In June 2006, an inaugural conference on "English Communication Skills for the ITES (Information Technology Enabled Services) Industry," was held in Manila, Philippines, drawing support from universities in Hong Kong, Australia, the Philippines, India, and New Zealand, together with major outsourcing firms in the Asia-Pacific region. Another conference sponsored by the same organizers followed in July 2007, in Manila and also in April 2008, in Bangalore. Conference presentations in this growing international gathering cover diverse topics in the areas of discourse and conversation analysis, the teaching of pronunciation and grammar, intercultural communication, and training/curriculum design. The level of enthusiasm and variety of subject matter in the conference proceedings indicate that there is an emergent impetus for more language-based research in

outsourced call centers (“Call Center Communication Research,” 2006; J. Lockwood, personal communication, unreferenced). The Hong Kong Institute of Education and the Hong Kong Polytechnic University have established the Call Center Communication Research Program (see their official website at: http://www.engl.polyu.edu.hk/call_centre/default.html) which aims to conduct more language-based research in outsourced call centers and provide consultancy services to various outsourcers especially in the U.S. for language training and language-based performance evaluations.

1.6 Overview of the book

As previously mentioned, this book makes use of a corpus of outsourced call center transactions, which, to this point, I believe, is the first to utilize a large-scale collection of transcribed texts of actual call center service transactions. I explore the discourse of outsourced call centers between Filipino agents and American callers engaged in various types of communicative tasks, e.g., troubleshooting a technical problem or processing orders for a wide range of products. My interest in analyzing the linguistic characteristics of this discourse originated from my experience working as a language monitoring supervisor for one of the biggest American-owned call center companies with extensive operations in the Asia-Pacific region. I follow an empirical research design that relies on a number of analytical approaches including corpus linguistics and discourse analysis. I combine quantitative and qualitative examination of data obtained from corpus and computational methodologies in my investigation of a range of lexico/syntactic features of outsourced call center discourse relative to other comparative registers of conversation. I pursue two major goals in the book:

- (1) To conduct a corpus-based register comparison between transcribed texts of outsourced call center interactions, face-to-face American conversation, and spontaneous telephone exchanges between participants discussing various topics; and,
- (2) To study the dynamics of cross-cultural communication between Filipino agents and American callers, as well as the other related demographic categories of speakers in outsourced call center transactions, e.g., gender of speakers, agents’ experience and level of service performance, and the primary communicative tasks of interactions.

I have designed and collected a corpus of outsourced call center transactions composed of 500 transcribed texts with approximately 553,765 words. Clearly, I did

not intend to investigate the prosodic quality of outsourced call center discourse, but this line of research is very relevant for future, related studies. I believe that register comparison and the analysis of lexico/syntactic features of cross-cultural communication characterizing the discourse of outsourced call centers both have important theoretical implications for the study of language and culture in general and the analysis of linguistic variation in particular. By using a corpus representing the typical interaction in outsourced call centers, I am able to illustrate what Filipino customer service representatives and American callers normally say and do during these service transactions. My research findings are relevant not only in understanding the variety of English spoken by Filipino call center representatives but also in achieving a broader understanding of the dynamics of cross-cultural exchanges in this relatively new register of conversation. Finally, the research findings have relevant and potentially useful application in the design and implementation of training programs for agents in offshore call centers – most particularly those located in the Philippines – which serve American clients.

1.7 Outline of the book

In comparing outsourced call center data with related spoken corpora, I hope to identify prominent similarities and differences within the previously identified registers of spoken interactions and also isolate the unique features of outsourced customer service transactions from these other registers. To this point, I do not have comparable corpora e.g., American or Indian agents in similar call center service transactions, to enable a more focused contextual comparison of linguistic data. However, it appears that there is a growing interest and enthusiasm, at least with the call center company that sponsored this research, in continuing this line of investigation using data from call center locations outside the Philippines. In Chapter 2, I provide an introduction to outsourcing in the Philippines as well as a description of the challenges faced by the industry in the current economy. I also provide background about the English-in-education policies in the Philippines and the level of education of Filipino professionals serving American callers.

In order to obtain data necessary to achieve the goals of this book, I have identified four main internal text categories for comparison in the Call Center corpus. These are: (1) speakers' role (agents vs. callers), (2) gender of speakers, (3) agents' quality of service (derived from agents' linguistic and task performance assessment scores), and (4) primary communicative task involved in transactions (troubleshoot, inquire, and purchase). Additional subject or contextual categories, e.g., agents' experience with their current accounts, callers' background, and level of pressure in the transactions are also considered in the analysis of the

transactions in some chapters. I also present register (or external) comparison of the linguistic features of call center interactions relative to two corpora: (1) face-to-face American Conversation from the Longman Corpus, and (2) spontaneous discussion of topics from the Switchboard corpus. I provide a detailed description of these internal and external text categories in Chapter 3. I also describe the composition of these corpora, my design and collection of the Call Center corpus, and the corpus-based methodology I followed in data analysis.

Chapters 4 to 9 present quantitative comparisons of linguistic features across registers (three corpora) and then across the internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. I attempt to qualitatively interpret the functions of these features based on their distribution and the sample text excerpts that show the contextual usage of these features by speakers. The text excerpts provided in these chapters also help describe further the common lexico/syntactic preferences of speakers in these interactions. Each chapter starts with register comparison followed by a more detailed comparison of features in call center interactions. In Chapter 4, I discuss the results of a multi-dimensional (MD) analysis following Biber (1988). I provide a description of the steps involved in MD analysis and my interpretation of the three extracted linguistic dimensions.

In Chapter 5, I compare the distribution of selected lexico/syntactic features relevant in the study of cross-cultural communication in outsourced call centers. The selection of these features is influenced by the LGSWE, Quaglio (2004), and Biber (2006). This chapter acts as a continuation of the MD analysis presented in the previous section. Some of the linguistic features analyzed in this chapter (e.g., lexico/syntactic complexity features) have been mentioned briefly in the MD analysis and are now presented in greater detail to supplement the MD results.

In Chapter 6 (*Stance*), I adapted Biber's analytical framework in the analysis of grammatical expression of stance. I focus on three groups of features for stance analysis: (1) modal verbs, (2) stance adverbs, and (3) stance complement clauses. In Chapter 7 (*Politeness*), I look at the distribution of groups of politeness and respect markers used in the registers and by agents and callers in call center transactions. These groups of politeness and respect markers include (1) polite speech-act formulae, (2) polite requests, (3) apologies, and (4) respect markers. The distribution of these grammatical stance and politeness markers across registers and speaker groups in call center interactions indicates that stance and politeness features prominently characterize the discourse of outsourced call center transactions.

In Chapter 8 (*Inserts*) and Chapter 9 (*Dysfluencies*), I present a combination of discourse features unique to conversation or representations of spoken discourse. I considered interjections (e.g., *oh*) and discourse markers (e.g., *ok*, *well*, *I mean*) as inserts following the LGSWE and Schiffrin (1987). For dysfluencies, I consider filled-pauses, short and long pauses (transcribed in the Call Center corpus), and

frequencies of repeats. I also add “holds” in call center interactions or instances of temporarily putting the call on hold for a speaker to conduct research for information. Although a hold is not a dysfluency, per se, it is clear that an agent who places his/her caller on hold lacks the necessary information to complete the call and therefore may benefit from additional training in product support. The main goal of these two chapters is to provide the frequency distribution of these selected linguistic features of spoken interactions. As is the case in most chapters, my analysis of the distribution of these features could further be developed in subsequent, related studies.

In Chapter 10 (*Communication Breakdown: Caller Clarifications*), I discuss the distribution of caller clarifications in the Call Center corpus. I define a caller clarification as a statement, request, question, or sequence of questions articulated by the callers after the agents’ turn or response providing information or procedure (e.g., “*What did you say it was?*” or “*I didn’t understand you, could you repeat that?*”). These instances of caller clarifications in customer service transactions point to a potential miscommunication. Many of these clarifications stem from the agents’ inability to provide clear and specific information, pronounce words based on “standard” American phonology, use vocabulary that matches the callers’ background, and other related technical (e.g., sound) and production issues during the calls. My analysis in this chapter provides interesting results that could contribute to the creation of training materials that might help in limiting the number of these caller clarifications received by Filipino agents.

Finally, in Chapter 11 (*Synthesis and Future Directions*), I summarize the results of my analysis, offer pedagogical implications about the training of Filipino agents, and emphasize directions for future research.

Outsourced call centers in the Philippines

2.1 The influx of outsourced call centers in the Philippines

Customer services over the telephone in the U.S. have been gradually outsourced overseas due to the increasing business demand to trim expenses incurred in maintaining these call centers on the mainland. Various companies ranging from Fortune 500 businesses to smaller internet-based firms have relocated their customer service operations to countries with available human resources and cheap labor cost primarily to improve their overall financial structure (Friginal, 2004; Magellan Alliance, 2005). “Outsourcing” is defined by the World Bank as “the contracting of a service provider to completely manage, deliver and operate one or more of a client’s functions (e.g., data centers, networks, desktop computing and software applications)” (“World Bank E-Commerce Development Report,” 2003). Developments in telecommunications and international business processing practices in the last decade paved the way for various services to be more transportable and fragmented, thereby simplifying the tasks involved in business operations and allowing them to be relocated more easily (Rodolfo, 2005). In the case of the U.S., many businesses initially explored lower-cost “in-shore” or domestic locations for a range of services from simple “low-value” data encoding to “high-value” processing such as software design. This movement was followed by locating these services in “near-shore” countries (e.g., Ireland, for the U.S. market) in the mid-1990s (Friedman, 2005; Rodolfo, 2005). However, as businesses continue to search for even more opportunities to reduce production and customer service expenditures, outsourcing eventually took the path of offshoring – or locating to more distant, low-wage countries. Typically, these countries such as India, the Philippines, and China, are less developed economies with a large base of educated workforce. Low-wage skilled workers and professionals, together with an efficient and cost-effective telecommunications infrastructure, become the main value proposition of these lower-income countries. International telecommunications costs declined dramatically in these developing countries as they liberalized their information technology (IT) sectors and received significant support from overseas investments (Rodolfo, 2005).

A report from Earthlink, a broadband internet company in the U.S., presents the business realities involved with outsourcing in the current economy. For financial stability, savings, and profit, the company laid off 1,800 of its 5,100 American employees in 2003 and outsourced customer service jobs to Manila, the Philippines and Hyderabad, India. This decision resulted in a combined profit and expense reduction cost amounting to \$14.2 million in the second half of 2003 (Schoenberger, 2004). As this scenario has been repeated in many similar business contexts, the U.S. has lost more than 500,000 call center jobs to India and the Philippines since 1997. In the Philippines, outsourced call centers employ around 150,000 to 170,000 Filipinos as of March 2008, providing a variety of customer and employee care services to Americans including handling call-in queries and technical support, consumer services, and telemarketing. In 2006, estimates of the total Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) size in the Philippines range from \$4.5B to \$5.5B a year, and the industry is projected to have an annual 75 percent increase in total economic value until the year 2011 (Teves, 2003; "Earnings from Call Centers Seen at \$7.3B in 2010," 2007; Olchondra, 2006; Tuchman, 2006). The current estimates of a \$180B global BPO market by 2010 place the Philippines in the forefront of the market together with India and China. The country continues to invite American companies to relocate their customer service centers in its major cities (Manila, Cebu, Clark, Davao, Baguio) by providing tax incentives, improving technology architecture, and focusing on the marketability of its human resources (Friginal, 2004). Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, in her State-of-the-Nation Address in July 2004, emphasized the importance of the call center industry in the country's economy. She mentioned that investments in call centers and back office operations have increased dramatically, resulting in 68 U.S.-based call centers in 2004 compared to only two in 2000. This development obviously meant the creation of jobs and additional flow of investment money from U.S. firms (Uy, 2004). The president has continued to single out the outsourcing industry as a key potential growth entity in the country. As of March 2007, there are over 150 U.S.-based call center companies and over 50 other international call centers from Australia, the U.K., and other European countries located not only in Metro Manila but also in cities north and south of the capital city. In a press statement, Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) Secretary, Patricia Santo Tomas, said that Filipinos' intelligence, adaptability, industry, and proficiency with the English language have made the Philippines one of the world's principal hubs for call center investments and operations. Citing the Labor Market Intelligence Report of the DOLE's Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, the Secretary said that, "overseas investors preferred Filipinos for their English proficiency, high rate of literacy in information technology, trainability, natural warmth, customer care orientation, and a strong affinity to the Western culture that were all vital in call center operations" (Uy, 2004, p. A12).

2.2 The Philippine advantage in outsourcing

Because of its tradition of bilingual education (in English and Tagalog-based Filipino) and cheap labor market, the Philippines has become one of the major centers for U.S.-based outsourcing, second only to India (Teves, 2003; "Service Alert," 2004). However, recent data related to BPO human resources and other operational costs show that the Philippines is becoming a heavily-favored alternative to India. Jim Sanderson, vice president and chairman of applications developer Lawson Software, said in October 2006 that India could readily provide large companies with 10,000 people or more with its big number of IT professionals but its BPO costs were rising 15 percent per year, compared with relatively stable costs in the Philippines of less than five percent. Sanderson also noted that the attrition rate in India is about 30 percent, compared to only 10 percent or so in the Philippines (Ochoa, 2006; Olchondra, 2006). Major Indian-based BPO firms such as Dell and Siemens have also established operations in the Philippines in the last five years. In March 2006, Dell announced the doubling of the number of its call center agents in the Philippines from 700 to 1,400. Also in 2006, Siemens launched its (Philippine Peso) PhP250M call center in Manila with an estimated workforce exceeding 1,000 in mid-2007. The General Electric group of companies also established an 800-seat call center in the Philippines in 2005, which they hope to expand to 3,000 employees by 2009. Other companies including Microsoft, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, and Prudential have also established back office operations in the Philippines in addition to their Indian subsidiaries and are looking at expanding in the next five years (Domingo, 2006; Oliva, 2006; "Philippines Sees Jump in Outsourcing Business by 2010," 2007).

The Philippines produces over 400,000 English-speaking college graduates every year. Of these, 80,000 are in the fields of information technology, computers, and engineering. Another 110,000 come from business-related fields, such as commerce, finance, and accounting (BPAP, 2007). The international perception of the Filipinos' English language competency and overall trainability is positive because of the high number of college graduates in the workforce compared to other countries, including the U.S. and India. Bruce Campbell, corporate operations officer for a U.S.-owned BPO, Sitel Philippines, told a news conference in August 2007 that most, if not all skilled workers in the Philippines have college degrees compared to their counterparts in the U.S. who are only high school graduates (Cabreza, 2007). Also, the growing Philippine population estimated at over 90 million in 2007 appears to complement the requirements of the BPOs for increased manpower and staffing. The sizeable pool of qualified human resources in the country can rival that of heavily-populated countries such as India and China. Aside from robust population numbers, the country's demographic

structure also ensures the sustainable flow of skilled and relatively young workers in the BPO labor force. Only four percent of Filipinos are above 65 years old in 2002. In addition, the Philippines has a respectable illiteracy rate for a third world economy. According to the 2002 estimate of the World Bank, the illiteracy rate of the population above 15 years of age in the Philippines is only about five percent. This estimate is considerably lower than the average for all economies in East Asia and the Pacific (13%) and for all lower-middle income countries (13%) (Rodolfo, 2005). As a major ESL-speaking country with a strong emphasis on college education and overseas employment, the Philippines is eminently suitable to supply English-speaking customer service agents to many U.S. and international BPOs.

By Philippine standards, the average entry-level salary of agents in outsourced call centers is competitive. A newly-hired agent's basic salary of approximately PhP12,841 (\$274 at the current exchange rate in September 2008) per month is higher than that of many technical and white collar workers in government and private corporations. For example, a geologist working for the Department of Environment and Natural Resources earns a monthly salary ranging from only PhP8,000 to 10,000 (salary range data taken from the Department of Labor and Employment [Philippines] website: <http://www.dole.gov.ph>). Financial benefits, additional incentives, and opportunities for immediate promotions are major reasons why there has been a continuing increase in the number of applicants for positions in the BPO industry in the Philippines since the late-1990s. Additional remuneration such as overtime pay, productivity bonuses, transportation allowance, and medical insurance make the financial package attractive, especially for recent university graduates. Because outsourced call centers employ mostly young, English-speaking professionals, the industry has cultivated a dynamic, fast-paced, and competitive atmosphere which appears to capture the interest of a greater number of fresh college graduates. Many call centers in the Philippines are also tapping college graduates from provinces outside the capital, Manila, and are branching out to other cities in order to find qualified potential agents who are able to speak English proficiently. Most job fairs conducted in universities and various malls across city centers regularly showcase call center companies competing for trainable English speakers. Experienced agents and management staff are easy targets for promotion to supervisory and managerial positions in other call centers. There is considerable demand for and aggressive recruitment of experienced/trained call center agents the Philippines because of the constant growth of the industry and the continuing flow of new start-up call centers seeking qualified Filipino professionals (Magellan Alliance, 2005; BPAP, 2007).

Over the last 10 years, the Philippines has established its capabilities and reputation for delivering high-quality, productive call center services. This high-profile sector, which has also been referred to as the “sunshine industry” of the Philippines, continues to influence the economic and educational policies in the country. It is also evident that many BPOs recognize the Philippine advantage in maintaining call centers outside of India and the mainland U.S. During the initial boom of the industry in 2002, a survey conducted by Garner of BPOs engaged in call center operations in the Philippines shows that these BPOs are relatively satisfied with business operations and staffing as well as the level of government assistance for outsourcing in the country. A related survey by Tschang in 2005 also supports these prevailing impressions. The most commonly cited positive or “advantageous factors” for outsourcing in the Philippines include:

- The labor pool is competitive and has a good knowledge of American English and a long history of cultural affinity with the U.S. This means that there is minimal need for voice or cultural training.
- The Filipinos’ cultural advantages, such as strong interpersonal skills and a strong familiarity with the U.S. culture, are also cited as relevant for customer service. Many interviewees and other observers assert that such skills can help the country with its call center work.
- Manila’s livability and reasonable quality of life appeal to expatriates. This was mentioned by local company heads and expatriates, as well as in various consulting reports.
- The strong telecommunications infrastructure, the availability of real estate, government incentives such as the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) (low taxation), and low employee turnover rates are also seen as important advantages.

Finally, the combination of cheap labor and the available supply of skilled applicants in the Philippines makes it possible for U.S.-owned call center companies to use managerial practices very different from those generally found in the U.S. or other developed countries. In 2004, Hagel finds that these outsourced call centers invest heavily to recruit staff, since “they can afford to be more selective.” In Table 2.1 below, I summarize results of a case study by Hagel of the recruitment and screening process for prospective call center agents by a major U.S.-owned company which is one of the biggest outsourced call centers in the Philippines (not the call center that provided data for this research).

Table 2.1. Summary of agent recruitment and screening processes from Hagel (2004).

Selected Factors	Descriptions
Recruitment	[XX Company] employs a recruiting team of over 30 human resources staff that puts applicants through a rigorous seven-stage screening process (an equivalent U.S. call center operation might have around four people on a similar team. A two-stage process – a resume and a short interview – is typical in U.S. call centers). Because of this process, [XX Company] is able to offer positions to only two percent of its applicants while enjoying a 90 percent acceptance rate, compared with an average acceptance rate of 50 percent in U.S. call centers.
Managers to staff ratio	In terms of managers-to-staff ratio, high wages in the U.S. are a major reason for the understandable tendency of high-performing companies to strip out layers of middle management and to increase the operating span of the remaining managers, forcing them into administrative and supervisory roles. In the Philippines, by contrast, the ratio of managers to staff is much higher because companies can afford to sustain managers' salaries. This allows the managers to spend more time building the skills of employees. The higher ratio of managers to workers also allows companies to pay greater attention to identifying and implementing process improvements that enhance their operational performance; at [XX Company], no less than 10 percent of a team leader's (frontline managers) time is spent in this way. [XX Company] maintains a ratio of one team leader to eight customer service agents, compared with a ratio of 1:20 or more for similar U.S. operations.
Training programs	The company invests heavily in formal training programs, which are reinforced by apprenticeship, coaching, and mentorship. Agents who handle complex mutual-fund advisory calls, for instance, take a 16-week training course leading to the NASD Series 7 examination for broker certification. By organizing employees into smaller teams that have more exposure to managers, the company can follow up with ad hoc coaching and detailed reviews of every agent's performance – at least an hour a week for seasoned reps and more for newer ones. Agents at [XX Company] enjoy an average pass rate of 81 percent on the NASD tests (recently, in fact, the pass rate has been 100 percent), compared with an average U.S. pass rate of 59 percent.
Handling time	The benefits are evident as soon as the company takes over a client's call center. One client, in its own operations, was used to an average handling time of about eight minutes. Within six months, [XX Company] had reduced this to four and a half minutes by refining call-handling procedures; revising the order in which information was gathered and entered, with a view to minimizing the impact on performance; and altering computer screens to reduce the number of page changes required in most transactions.

2.3 Challenges faced by outsourced call centers in the Philippines

With all of the positive factors mentioned above, it might appear that outsourced call centers in the Philippines are in for the long haul. However, there are still

numerous variables presently posing real challenges to the stability of the industry in the country. It is hard to project long-term scenarios of BPOs in the Philippines amidst the current economy and these prevailing threats. These threats include (1) the current weakening U.S. dollar value in international markets and the instability of the global stock markets in 2007–2008, (2) the actual skill level of the remaining pool of workers, and (3) public perception of outsourcing in the U.S.

2.3.1 Weakening U.S. dollar

The U.S. dollar and Philippine peso exchange rate is a constant major consideration for U.S.-based BPOs in relation to future expansion plans, impacting projected year-end revenue targets, and the hiring of employees and staff. For example, in 2005, the average exchange rate between U.S. \$1 and PhP1 was 1:55. In December 2007, the exchange rate dipped to 1:41.5 but the dollar rebounded to 1:47.33 in September 2008. This plunge in the dollar value in relation to the strength of the Philippine peso in 2007–2008 consequently affects industry projections and financial directions. A strong Philippine peso could invalidate the primary *raison d'être* of outsourcing in the Philippines and could significantly change the business practices of BPOs in the months and years ahead. In 2005, the industry estimated that a low-end call center project would need about PhP550,000 (U.S. \$10,000) per seat for a year-long operation. This meant that a 100-seat call center entailed an investment of about U.S. \$1 million per year with the U.S.\$1:PhP55 exchange rate. The return of investment, however, was very attractive, with some estimating that a call center seat in the Philippines can yield anywhere from U.S.\$1,000 to U.S.\$2,000 net income per month (Rodolfo, 2005). Clearly, however, in 2007–2008, the numbers are not as favorable for the BPOs because they have to spend more dollars (over \$12,200) per seat. If the trend of the strengthening peso continues through 2010, more changes in industry practices are likely. However, even with the less-favorable late-2008 world economic turmoil and exchange rate, it is still clearly more advantageous to BPOs to hire Filipino (or Indian) professionals than skilled/college-educated American workers.

2.3.2 Skill level of remaining pool of workers

As call centers continue to hire qualified agents, especially recent college graduates, at a relatively rapid pace, some sectors raise concerns about the overall skill level of the remaining pool of potential hires. In the first few years of the industry, many call centers were able to be selective in hiring agents and staff as reported by Hagel (2004) in the case study referenced above. However, with call centers competing for agents with high-level language proficiency and effective socio-linguistic skills, some companies are currently not able to fulfill staffing requirements,

especially for high-end accounts such as banking and investment services. In March 2006, a report from a U.S.-based think tank, John F. Kennedy Center Foundation-Philippines (JFKCF-P) said that the fast-growing outsourcing and call center sector in the Philippines was in danger of losing steam because the supply of qualified workers was drying up. According to the JFKCF-P, less than three out of every 100 new college graduates were hired in the BPO/call center industry from 2004 to 2006. The JFKCF-P study showed that the declining supply of qualified workers in this sector could arrest the projected growth of the industry and keep it from matching the level of call center employment in India. Among the solutions offered by the JFKCF-P was to “adequately prepare fresh graduates in the Philippines for a job in a BPO firm by providing them quality training, especially in the declining proficiency of graduates in the English language” (Domingo, 2006, p. B11). This general perception of the “declining proficiency of graduates in the English language” (discussed later in this chapter) has been constantly talked about by industry insiders, educators, media practitioners, and lawmakers in the Philippine Congress.

2.3.3 Public perception of outsourcing in the U.S.

The socio-political climate in the U.S. also influences the state of outsourcing in the Philippines and India, and it is possible, with the results of elections in the U.S. in 2008, that legislative amendments and/or changes in governmental regulations might impact the status quo of outsourced call center operations. Television, radio, and print media coverage in the U.S. of the outsourcing phenomenon has gained significant attention over the past few years. American public sentiment, as revealed by customer surveys and interviews, appears to be leaning towards a more negative perception of outsourcing. Anton and Setting (2004) report in a study entitled “The American Consumer Reacts to the Call Center Experience and the Offshoring of Service Calls” that the call center experience has a relatively strong impact on how customers perceive a company’s customer service support, and on how likely they are to repurchase products/services from companies that outsource their customer service calls to offshore call centers. The main purpose of Anton and Setting’s research is to survey a statistical sample of U.S. consumers to gauge their perception of companies based on their call center experience. They also attempt to determine whether or not language and communication issues with offshore call center agents have an impact in the customers’ call center satisfaction levels. The ultimate goal of this study is to measure the resultant effect these customer call center experiences have on the customers’ future purchasing behavior toward a company. Table 2.2 summarizes their major findings.

Table 2.2. Summary of findings from “The American Consumer Reacts to the Call Center Experience and the Offshoring of Service Calls” (Anton & Setting, 2004).

1. Key demographics and psychographics of the American consumer respondents:
 - a. The majority of respondents are between 36 and 55 years old.
 - b. More than 51 percent of respondents have at least a four-year college degree.
 - c. Two-thirds of respondents have an annual household income of more than \$50,000 per year.
2. Most important findings articulated by the American consumer respondents:
 - a. Customer dissatisfaction with the call center agent is largely due to agent-related issues – both general and communication. General agent-related issues (e.g., agent lacking customer service skills) made up the majority of agent-related issues. Reasons related to communication skills included language difficulties (e.g., poor English and difficulty understanding), although this ranked among the lowest factors, having little effect on a customer’s call center experience.
 - b. 84 percent of the callers knew or had the impression that their call was being handled domestically.
 - c. Of concern for U.S. companies considering offshore outsourcing, the majority of American consumers (65 percent) are likely to negatively alter their buying behavior (decrease purchases or discontinue purchases altogether) if they were made aware that the company they were calling had outsourced its customer service call center operation overseas.
 - d. 44 percent of respondents would consider decreasing their spending.
 - e. 21 percent would discontinue their purchases altogether.
 - f. 23 percent stated that their buying behavior would not be impacted – positively or negatively – by the overseas location of a company’s customer service center.
 - g. 11 percent were unsure/undecided at the time of the survey as to whether their buying behavior would be affected (positively or negatively) by having knowledge that their call was being handled by a call center outside of the U.S.
 - h. One percent of respondents said that they would consider buying more if they knew or were made aware that a company was sending its service calls to a call center located outside of the U.S.

These attitudes were found to be consistent and/or hold true both across and within all demographic groups (age, education, household income, and geographical region) and product call categories (type of customer service call, caller satisfaction and industry). In other words, armed with the knowledge that a company is sending its customer service calls offshore, the majority of American consumers are likely to react negatively, regardless of their age, income, level of education attained, where they live, or nature of their call.

3. Those areas in which there appears to be a heightened vulnerability, given the higher portion of respondents who would adversely alter their buying behavior, include:
 - a. Companies operating in the computer software industry; 84 percent of respondents who had recently called the customer service center of a computer software company indicated that they would negatively alter their purchases if they were made aware that the company’s customer service center was outsourced overseas.

(Continued)

Table 2.2. (continued)

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- b. Calls related to shipping; 80 percent of respondents who recently called a customer service center stated that their buying behavior would either decrease or discontinue if they were made aware that the company was sending its customer service calls to a call center located outside of the U.S.
 - c. Calls related to utilities and those related to transportation both showed that 70% would be negatively impacted armed with the same knowledge.
 - d. An interesting cut of the database showed that of the 26.8 percent of respondents who indicated that there would be no impact on their buying behavior if their calls were handled offshore.
4. For technical support calls:
- a. **College educated respondents and younger individuals (ages 18 to 35) were more likely to indicate that their buying behavior would not be impacted if their technical support call was handled by an offshore agent.**
5. **The stakes are high as even companies that achieve high-caliber call ratings are not immune to the potentially negative effects of the public sentiment surrounding outsourcing customer service operations offshore:**
- a. Regardless of the level of satisfaction that the customer received from the call center experience, the majority would buy less or discontinue buying if they knew that their call was being handled by an offshore agent.
 - b. Consumers cited strong feelings of nationalism and loyalty to America as the primary reasons for why their buying behavior would be adversely affected with knowledge that a company was sending its customer service calls to a call center located outside of the U.S.
 - c. Verbatim comments from respondents included (among others): "Be American, buy American." "I always buy locally before nationally, and nationally before foreign." "I live in a town that's losing jobs, so I want all the jobs from U.S. companies in the U.S."
 - d. At this point in time, with respect to offshore customer call centers, sentiments of nationalism and loyalty play a stronger or more influential role in the purchasing decisions than overall indifference towards the issue of offshore outsourcing.
6. Less important findings articulated by the American consumer respondents:
- a. Nearly half of the respondents had called a customer service call center within the past 30 days, with more than one-third calling within the previous two weeks.
 - b. The primary reasons for calling the company was to ask for technical support, register a complaint, or ask for product information.
 - c. The vast majority of respondents (82.8 percent) who called a customer service number within the past 30 days spoke directly with a call center agent.
-

Nevertheless, it appears that sentiments against offshore call centers as reflected in Anton and Setting's (2004) study have still not made significant impact

in curtailing the outflow of U.S. call centers to India and the Philippines. Some observers maintain that the American consumers of goods and services are more driven by the price point than principle and that, without an economic incentive to do otherwise, they will take advantage of the best buy, regardless of appeals by some advocates and American businesses to “Buy American!” In support of this contention, it appears that even as some American businesses such as Wal-Mart are the object of strident and highly-visible criticism for exploiting cheap manufacturing and labor in countries like China, their customer base continues to be a loyal one. So that, if the downstream effect on the American consumer of outsourcing goods and/or services is a better price, some reason that opposition to the practice will wane. In addition, the American market is now so saturated with news reports on outsourcing that many customer service callers seem to expect that they will be routed to locations outside the U.S. whenever they call for technical support or purchase computers. Although Americans are highly aware that call center jobs are moving outside the U.S., it is possible that they are becoming – or will become – more accepting of the practice.

However, it is common in Philippine call centers for agents to encounter American callers who ask to be transferred specifically to American agents “*who are in the U.S.*” Some callers may immediately ask for the specific location of these agents before they proceed with their questions or issues in initiating the transactions. These callers are also often aware that they are speaking to foreign agents when they notice second language accent or intonation. In Text Sample 2.1, the caller specifically asked for the agent’s location and later asked to be transferred to an American agent when the Filipino agent did not give her location “*for security reasons.*”

Text Sample 2.1 “I want to talk to an American”

Agent: Thank you for calling [XX Company] tech support, my name is Mary, my tech ID is [xxx], can I have your DSL phone number please?

Caller: Hey Mary what’s your ID number? [angry/irate tone]

Agent: That’s [agent’s ID number repeated]

Caller: Phone number, area code 206-333-3333

Agent: Ok, that’s 206 uh 333-3333 is that correct?

Caller: Right

Agent: Alright, and now would this be a good number to reach you if in case we need to follow up on something?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: Ok can I also have your permission so I can access your records?

Caller: Oh yeah, you have my permission

Agent: Alright, so I just need a moment [interruption]

Caller: Where are you located?

Agent: I'm sorry sir I can't tell you that uh for security [interruption]

Caller: You can't tell me that? Ok let me talk to your supervisor now, come on I've been without service for three days, I'm sick of you guys, I'm writing a letter to congress, where the, you know where I am, you have my permission, I'm pissed off! Let me talk to your supervisor, I'm fed up with you!

Agent: Yes sir [interruption]

Caller: Come on [!]

Agent: Well, sir [interruption]

Caller: Come on [!]

Agent: Uh, uh, yeah, I'm sorry to hear about that [interruption]

Caller: Mary I've got your number [unclear] I've tried a hundred, let me talk to someone, I don't want to hear your shit, I need help, I don't need, uh blockage, I want this working

Agent: Ok sir, uh, I'll be transferring you over to my supervisor right away, ok I just need to know I have the correct information on my end

Caller: I don't want you to, listen, if you're offshore I don't wanna, I wanna talk to an American that's what I wanna know, are you in the United States?

Agent: Yes [agent lied] [long pause] [no response from the caller for more than 5 seconds] sir, all I need is the first and last name and your complete billing address and I'll be transferring over to my [interruption]

Caller: No, when I called, they, they identified the number that is why you have the communication number, you should know this, you've been asking me this three times, ok, now what is the deal here? I want help! Just want you to help me. I'm calling you because you're not providing the service! I want a refund! You're not giving the service! Wha, what, the name under this is Jan Corn* C O R N, my name is Michael Corn C O R N. I have a bill [unclear] \$300 and I am charging [XX Company], ok, per hour! You get this? I want this resolved! Not some phony messages! What else do you need to know Mary? Give me your supervisor!

Agent: Yes, I'll go ahead and get a supervisor, just give me a one moment please [call was put on hold]

*All names were changed

[agent talked to supervisor explaining that the caller was irate; supervisor asked background information, e.g., caller's location, issue, etc., and prepared to take over the call; call was cut]

This call excerpt illustrates negative perceptions of outsourcing by some Americans. There are callers who would immediately ask for the agents' location and then demand to be transferred when they are found to be offshore. Some accounts allow their agents to say their actual location while some are trained to decline. The Filipino agent in the excerpt above "lied" when asked by the caller if she was

in the United States. It is interesting to note that when the agent said “yes” to this question, the caller paused and decided to engage in the call and provide the information requested. If this caller’s sentiments become representative of the majority of American customers in the years ahead, changes in the industry are, no doubt, very likely.

In addition to this negative American perception, it appears that there are actual and obvious cultural limitations impacting the ability of Filipino agents to deliver high-quality customer service responses to American callers. These deficiencies can likely be addressed, or at least mitigated, through additional training and experience in transaction handling. It is not easy to project and act sufficiently like “an American” so as to satisfy American customers, given the types of available training currently offered by many call centers in the Philippines while, at the same time, make a quick transition from skills and product training to actual phone support. The following excerpt (Text Sample 2.2) illustrates the intense and “pressurized” communication Filipino agents often encounter when attempting to handle angry callers. What this transcription does not totally capture is the customer’s angry and frustrated tone and hostile indifference as the agent attempts to troubleshoot the problem. Indeed, the customer’s anger becomes an additional barrier to the agent’s successful resolution of the problem. The agent in this sample was just completing his first month of actual phone support. He spoke with thick Filipino accent but appeared to understand his support procedures well. However, he was not able to control the caller’s emotions. The agent understandably believed that polite apologizing and respectful intonation, following common conversational norms in the Philippines would appease the caller and facilitate positive communication, enabling him to resolve the problem. In fact, it is possible, if not likely, that the “mismatch” between the agent’s calm and polite demeanor and the caller’s anger and frustration might have created a perception in the caller’s mind of ineptitude or condescension on the part of the agent and actually exacerbated the communication breakdown, resulting in an unsuccessful transaction. In any event, there is clearly a mismatch between the sociolinguistic strategy employed by the agent and the caller’s disposition and needs, resulting in a failure of the transaction.

Text Sample 2.2 “Don’t apologize, just fix it!”

Agent: Thank you for calling [XX Company] technical support my name is Lyle may I please have your telephone number?

Caller: It’s the one I punched in already

Agent: Uhm yes sir but uh we don’t uh it’s not been uh [interruption]

Caller: 333-444-4444

Agent: Ok sir let me just verify that one it’s 333-444-4444 is that correct?

Caller: That's correct

Agent: Is this a good call back number?

Caller: Yes I can't sign in it says no internet connection

Agent: Uh-huh but sir may I uh have your name please before we start uh
[interruption]

Caller: Oh for god's sake it's the one you're showing

Agent: Ok sir I'm so sorry for that one

Caller: I can't sign in it says no internet connection

Agent: Ok I'm so sorry for the inconvenience sir I have uh your [interruption]

Caller: Don't apologize just fix it [!!] [angry/shouting]

Agent: Ok uhm but before I proceed uh sir may I have your approval to access your account?

Caller: Yes

Agent: Thank you very much ok here's what we're going to do we would check the physical connections on your modem and we would try to power cycle the modem ok? uhm can you [interruption]

Caller: I have no idea what that means just fix it

Agent: Yes sir can you try to uh unplug the black cord that uh by the way sir may I have the uh what uh operating system are you using?

Caller: Windows XP

Agent: Is it a Windows XP? What modem type are you using? Is it a black box?
[interruption]

Caller: Little black box with the antenna

Agent: Ok so can I put you on hold for two to three minutes while I check my
[interruption]

Caller: No no no [!!]

Agent: Ok

Caller: No go ahead and fix it do you want me to read you the whole message? There's no internet connection

Agent: No sir yes can we can you try to unplug the black cord at the back of the modem and try to plug it back in after a minute?

It is difficult to confidently predict the sustainability of outsourced call centers in the Philippines in the next 10 or so years amidst the many challenges faced by the industry. Monetary realities and basic business intangibles indicate that outsourcing is a viable option for U.S. firms. The cost of manpower and technology in the U.S. required to provide telephone-based customer services is far too great given the available offshore alternatives. The first 10 years of outsourced call centers in the Philippines brought much-needed investment money and provided jobs for many Filipino professionals. It is clear that the country is doing its best to

continue to lure U.S. corporations to operate business processes in the Philippines by addressing the training needs of its human resources, especially in the use of the English language.

2.4 English education in the Philippines

English education in the Philippines began in 1901 with the arrival of American public school teachers. The previous Spanish occupation, which ruled the country for over 300 years, did not implement extensive education for the masses, and Spanish did not become a major language spoken by the populace. By contrast, the English language has been taught and used in public schools and was later instituted as a co-national language with Filipino in the Philippine Constitution (Gonzalez, 1998). English has been regarded as the preferred language of business, politics, and education, and most official publications in the government and the legal system have been printed in English. From the early 1900s to the present, English, not Filipino or other regional languages, has been considered as the “language of prestige” (Sibayan, 1994; Gonzalez, 1998; Tupas, 2004). English instruction in classrooms is based on American English as an exo-normative model in structure and target phonology (Bautista, 2000). Major school subjects, especially mathematics and science, are generally taught in English and make use of English-based textbooks and materials (Acuna, 1994). Some changes in the medium of instruction policies in public schools have been implemented in the last decade but English continues to be the prevailing language of instruction in secondary and tertiary schools.

Language controversies related to the Bilingual Education program influence the direction of English-in-education policies and language planning in the Philippines. There is an obvious inconsistency in the use of English as the medium of instruction in the public and private schools and the way the school systems are structured in the country. Private schools in the big cities are producing competent English speakers while many rural schools in the provinces have not shown consistent improvement in teaching and training students to use high-level English (Bernardo, 2004; Nical, Smolicz, & Secombe, 2004). Still, classrooms are tasked to focus on the teaching of English and to use English-based reading materials in many subjects. This is true even in the rural areas where there are few qualified teachers and insufficient textbooks and instructional tools that could facilitate effective second language (L2) acquisition. The gap in English education in schools is one reason why some sectors call for a redirection of language teaching in the country and propose “intellectualization” of Filipino and its use as the main medium of instruction in schools. Sibayan (1994) contends that the country will

benefit from a cultural restructuring in language education based on a grounding in regional languages rather than English. He defends the need to rewrite the bilingual program to include regional languages and limit the extent of English as medium of instruction in mathematics and science. This is a contentious proposition that has not received support from the Filipino masses and the elites; with the perceived economic benefits of English for international business and for overseas employment, this move has not gained significant momentum. There appears to be no major backing for this argument so that, even in rural areas, the use of English in schools is regarded as ideal and is not considered to be detrimental to overall learning (Acuna, 1994; Nical, Smolicz, & Secombe, 2004). Although there are signs, especially in relation to achievement in mathematics and science, that students have performance issues due to language difficulties, English still maintains its stature as the language that brings economic benefits to people.

Politicians, media practitioners, and officials in the Department of Education continue to voice their negative opinions about the present state of English teaching and the level of fluency displayed by Filipino students and graduates in the country. These popular opinions directly mirror the statement from the JFKCF-P report mentioned earlier in this chapter that there is a “declining proficiency of graduates in the English language.” Solita Monsod (2003), a former Economic Planning secretary, wrote in a newspaper column that, “in the ‘third largest English-speaking country in the world,’ there is a shortage of English-fluent speakers” (p. B2). Current public perception, especially from Filipino professionals themselves, agrees with this general, albeit intuitive, assessment. The increasing number of speech training centers, including “call center academies,” shows that there is a thriving market for post-university English training courses in the country. Likewise, it appears that many professionals are not confident that they have been successfully trained in business communication, especially with native speakers of English, by their universities. From 2001 to 2007, several call center training academies catering to university graduates have been established in the cities of Manila and Cebu in addition to the well-established speech training centers already in operation since the early 1980s (Friginal, 2004). These institutions often have strong support from local universities and they provide additional emphasis on the grammar of spoken English and accent training. There is motivation for Filipino skilled laborers to aspire to high-level proficiency in international or global communication in English due, for the most part, to the lure of overseas employment, and locally, employment in multinational corporations such as call centers, export manufacturing, and technical assembly plants.

It is not clear either where the notion that “Filipinos spoke fluent English” before comes from, or the specific time frame when this “fluent English period” was supposedly evident. Many of these prevailing perceptions about fluency in

English have not been measured or quantified in research. Traditionally, because American teachers started public education in the country, many of those who were trained by these teachers spoke positively of the way English was learned and used in the public schools. It is obvious, however, that with the current economy, the education sector has too many limitations when it comes to the training of teachers (for example in the teaching of English as a second language) across the board. In addition, instructional materials and textbooks as well as classrooms in public schools in the big cities and rural areas are largely inadequate.

Nevertheless, even with some internal and external criticism of the English proficiency level of Filipino professionals, the Philippines has maintained its status as the “manning capital of the world” (Ramirez, 2001, p. 2) in maritime operations, domestic help, engineering, and nursing. Compared to many Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) countries, the Philippines has had relatively more opportunity to export its human resources to countries requiring English communication in skilled labor and domestic help. Also, the country has continued to benchmark with APEC standards in technology training and language use. Filipino professionals have shown an ability to communicate in English that has satisfied the minimum requirements of corporations, hospitals, and private homes overseas especially in the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Ramirez, 2001). Many Filipino nurses are able to successfully pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Test of Spoken English (TSE) requirements which allow them to work in the U.S., U.K., or Canada. The goal of English as an International Language (EIL), i.e., “international intelligibility” (Baetens-Beardsmore, 1993; Hung, 2002), seems to have been achieved by Filipinos in communicating with both native and non-native speakers of English in many settings concerned with cross-cultural business and medical care transactions. It appears, therefore, that the quality of English spoken and used in the Philippines could stand on its own and be considered a self-determining variety of English which is deployed across structures equipped to fully function in international settings (Phillipson, 2001; Dayag, 2004; Tupas, 2004).

The two opposing views on the quality and status of English use in the Philippines (i.e., “native-like fluency” vs. “international intelligibility”) have implications to the macro and micro language policies in various contexts. As shown by Monsod’s (2003) comments and the JFKCF-P report, criticisms regarding the English proficiency of the Filipino professional result from the failure of the education sector to teach fluent English, especially in the public schools. This view argues for language-based policies, especially English-in-education programs to aspire to native-like mastery and fluency in American English. On the other hand, groups of people who advocate for the recognition of a variety of Filipino English seem to be contented with the current policies and are more focused on the overall

improvement of quality of teaching and materials development. This second view relates to the principles of EIL and is supported by the current success rate of overseas employment. Because skilled labor is the number one export of the Philippines, it could be argued that English and communication needs for international understanding have been successfully addressed by language policies in the country and that no change of course is necessary. Focusing on goals such as comprehension and cross-cultural communicative strategies instead of fluency, accent, and syntax could be practical and more attainable. Making Filipinos “own” their variety of English could help further determine language policies that are attuned to the cultural and economic realities in the country (Graddol, 1997; Hung, 2002; Matsuda, 2003).

With the boom of employment in outsourcing, however, it is clear that fluency, accent reduction, and the acquisition of high-level English have gained the upper hand in setting the direction of language planning and shaping of popular opinion. As a key growth industry currently providing jobs and revenues to the country, the government and the education sectors are ready to respond to the language needs of call centers. This direction influences future guidelines for organized, top-down language planning implemented by the Department of Education and private language training institutions. Highlighting the importance of fluency in English following the typical American variety could define the nature of macro and micro language policies in the Philippines. As the country pursues this focus in the coming years, it would be fair to ask if educated bilingualism and designs to teach fluency following an exo-normative model (i.e., “standard” American English) could lead to the acquisition of native-like mastery in the target language, taking into account the language realities in the Philippines. Given that schooled bilingualism has achieved only minimal proficiency, within very limited registers or domains of usage (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997), the outcome could still be a disappointment for sectors demanding the immediate acquisition of native-like fluency in English from the Filipino workforce in international business.

In the light of these issues, collaborations between the BPOs and public and private universities in the training of future call center employees and the language assessment and monitoring of existing call center agents have been established. In June 2007, a local university in northern Philippines, the University of the Cordilleras, started piloting a preparatory course in English proficiency, technical competency, and customer relations designed by a U.S.-owned BPO, Sitel Philippines. Rod Spiers, Sitel northern Philippines (Baguio) site director, reported that the firm has partnered with the university for a five-year testing project (2007–2012) to flesh out a curriculum designed for BPO firms. The Sitel director added that the preparatory course was designed to give college students “a concrete idea of what it is like to work in a call center, [where] the final stretch of training will be an

onsite, hands-on lesson at Sitel Baguio” (Cabreza, 2007, p. B12). Many call centers are also very supportive in providing monetary assistance to their employees who want to pursue higher education. Attendance at external language-based training and various performance certifications offered by private agencies is highly encouraged. Companies continue to send their employees overseas for corporate meetings and additional training, and these exposures to trends and current business practices contribute to the holistic development of Filipino professionals in international business settings.

2.5 Quality service: English proficiency and cross-cultural interaction in outsourced call centers

Text Sample 2.2 (“Don’t apologize, just fix it!”) illustrates factors threatening the sustainability of the call center industry in the Philippines, and also clearly shows the importance of effectively addressing English proficiency and sociolinguistic strategies to serve American callers successfully. As it is, productivity and service quality are inextricably bound to each other in outsourced call centers, whether measured empirically or experientially (Granered, 2004). Considering factors related to cultural sensitivity and language proficiency, the non-native English speaker engaged in service transactions needs to have effective cultural understanding of customer needs, proficiency in English, and successful communicative strategies in transferring information to the callers. The interplay of these factors is expected in every single call to ensure customer satisfaction and loyalty. Moreover, a sincere, patient, and service-oriented call center agent is highly desirable in order to relate to the customer and show adequate, personalized service (D’Ausilio, 1998; Granered, 2004). The service industry is efficiency-driven and highly customer-centered. An agent’s inability to perceive, and then adjust to the needs and demands of the caller could mean a failure of the transaction with significant negative effect on business (D’Ausilio, 1998). In the Philippines and India, this failure of transactions could also cause the termination of the agent from the company (Pal, 2004). Providing “total quality service” is important in maintaining customer loyalty (Albrecht & Zemke, 2001), and the use of effective language in transactions as mentioned in the customer experience survey by Anton and Setting (2004) is a major factor in facilitating a kind of service that will guarantee customer patronage. For the Filipino non-native speakers of English, it is ideal to display high-level ESL abilities in service encounters in order to efficiently address customer needs and avoid misunderstanding.

In addition to proficiency in the target language, cross-cultural competence is very important in service interactions involving speakers from different language

backgrounds (Korhonen, 2003). Training programs that integrate instructions and tasks intended for the acquisition of cross-cultural competence are necessary in outsourcing (Granered, 2004). Korhonen states that training in international communication which is facilitated without a direct link to the cultural norms of the target language has proven to fail. The failure to utilize cross-cultural communicative or linguistic (e.g., repetitions, use of numbers, references, or response forms) strategies potentially leads to miscommunication with fatal consequences, as in the studies conducted by Cushing (1994) and Jones (2003) about the cross-cultural communication problems experienced by air-traffic controllers and pilots who don't share the same first language background. In call centers, miscommunication, as in most business-oriented settings, is harmful in transactions and must be avoided to assure the completion of support and save valuable contact time. In various instances, the inability of Filipino agents to express specific instructions without confusing the customers creates errors, more unnecessary questions, and misunderstandings.

To be successful, Filipinos need to continue to develop a customer service culture congruent with American expectations and not largely following Filipino norms and communicative conventions in service encounters. In Text Sample 2.2, the agent clearly was demonstrating typical Filipino behavior of appeasing an angry customer by apologizing and respectfully deferring to the caller. The agent appeared to assume his "servant" persona in trying to develop trust and confidence in the caller. This strategy did not work, as the caller seemed to have become even more impatient in response to these apologies (e.g., "*Don't apologize, just fix it!*"). As Filipinos gain experience serving American callers, they learn about the value of control and "leveling" with the common culture of the callers. Americans have been characterized as having a "distance/individualistic" culture (Hofstede, 1997) which opposes the Filipinos' family/collectivist norms. In Hofstede's collectivist/individualist scale, the U.S. is ranked as the most individualistic culture directly opposite of the Philippines on the other end of the scale. Freedom and equality of individual opportunity shape the social structure in the U.S. while family and harmony in social structures are defining norms for Filipinos. The drive for status and achievement means that Americans work a lot, are mobile, and expect immediate returns from their time and effort invested. Americans are known to be results-oriented with the main goal being profit and achievement as they want to see – and get to – the bottom line right away. In communicating with Americans in outsourced call centers, Granered (2004) suggests that offshore agents have to make their points obvious and direct immediately instead of trying to appeal to emotions or build trust. These agents need to stress points clearly and repeat them a few times for clarity and then get to the "fix" or solution to the callers' problem as quickly as possible. Relationships and "harmony" should be a secondary

by-product, rather than a primary objective for Filipino agents trying to successfully meet American customer needs. In sum, Filipino agents need well-designed language and culture training, as well as sufficient experience serving American callers, to slowly gain cultural awareness that is vital in successful outsourced call center interactions.

Clearly, culture learning cannot be accomplished overnight in the context of outsourcing customer service. Even Americans coming from different regions in the U.S. will encounter minor cultural problems among themselves in interactions. The lesson here is knowing how to solve these culture-based conflicts successfully, as most native speakers would be able to do in service interactions. Filipinos have to learn to properly but efficiently ask for additional contexts and explanations whenever they experience difficulty in understanding the callers culturally. In the two short call excerpts below (Text Samples 2.3 and 2.4) the agents did not immediately connect with the callers' turns, as there appeared to be no schema that could help them to fully understand the specific ideas or concepts which the callers were trying to communicate. In 2.3 below, the Filipino agent does not connect the state of Ohio and "buckeye" and in 2.4, the agent fails to comprehend the caller's attempt at further explaining what "saddle blanket" means after having trouble spelling it (*"Saddle Blanket, like blankets that are on a horse, saddle blanket"*).

Text Sample 2.3 "Buckeye is one word or two words?"

Agent: Let me just pull up my uh my system here uhm, ok what is the new address now please?

Caller: It's 2222 South Main Street Columbus, Ohio 44444 and the new name is Buckeye Pack & Ship

Agent: How do you pronounce, I mean how do you spell the uh company name?

Caller: Buckeye B-U-C-K-E-Y-E Pack P-A-C-K and the symbol for and [&]

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: Ship S-H-I-P

Agent: Uhm Buckeye is one word or two words?

Caller: It's one word, don't you know that?

Agent: One word, so it's in Columbus, right?

Caller: Yes, Ohio Buckeyes, man

Agent: Oh ok, Ohio Buckeyes

Caller: Yeah, I guess you're from Michigan [laughs] [unclear] or [interruption]

Agent: I'm sorry, sir?

Caller: Oh never mind, I'm just, whatever [interruption]

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: That's fine

Agent: Ok

Text Sample 2.4 “Saddle blanket horse?”

Agent: Ok uh Lane could you please provide me your uh new billing address?

Caller: Uh it's 2222 Saddle Blanket Place, three words

Agent: Sattle S-A-T-T-L-E?

Caller: S-A-D-D-L-E

Agent: D-D-L-E ok

Caller: Saddle blanket like blankets that are on a horse, saddle blanket

Agent: Saddle blanket horse?

Caller: Huh?

Agent: What is that?

Caller: No, I'm saying saddle blanket, like you would put on a horse, a saddle blanket, it's
S-A-D-D-L-E-B-L-A-N-K-E-T-P-L-A-C-E Saddle Blanket Place, three words

Agent: I see

Caller: Got that?

Agent: Ok Saddle Blanket Horse

Caller: No man Saddle Blanket [interruption]

Agent: I'm sorry Place, I mean Place not Horse, I'm sorry

Caller: [laughs] that's alright

Agent: I'm sorry, I'm sorry

Caller: No problem, no problem

Agent: I'm sorry for that

Caller: It's alright

In the two excerpts above, the agents did not have the necessary cultural connections with or immediate comprehension of the callers' words or phrases. In the “buckeye” excerpt, the caller showed some level of frustration that the agent did not know how to spell buckeye (“*It's one word, don't you know that?*”; “*Yes, Ohio Buckeyes, man.*”). Although in these cases, these misunderstandings created only minor communication issues that generally did not affect the overall flow of the transactions, they likely would have reinforced a caller's skepticism and reluctance to deal with a foreign call center agent, if any predisposition in that direction existed in the first place, as it often does. It would be ideal for outsourced call center agents to learn these nuances in American speech and cultural norms but it is clear that these are not going to be learned quickly.

Some might argue that as customers, Americans ideally should also learn to be more accepting and accommodating of the language and culture-based limitations of Filipino agents. Unfortunately, and realistically, because of the inherent dynamics of customer service and the political and economic implications involved in the outsourcing of U.S. jobs, the burden is left to Filipino agents to support customers efficiently and avoid constant miscommunication in order to sustain the flow of

the service transaction. Because of limited training materials designed for outsourced call center agents, many language and culture training programs in call centers in the Philippines use materials from the U.S. and those that are available in the market. These references and activity manuals on call handling practices and mock transactions are primarily written for native speakers of English or those with high-level language proficiency. Training topics in telephone support which address service competence include appropriate speech techniques; establishing rapport and personalization of support; and clarity, effectiveness, and accuracy of information. The foci of these topics already assume proficiency in the language. These common topics are universal in the context of outsourcing but, as pointed out by Korhonen (2003), the need is for more grounding of these skills in cross-cultural competence, and consequently effective language usage. However, even with the obvious concerns about these issues in training curriculum and materials, the prevailing training environment in many call centers appears to address the basic requirements that support the preparation of agents in customer service. More provisions for practice are given and constant monitoring and coaching are provided by language trainers employed by the companies. Call centers employ American expatriates and Filipinos with advanced ESL teaching experience to work with agents in various areas of language production and task performance. Once the agents start taking actual calls from American customers, they gain valuable experience in the real-world use of the English language in addition to exposure on the range of issues and concerns coming from the customers.

In a previous study (Friginal, 2007), I found that the level of professional English spoken by university graduates in the Philippines does not readily match the English proficiency expectations of American call centers and customers. However, Filipino agents' education in English, overall L2 proficiency, and trainability allow these agents to work in outsourced call centers and attain adequate achievement in the industry when provided appropriate training and experience on a micro level. Schooled bilingualism in the Philippines has provided opportunities for Filipino professionals to work in international business satisfying the standards of many multi-nationals and international organizations. Nevertheless, for particular industries requiring native-like fluency in English, e.g., outsourced customer service, the English-in-education policies in the Philippines still leave gaps in training its professionals in the acquisition of fluent speech. Specific pragmatic features of the L2, contextual domains of usage, and cultural sensitivity are, as expected, not thoroughly learned in schools.

English proficiency and cross-cultural communication training and the call center company's English-based policies are important in addressing the gaps brought about by L2 limitations in outsourcing. In addition, actual experience in transactions with Americans increases the confidence of the agents and provides them the best venue to practice their language skills and task performance. These

language and communication experiences lead to higher scores in English tests and service quality monitoring. It would be interesting to investigate in a longitudinal study if such improvements eventually lead to the acquisition of native-like proficiency in English after a period of time. High-level English in customer service is required, but this alone does not determine success in transaction handling and accuracy. Other factors that will ensure effective delivery of service such as establishing rapport, personalization of support, comprehension, and correctness of information in transactions are equally important. A successful interplay of product knowledge, cross-cultural communication skills, service personality, and language skills is needed by the non-native agents in this context of customer service to effectively provide services to American customers. Outsourced call centers in the Philippines would benefit from devoting additional training time and resources to other areas in addition to English proficiency to achieve agents' improvement in task performance.

2.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter I introduced the context of outsourced call centers in the Philippines including the Philippine advantage in outsourcing, challenges faced by the outsourced call center industry in the Philippines, and English education and language-in-education programs that lead to current policies that affect the employment of Filipino professionals in U.S.-owned call centers. I pointed out some of the challenges that have potential wide-ranging effects impacting the sustainability of outsourced call centers, not only in the Philippines but also in India and other countries. The U.S. economy and public perception of the quality of service provided by foreign agents continue to play an important role in changing management perspectives and business directions that may eventually curtail the influx of outsourced call centers into countries outside of the U.S.

Clearly, cheap and sustainable customer service is an important consideration for many U.S. companies. The Philippines has quite a lot to offer when it comes to human resources, available technology, and governmental support provided to multi-national investors such as call centers and technology outsourcers. I believe that there is sufficient incentive and support in the current economy and Americans' public perception of practicality and affordability to ensure that outsourcing will continue to flourish. It is also possible that American customers will continue to adjust and accommodate the limitations of foreign agents in language and cultural awareness during service transactions. In consideration of and response to this possible – I believe likely – scenario, language training in most call centers is continuing to improve and include relevant, real-world materials that contribute to effective learning and the acquisition of high-level proficiency in English.

CHAPTER 3

Corpora and description of speaker groups in the call center corpus

3.1 Contextual description of the call center company in this book

The U.S.-owned call center company that provided data and sponsored the corpus collection and transcription for this book supports a variety of corporations in North America, Asia-Pacific, and Europe. The company focuses primarily on call center operations with some IT consulting for the U.S. and European markets. Its recent operations have included financial services, travel, and telecommunications, as well as a diversified technical support business for consumer products. As of September 2007, this third party call center company employs close to 10,000 agents in the Philippines, serving over 35 different American corporations and an increasing number of clients based in Asia and Europe. From a modest operation that started with 16 employees acquired from one of the first BPOs in the Philippines in 1997 (and only one Fortune-500 corporation as client), this call center has grown considerably and has continued to be one of the leaders in outsourcing services in the Philippines and the Asia-Pacific region. Table 3.1 shows the company's timeline of operation and growth, especially its increasing number of sites and agents in the Philippines from 1997 to 2006.

3.2 Language training and quality monitoring practices

U.S.-based customers who need assistance for products and services call a designated (often toll-free) number that may direct them to available agents in the Philippines who are employed by this call center company. Calls are entertained during regular business hours in the U.S., which requires that the agents in the Philippines work on nightshift (usually from 10 PM to 6 AM) to accommodate the differing time zones. Some agents serve accounts that operate for 24 hours, seven days a week. For third party call centers, the agents are employed

Table 3.1. Sponsoring call center’s timeline of operation in the Philippines.

Year	Developments
1997	First year of operation in the Philippines with 16 call center agents; one site
2000	More expansion in the first site; over 600 agents
2002	Over 2,000 agents; established another site in the Philippines’ central business district
2003	Over 5,400 agents; added one more site in Manila and in the province of Cebu in central Philippines
2004	Over 6,500 agents; five total service locations in the Philippines
2005	Over 7,000 agents; launched another site
2006	Over 8,000 agents

Data were taken from the company’s official website intended for clients and prospective employees in the Philippines and Asia-Pacific region. This call center company owns the data/corpus analyzed in this study. I strictly ensured the privacy and confidentiality of all speakers and clients in the transactions included in the corpus and used as excerpts in this book. Note that I have done the analysis of data in my individual capacity as a researcher and not in representation of the sponsoring call center company.

by the call center company and not by their respective accounts. In other words, agents may be handling customer calls about the iPhone and have received technical training about the product; however, they are not considered to be Apple employees. The agents receive salaries and benefits from the call center, which, in turn, collect revenues from the accounts for manpower services and use of technology and equipment. The call center, in coordination with representatives from the accounts, provides English and phone-handling training and coaching to the agents and regularly evaluates agents’ performance and customer satisfaction scores in the transactions.

All agents hired by the call center company in this study attend a short, two-week “core-skills training” for new employees designed as an orientation program that covers language use, U.S. culture, and phone-handling topics, as well as business and procedural account matters before they attend their “product training.” This core-skills orientation program for agents is conducted by the training department of the call center in collaboration with the human resources (HR) and quality assurance (QA) departments. New-hires have successfully passed a series of interviews and written examinations based on their knowledge and understanding of the services and products offered by the specific account and their ability to communicate effectively in English. Product training focuses on the actual support processes that the agents will provide their callers once they start taking actual calls. This training may be conducted for a period from two weeks to four months depending on the requirements of the account. Agents serving high-value accounts such as investment or banking services are often required to train for examinations in order to obtain U.S.-required certifications or licenses.

Some agents are sent to the U.S. or other training centers outside the Philippines for product training.

Once the agents start taking actual customer calls “on the floor,” quality monitoring of performance is conducted on a regular basis. An agent may be grouped with a particular team under a team leader who acts as a coach and also conducts account-specific evaluation of performance. In this call center, internal, account-specific evaluations are matched by additional monitoring from the QA department. Results of weekly or monthly performance evaluations are of great interest to the accounts. The QA department of the call center also conducts customer satisfaction surveys by calling recent customers and asking a series of questions about their interactions with the agents. Data from internal team-leader evaluations, QA monitors, and feedback from American customers are sent to the U.S. offices of these accounts and reports of problems as well as customer satisfaction or dissatisfaction scores are regularly scrutinized. U.S. clients make frequent and necessary checks of the performance of their outsourced division comparing data from their local operations in the mainland with the group of agents from the Philippines. Conference calls between U.S.-based managers and supervisors from various accounts are conducted regularly with the QA officers of the call center in the Philippines. Clients hold the call center responsible for improvements in agents’ performance and can recommend the termination of low-performing agents. Customer complaints—especially those related to language and task performance (e.g., intelligibility, accuracy of support, average time spent in transactions)—are internally addressed in the Philippines by providing the agents additional training and coaching.

Different language and quality scorecards are used by this call center company to match the specific needs of accounts. Some accounts have very strict compliance requirements regarding agents’ support processes which are all reflected in the assessment instruments used to evaluate agents’ performance. For example, there are accounts that require agents to meet a certain average length of time in completing transactions (AHT or Average Handling Time). It is apparent in listening to these transactions that groups of agents attempt to solve issues in the shortest amount of time possible. Agents are trained to initiate closing spiels (e.g., “*Is there something else I can help you with?*”) to signal and encourage the conclusion of the transaction. In addition, some accounts also require their agents to sell products or offer callers related services. In these instances, successful sales lead to incentives and bonuses.

In general, agents have monthly scorecards that show quality monitoring scores, language proficiency ratings, number of customer complaints or positive feedback, and average length of completion of support. These indicators yield a monthly performance rating for each agent. These data are considered during the

provisionary status of the agents' employment with the call center (usually during the first six months) and are used as the basis for financial incentives or possible promotion, or—in the case of poor performance—additional training, extension of the provisional status, or termination of employment. Although it may seem that these rigorous quality monitoring processes might create too much pressure to allow agents to perform well, it is apparent that most agents are able to adjust to the demands of their accounts and maintain very good, collegial relationships with other agents, their team leaders, and account managers. The benefits and the internal employee development programs of this call center seem to outweigh the constant on-the-job anxiety resulting from “performance surveillance,” even for those agents working with problematic accounts. Agents are also motivated by available opportunities for upward movement in the call center and the prospects of overseas training and employment.

3.3 Corpora

This study uses a corpus of outsourced call center transactions (heretofore “Call Center corpus”) described below. Because there was no previously available corpus of call center discourse, I designed and collected one to represent the typical interactions and communicative tasks pursued by agents and callers involved in telephone-based customer service. As a baseline to highlight what is distinctive about outsourced call center interactions in terms of the frequency and distribution of salient linguistics features, I use other existing corpora of spoken discourse for comparison. The comparative corpora include: (1) American face-to-face conversation (a portion of the Longman Grammar corpus), and (2) spontaneous telephone conversation between American participants who are native speakers of English from the Switchboard component of the American National Corpus Project (ANC) (for more information, see the ANC website at <http://americannationalcorpus.org/>). I use these comparison corpora to compare call center interactions with face-to-face conversations that are not specifically involving the performance of tasks, and interactions that are also conducted on the telephone. Copies of these corpora were provided by the Corpus Linguistics Research Program of the English Department at Northern Arizona University.

3.3.1 The Call Center corpus

The corpus of call center transactions was collected in the Philippines over a period of four weeks in July 2006. The transactions were retrieved following

the list of audio files cued in the database of recorded calls for a particular work shift. The call center company uses a web-based software that stores audio files of transactions that will be available for a specified period of time, usually for quality monitoring and documentation of transactions. These transactions are accessible through a secured website only by quality monitors, account managers, and team leaders. Files from the database list that had audio problems or were either too long or too short were dropped during corpus collection. The completed calls that qualified in the corpus ranged from five to 25 minutes in duration. The 500 audio files that comprise the Call Center corpus have an average call duration of eight minutes and 45 seconds per transaction and have a combined length of over 73 hours of customer service interactions.

Convenience sampling of audio files was done to ensure, among other considerations, a comparable number of files per account or a balanced number of male and female agents and callers, as much as possible. As there were accounts that typically had female callers more than male callers (e.g., a purchase/order account for home products where callers were mostly female sales consultants), I spent extra time searching for male callers in this and other accounts in the database to acquire a comparable number of male and female American callers in the final composition of the corpus. The audio files of customer calls were transcribed into machine readable text documents by trained Filipino transcriptionists following conventions used in the collection of the service encounter corpus of the TOEFL 2000 Spoken and Written Academic Language (T2K-SWAL), (see Biber (2006) for a detailed description of this corpus). Text Sample 3.1 below shows the header information and an excerpt of the transcribed interaction between an agent and caller in an inquiry-type call. Personal information about the callers, if any (e.g., names, addresses, phone numbers, credit card or social security numbers, etc.) was consistently and scrupulously replaced by different proper nouns or a series of numbers in the transcripts. No attempt was made to transcribe phonetically, but some comments about pronunciation, whenever it resulted in misunderstanding, were added in the texts. I checked the transcribed text files manually for format and accuracy.

Text Sample 3.1 Transcribed text file with header information

<Agent Name: XX>
<Account: XX Company>
<Agent Gender: M>
<Caller Gender: M>
<Caller's Location: Atlanta, GA>
<Date: July 16, 2006>

Agent: Thank you for calling [XX Company] this is [agent name], how may I help you?

Caller: Hi, how are you doing today sir?

Agent: I'm good

Caller: Hi this is [caller's name] of [XX Company], I was trying to reach a Corene, Coleen?
[name changed]

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: Uh we are trying to reach uhm a service [unclear] we are trying to send for repair

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: And we are just trying to verify if it's out and working?

Agent: You have ticket sir with [XX Company]?

Caller: No, you all have a ticket with us, [XX Company], and I'm calling back to check

Agent: [long pause] and yeah go ahead

Caller: Ok what was your name again?

Agent: [agent's name]

Caller: [agent's name] ok what I was doing uhm I was calling back to see if your services
have been working

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: The service company that you guys contract with went ahead left a ticket in with
us and we are just trying to verify or it's either let you know that the service should
have been working at this point

Agent: Uh [interruption]

Caller: Would you like to have our ticket number sir?

Agent: Uh we can pull our ticket number, what we have is the, do you have a circuit
number management?

Caller: Yes sir I do I do have the circuit id

Agent: What's the circuit id?

Caller: 32-X-Y hotel golf paris 4-4-4-4-4

Agent: Oh, ok let me just confirm this ticket with my colleague here and let them pull out
the ticket, let them know that you called up

Caller: Sure no problem

Agent: It will be just be a minute

Agent: [hold – 1 min and 55 seconds], ok, thank you very much for waiting uh sir hello?

Caller: Yes?

Table 3.2 shows the summary of accounts, the number of texts, approximate number of words, and the number of male and female agents and callers in the corpus. Eight accounts divided into three major types (1) Troubleshoot, (2) Purchase, and (3) Inquire, comprise the corpus of transactions. These three general groupings of accounts are used in this book to indicate specific differences in the primary communicative task involved in the transactions.

Table 3.2. Composition of the Call Center corpus.

Code	Description of Accounts	Number of Texts	Approximate Number of Words	Male Agents	Female Agents	Male Callers	Female Callers
TECH 1	Troubleshoot Office Equipment	65	98,780	29	36	32	33
TECH 2	Troubleshoot Internet Connection (Home)	60	75,403	33	27	27	33
TECH 3	Troubleshoot Internet Services (Business)	70	65,549	36	34	43	27
TECH 4	Troubleshoot Kitchen Appliances	70	70,489	37	33	41	29
CS 1	Order/Check Order Status (Home/Kitchen Products)	60	59,729	20	40	15	45
CS 2	Purchase Mobile Phone Minutes	65	64,531	31	34	25	40
CS 3	Inquire/Order (Instrument and Equipment)	55	57,549	34	21	30	25
CS 4	Inquire/Order (Tools, Software, and Spare Parts)	55	61,735	28	27	32	23
	Total	500	553,765	248	252	245	255

3.3.2 Description of internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus

The analysis of cross-cultural discourse between Filipino agents and American callers is based on the following primary speaker groups:

1. Role – Agents or Callers
2. Gender – Male and Female Agents and Callers
3. Agents' Performance Evaluation Scores
4. Agents' Experience with Current Accounts
5. Categories of Accounts – Troubleshoot, Purchase, Inquire

In addition, some sections of the book also make use of supplemental speaker or account categories such as level of pressure identified with a particular account and callers' background (as lay caller or expert caller). I also have collected more specific demographic data about the Filipino agents (e.g., age, college degree, university graduated from) that I intend to use for correlational analysis in future related studies. These groups of speakers or accounts are deemed to influence the use of linguistic and paralinguistic features in the discourse. The intent is to establish the similarities and differences across these speaker or account groups in the corpus and show the extent of linguistic variation within internal sub-registers of outsourced call center texts.

3.3.2.1 *Role and gender: Male and female agents and callers*

There are 500 different Filipino call center agents in the corpus serving 500 different American callers (Table 3.2). Of the 500 agents, 252 are females and 248 are males. There are 255 female callers and 245 male callers in the transactions. The Filipino agents all have college degrees obtained from universities in the Philippines. Agents who studied outside the Philippines or those who have not obtained their college diplomas were not included in the final corpus. The ages of agents range from 21 years old to 55 years old. The average age of Filipino agents in the corpus is 26.

American callers come from all over the U.S. However, the geographic location of callers was not controlled or considered in the present analysis. For future related studies, it is relevant to also investigate the geographic locations of the callers in the transactions and use this information as a grouping category for American speakers. The first language background of the callers was also not specifically identified or controlled. In my corpus collection, however, I did not include callers with noticeable second language accent or those clearly having difficulty communicating in English with the agents. No other available demographic information aside from gender and call location is available for callers.

3.3.2.2 *Performance evaluation scores of agents*

I used an oral performance rating scale (see Appendix A for the assessment instrument and description of the rating scale) designed to assess linguistic and task performance of call center agents in actual service transactions. The development of this assessment instrument was based upon my experience in conducting language monitoring and evaluation of agents' task performance in the transactions for the QA department of this sponsoring call center company in the Philippines. I have also worked with trainers of the language training department of the same company to develop short-term training sessions for newly-hired agents. Most of the supplemental training sessions that I designed and conducted focused on English grammar and pronunciation, listening comprehension, American culture, and phone-handling strategies.

The main structure of the assessment instrument is derived from the Melbourne Medical Students' Diagnostic Speaking Scale (Grove & Brown, 2001) which is used to identify medical students who need support in their oral communication with patients in clinical practice sessions. The Melbourne scale is applicable to both native and non-native speakers of English and is developed to provide detailed feedback for medical students to help them cope with the demands of their studies (Grove & Brown, 2001). The test designers' justifications for the Melbourne scale, together with reported success in its application, appear to match the assessment needs and criteria in the context of outsourced call center transactions.

Overall (oral) performance in the rating scale is evaluated according to two sets of criteria, one task-specific and the other language-oriented. The task-specific criterion is divided into two major categories: (1) adequacy of support, and (2) interpersonal skills. These categories evaluate the handling of call transactions and the way the agents deliver the solution to the specific concerns of the caller. Sociolinguistic competencies and compliance with policies and procedures are especially important in evaluating the items listed in these categories. The linguistic criterion is made up of two categories: (1) language, and (2) production. The language category evaluates discourse structure and spoken grammar as well as vocabulary use and agents' word choice. The production category measures the segmental and suprasegmental features of agents' speech. For these linguistic criteria, the standard for the evaluation of language use and production is largely based on native-like performance as target proficiency level. L2 agents, in other words, are compared with typical L1 agents performing the same type of work. The definition and range of native-like proficiency and other similar concerns about language performance are commonly discussed in Philippine call centers, and these considerations have been applied in many approaches to performance assessment.

All of the categories and attributes in the instrument have been covered in varying depths (i.e., amount of materials covered) and lengths (i.e., time spent in

discussing the material) in the language and product training sessions attended by agents before they take actual inbound calls. The instrument uses a numerical rating scale (Linn & Gronlund, 1995) similar to the Melbourne test. The 1 to 6 scales are divided into three proficiency levels: (1) Low, from 1 to 2, (2) Mid, from 3 to 4, and (3) High, from 5 to 6. In interpreting the numerical scales from 1 to 6, the descriptors used in the Test of Spoken English (ETS, 2001) (for example: “highly effective,” or “almost always effective”) are used.

For a previous study, I pre-tested the instrument and conducted an inter-rater reliability evaluation for this rating scale (Friginal, 2005). Three ESL-trained and experienced raters helped me assess recorded training “mock-calls” of 12 participants. The three raters had a minimum of five years’ experience with ESL teaching and assessment of oral skills. We conducted four calibration sessions using the rating scale in the summer of 2005, with each session lasting for more than an hour. We pilot-tested two mock-calls for each calibration session and discussed our ratings of every item in the rating scale as well as our rationale supporting a particular score. We had very few disagreements in rating the pilot calls and all discrepancies among our ratings were easily resolved during the discussion.

Mean scores for task and linguistic criteria and the total performance rating for each participant were obtained. Inter-rater reliability measures for this study reported a Cronbach’s Alpha of 0.890. This high Alpha value was attributed to the extensive experience of the raters in monitoring oral performance in similar task-based interactions and our extensive discussions of the scales during the calibration sessions. It helped that the numerical scales in the instrument were highly comparable to established assessment instruments like the TOEFL or TSE. Moreover, it was also relatively easy to compare the performance of the training participants in the mock-calls because they followed only one form of questionnaire or script scenario.

To obtain performance ratings for the present study, I personally evaluated the agents’ task and linguistic performance in the transactions. The performance evaluation of the 500 total transactions (500 total agents) in the corpus using three or four additional raters was not practical due to limited resources and scheduling concerns. Because there was a previously established high inter-rater reliability of the instrument, I argued that my evaluation of agents’ performance was reliable. Subsequently, a total of 90 representative sample transactions across accounts (18% of the total transactions) were evaluated by two other raters employed by the call center company in the Philippines. We again conducted a brief calibration session before the assessment of the sample calls. The Chronbach’s Alpha measuring inter-rater reliability for the 90 selected transactions was 0.712. This result, although lower than the reliability data from my previous study, was acceptable, given the number of evaluated transactions and variables measured in the instrument.

In my post-assessment conversation with the two external raters, we noted minor difficulty in understanding service accuracy, especially whether or not the agents were clearly following account procedures. We did not encounter specific problems with the assessment of linguistic performance. Table 3.3 summarizes the assessment results including the averaged ratings from the 90 transactions evaluated by three raters, and shows the performance evaluation grouping (Low, Mid, High) of agents used in the analyses.

Table 3.3. Summary of performance evaluation of 500 agents in the corpus.

Performance Evaluation Level	Number of Agents	Percent	Average Rating
Low	53	10.6%	2.722
Mid	333	66.6%	4.442
High	114	22.8%	5.455

The average performance evaluation score of the 500 agents is 4.206 (out of 6). This very acceptable result indicates a “high-Mid” average rating for the selected agents included in the corpus. As shown in Table 3.3, 53 agents scored below 3 (2.722) and were considered to have a low level of task and linguistic performance in the transactions. These agents showed limitations in using effective English and did not efficiently provide the required level of service to the callers. Caller clarifications, repeated questions, and complaints were common in these transactions. More than half (66.6%) of the agents in the corpus belong to the “Mid” level, while 114 (22.8%) qualify as “High” in performance evaluation. Female agents (4.715) have higher evaluation scores than male agents (3.921).

3.3.2.3 *Experience of agents with their current accounts*

I included agents’ experience with their current account as a grouping category in the book to look at the influence of familiarity with account procedures and protocols on the linguistic characteristics of agents’ speech in the transactions, and the ultimate degree of success in handling the calls. Also, experience talking with American callers over months or years in this context could enable the agents to acquire sociolinguistic strategies necessary for them to more effectively and efficiently serve their callers. However, I consider results from this analysis cautiously, as I do not have sufficient data showing the actual extent of call center experience of all the Filipino agents in the corpus. In other words, the data on experience I have are limited to the current accounts by the agents, not including possible previous experiences they may have had from other call centers or other accounts. Experience is measured in three sub-categories: (1) those serving their accounts from three months to less than one year, (2) from one to two years, and

Table 3.4. Summary of agents' experience with current accounts.

Experience with Current Account	Number of Agents	Percent
Less than 1 year	191	38.2%
1 to 2 years	206	41.2%
Over 2 years	103	20.6%

(3) over two years of service with current account. Table 3.4 shows the summary of agents' experience with their current accounts.

The “most experienced” agents in the corpus have been serving their current accounts for three years and two months during the time of corpus collection. There are 103 agents (20.6%) with over two years of service to their current accounts. The least experienced agents are only on their third month of actual phone support. One hundred ninety-one agents (38.2%) have been with their current accounts for less than one year. Two hundred six agents (41.2%) have service experience of at least one year to two years with their respective accounts. The average length of experience with current account in the corpus is one year and three months.

3.3.2.4 *Description of categories of accounts*

This section provides a description of the three primary categories of accounts including the eight accounts that comprise the Call Center corpus. A brief discussion of common support protocols, types of questions or caller concerns, pool of potential callers, and agents' educational background and qualifications within each account is provided below. Also included in this section of the book are text samples showing opening sequences of the transactions leading to the callers' main question or issue in initiating the call. These text samples could help in presenting the typical context of transactions in the accounts. Note that in categorizing the accounts, I considered the primary communicative task involved in each call (Troubleshooting, Purchase, and Inquire). However, these tasks overlap many times in typical call center interactions and it is common that selling products (or processing orders) is also done in a troubleshooting transaction. Hence, in finalizing the grouping of accounts, I ensured that the primary purpose of the call still matched the main communicative task in the transaction. For example, I dropped calls in a troubleshooting account that focused on customer inquiry and not primarily in fixing a machine/equipment malfunction.

3.3.2.4.1 *Troubleshoot* Agents serving troubleshooting accounts are largely engaged in a communicative task that gives directions to fix a malfunctioning machine or piece of equipment. Agents provide procedures and steps to solve a specific problem while the callers in homes or offices follow instructions and work

on fixing the machines themselves. There are four accounts in the troubleshoot account category:

1. TECH 1 – Office equipment
2. TECH 2 – Internet connection (Home)
3. TECH 3 – Internet services (Business)
4. TECH 4 – Kitchen appliances

TECH 1: Office equipment

TECH 1 is an account engaged in troubleshooting an office equipment that is utilized for postage metering and printing. These machines for use in the office are purchased by various businesses all over the U.S. and Canada. The agents in this account take calls from office staff responsible for the operation of the equipment. The majority of the calls for TECH 1 agents are placed to report a malfunction in the machine (e.g., no power or connection, printing troubles, replacing specific parts or ink/toner, etc.) but, from time to time, the agents also receive queries about upgrades in service or newer models. TECH 1 transactions selected for inclusion in the corpus all involved troubleshooting machine malfunctions. The agents make use of an extensive database that tracks business information and transaction records identified by a specific phone number. When customers call, the agents ask for the registered phone number to link the account data and service record of the caller/business. Software tools provide the agents access to troubleshooting steps and procedures and a guide that reminds them of the required flow of the transaction. In general, TECH 1 agents deal with fixable problems that are mostly solved before the end of the call. Many transactions involving power or connection issues are solved by restarting the machine (i.e., “power cycle”) while those that require replacement of printer ink or improving print quality follow clear and simple steps. The equipment also provides error messages that help the agents identify the problem. For fatal errors, the agents may transfer the call to a different department or may offer a replacement machine, often free of charge, depending on the customers’ contract with the company. Before concluding each call, agents are required to “sell” cleaning products or replacement ink cartridges to the callers.

Text Sample 3.2 TECH 1: Office equipment

Agent: Thank you for calling [TECH 1] this is Chris, can I get your phone number starting with the area code please?

Caller: 444-5555-555

Agent: Thank you. Do you have an extension or is this a direct line?

Caller: It's a direct line

Agent: Can you also verify for me the company name and address?

Caller: XXPro Services 444 Generic St., Detroit, Michigan, 55555 [address modified]

Agent: Thank you. Can I get your first and last name also sir?

Caller: Mark Danatti [caller's name was changed but sounds like "Mark Danatti"]

Agent: Thank you. Can you spell your last name for me Mark?

Caller: D-A-N-A-T-T-I

Agent: Thank you. One moment please [long pause] just bear with me for a few moments but I'm still pulling up your account [long pause] uhm, Mark to further update your account can I also get your uhm email address also please?

Caller: What do you need my email for?

Agent: Uh for rate updates in case there is an update with rate changes

Caller: Uh let's see I don't need that

Agent: Ok how can I help you?

Caller: I get an error message on the machine that I haven't been able to clear

Agent: What error message are, it's showing up in there?

TECH 2: Internet connection (Home)

Agents in TECH 2 handle troubleshooting calls from customers having difficulty connecting to the internet at home through a DSL connection service offered by a high-speed internet service provider in the U.S. There is a wide-ranging pool of potential callers in TECH 2 in terms of age, social background, and technical understanding of computers, but most callers have similar concerns regarding their inability to access the internet. Agents in TECH 2 have college degrees in information technology, engineering, or computer science. TECH 2 and other similar accounts concerned with internet connectivity services usually employ the greatest number of agents in Philippine call centers. There is high attrition in these accounts because agents who have gained experience and training of at least one year often find opportunities for promotion or transfer to other call centers or accounts offering higher salary. Thus, the typical agent for TECH 2 in the corpus is still in the process of accumulating experience in technical support. The training requirement is not rigid, and some agents may be sent to the floor to take actual customer calls after only two weeks of product training.

For the most part, internet connection issues for TECH 2 should be easily solved. In fact, the primary step in troubleshooting problems in this account only involves rebooting the modem or changing internet protocol addresses. The agents are trained to focus on this procedure and conduct related diagnostic tests to check service outage if there is one in the caller's specific location. However, the transactions in TECH 2 are potentially stressful for Filipino agents as callers tend to demand immediate resolution of their issues, which may not be possible, for example, in cases of outages or modem defects, given agents' limited options to solve these kinds of problems over the telephone. Language production factors

affecting the comprehension of technical information clearly aggravate the callers in TECH 2. Transactional challenges for the agents include the successful application of sociolinguistic strategies in delivering technical information to address callers' questions and also to continue to manage problematic transactions.

Text Sample 3.3 TECH 2: Internet connection (Home)

Agent: Thank you for calling [TECH 2] DSL Tech Support, my name is Jimmy tech ID [xxx] can I please have your DSL phone number?

Caller: Yes, 888-999-3333

Agent: 3333 ok, will this be a good callback number?

Caller: You can call my cell phone if you need to call back

Agent: Ok, and what is your cell phone number ma'am?

Caller: 888-555-3333

Agent: Ok, and uh, can I verify your name and billing address?

Caller: Andrea Marshall, the billing address is 777 xxth Street, Ogden, Utah, the name of the account is John Marshall [names and exact address were changed]

Agent: Ok, alright, uh, uh, alright, and do I have the permission to access your account here at [TECH 2]?

Caller: Yes

Agent: Ok. What was your name again ma'am?

Caller: Andrea Marshall

Agent: Uh, An, An, Andrei? A N D R E?

Caller: R E A, as Andrea

Agent: Oh, ok, Andrea, ok, alright, uh, how can I help you ma'am?

Caller: Well to begin with I'll just tell you right upfront I'm not real savvy on computers, ok?

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: And what happened was we got a new computer installed on Wednesday and we had our our, our D DSL started on Tuesday night afternoon, and it's been working like a charm until yesterday, and what I noticed is there's this little modem box that they sent us and normally the first three lights are solid green but yesterday and today and again, I can't connect today, it keeps saying this page cannot be displayed, the power button's green, something called an Ethernet button is green, but the DSL one is blinking and the internet one is not green at all

TECH 3: Internet services (Business)

Like TECH 2, TECH 3 agents handle troubleshooting and technical queries related to internet connection and services. TECH 3 agents, however, generally deal with callers who are mostly engineers or technicians employed as management information system officers of companies running servers, routers, and managing internet networks. Other callers may occasionally be office staff or

business owners inquiring or complaining about service or confirming repair schedules. Large scale companies such as airlines and banks running servers and business computing networks contract with TECH 3 for technology infrastructure and other computing services. In the Philippines, TECH 3 is divided into various departments serving different caller issues. The agents selected in this corpus are tasked to troubleshoot connection problems stemming from service outage or breakdown in equipment such as servers.

TECH 3 agents have college degrees in computer science and information technology, as do TECH 2 agents. The training requirement for TECH 3 agents, however, is slightly more rigorous, and some agents take qualifying examinations before being allowed to handle calls on the floor. Caller concerns in TECH 3 could be very difficult to solve; agents, at times, need to research solutions to technical issues during the transactions, and longer holds and transfers to other departments are common. Although the primary focus of TECH 3 calls is troubleshooting technical problems, complaints may be expressed by callers regarding the company's overall quality of service. Consequently, the transactions tend to be stressful for agents.

Text Sample 3.4 TECH 3: Internet services (Business)

Agent: Thank you for calling [TECH 3] technical support my name is Ben, may I have your ticket number please?

Caller: My uh, I don't actually have a ticket number, let me, let's see here, one second Ben

Agent: Sure

Caller: Ok we don't actually have a ticket number with you yet, I wanna open one, so, I have a circuit id

Agent: Yeah what's the circuit id?

Caller: It is 111-222-7777

Agent: Ok kindly hold on let me just pull up the record right now [long pause] and may I know who am I speaking with?

Caller: Uh Charlie [name was changed]

Agent: Charlie? Ok are you from The [company name]?

Caller: Uh yeah with [company name]

Agent: Oh with [company name] is this a game stop ticket or something?

Caller: Yup game card exactly

Agent: Ok let me just try and pull up the record right now

Caller: Ok

Agent: [hold 15 seconds] this is for [unclear] stop for 7777?

Caller: Yes it is

Agent: Ok Charlie can you actually give to me the complete address for this company?

Caller: Glad to, it is uh 6666 Abraham Road, Dallas, Texas [street name changed]

Agent: Dallas, Texas, ok kindly hold on [short pause] and actually we have an on-going outage in Dallas, Texas let me just check if your circuit is actually affected ok?

Caller: Ok

Agent: Let's see give me a moment here [hold 1 minute] let me just check, ok I almost know what it is

Caller: Alright

Agent: [hold 15 seconds] oh ok so I guess you're not part of the outage

Caller: Uh, ok

Agent: Yeah the outage is actually for new end circuit models for [unclear], let me just run my test right now Charlie

Caller: Ok

Agent: Ok kindly hold on [hold 20 seconds] ok actually Charlie I can see that the port is up on this one, let me just check if I can ping the IP address, oh I think there is actually another device that is connected or an equipment at the moment, am I correct?

Caller: Uh yes there's a router connected to it

Agent: There's a router connecting, it, I can be able to ping the IP address, so let me just check, ok?

Caller: Uh-huh?

TECH 4: Kitchen appliances

TECH 4 is a troubleshooting account dealing with kitchen appliances or machines such as garbage disposers or water dispensers. Most callers call because of a malfunction in the machine (e.g., not running, loud buzzing noise) or leak in the tank. Authorized plumbers and installers registered with the company also call to ask questions concerning the installation of the product or the replacement of a particular part. Although the primary type of transaction in TECH 4 involves troubleshooting or diagnosing problems and defects in the product, agents also frequently provide information for warrantees to determine whether or not the callers are qualified for replacement, refunds, or free in-home repair. The troubleshooting steps provided by the agents are limited to resetting the device or using a specific tool (e.g., an Allen wrench) to manually restart the motor. Technicians may have more complicated questions that are often transferred to another department.

TECH 4 agents are graduates of engineering and technology courses and several of them have previous experience in air-conditioning, refrigeration, or ventilation manufacturing and assembly. Product training for TECH 4 agents is conducted in Manila by trainers mostly coming from the U.S. Callers' questions and support expectations are established by the automated prompts before a call is routed to TECH 4 agents. Agents clearly understand the options which they can offer a caller for products that are needed to be replaced after conducting troubleshooting steps, if the problem is still not resolved. The company has a good

replacement and repair warrantee for qualified customers. However, conflicts arise whenever callers are not able to provide receipts or proof of purchase necessary to confirm if the product is covered by warrantee or not.

Text Sample 3.5 TECH 4: Kitchen appliances

Agent: Thank you for calling [TECH 4], this is Manfred, may I have your name and your phone number?

Caller: Hello?

Agent: Yes, can I have your name and your phone number?

Caller: Uh Mike McCaullum [name was changed]

Agent: How do you spell your last name?

Caller: M C CAULLUM

Agent: Ok have you called us before?

Caller: Excuse me?

Agent: Have you called us before?

Caller: Uh you're with uh [TECH 4]?

Agent: This is, yes this is [TECH 4]

Caller: Right, ok good

Agent: Is this about your garbage disposer or a hot water dispenser uh, are you an installer?

Caller: Yeah it's the garbage disposal, uh [interruption]

Agent: Ok so how can I help you today?

Caller: Uh, I, uh have a unit an CX-555

Agent: Ok?

Caller: And I mean it's only a couple of years old with the client and I'm having problems with the leaking from underneath, I mean, yeah, it's leaking and I need to help me reinstall this, uh, or maybe ask you if this is still covered by warrantee to replace the unit, you know?

3.3.2.4.2 Purchase The accounts belonging to the purchase category primarily take customer orders, process the purchase of products or services, and check for the status of orders and deliveries. There are two accounts included in this category:

1. CS 1 – Home/kitchen products
2. CS 2 – Cell phone minutes

CS 1: Home/kitchen products

CS 1 serves registered sales associates or consultants as well as the general American public in taking orders, checking shipment, and facilitating replacement for a line of preparation, storage, and serving products for kitchen and home use. These products are marketed by means of direct selling through a network of dealers and

sales agents. CS 1 agents take calls typically from sales consultants, many of whom have previous experience in calling the call center. The service transactions are easily handled with very limited conflicts. The agents have access to online records of transactions placed by sales consultants and the tracking of orders and shipment is regularly updated. Catalogues, item numbers, awards, and incentives for sales consultants are readily available to the agents through their networked tools.

CS 1 agents are well-trained in handling the transactions and have shown sufficient level of language proficiency and product knowledge. It helps that their support protocols and the issues that they typically handle are fairly simple and less demanding in contrast to other accounts in the corpus. Although agents maintain a very friendly, respectful tone in the transactions, they have very limited use of respect markers (*ma'am* and *sir*) or titles (*Mr.* or *Ms./Mrs.*) and mostly refer to their callers by their first names during the transactions. Language and product training as well as QA monitoring are managed effectively, and the agents are cordial and generally well-mannered. There are very limited language and task performance difficulties associated with CS 1 agents in the corpus.

Text Sample 3.6 CS 1: Home/kitchen products

Agent: Thank you for calling [XX Company] my name is Vanessa how may I help you?

Caller: Yes Vanessa I like to place an order

Agent: I'll be very glad to assist you with that one, for me to do so may I please ask you a question first?

Caller: Ok

Agent: Alright may I then please ask for your 11 digit id number?

Caller: Oh I'll give you my social

Agent: That'll be fine go ahead

Caller: 333-33

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: 3333

Agent: Thank you that's 333-33-333 and am I right with that one because it's not coming up in here 333?

Caller: [repeated number]

Agent: That will be 33 at the last [short pause] am I am I speaking to Lisa Johnson? [name was changed]

Caller: Correct

Agent: And is this a party order?

Caller: Uhm, no

Agent: Ok so just for a moment [long pause] do you mind if I put on hold for just a moment Lisa because we are having problem with [XX Company] application? I just want to verify with this one on my end, are you able to hold?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: Ok wait for a moment I'll be right back [hold 30 seconds] Lisa thank you so much for patiently waiting

Caller: Yes?

Agent: Alright we have already fixed the issue right now so that will be a non-party order?

Caller: Correct

Agent: Would it be alright if I have the description as consultant order?

Caller: Ok

Agent: Alright [short pause] and will this be shipped to your address or to a different address?

Caller: Mine

CS 2: Purchase cell phone minutes

CS 2 is a payment services account for a personal wireless network service provider. Callers call to purchase minutes for their phones or inquire about available service plans or contracts. Although there are first-time callers in the corpus, most transactions involve callers who have previous experience using the call center. The service transactions are uncomplicated and easily facilitated although the agents are required to follow procedural, sometimes repetitive spiels that make the calls last longer than they should. At times, the series of turns by the agents for callers buying cell phone minutes resemble automated prompts. Because of these structured moves during calls, most agents have memorized their turns and responses to general questions. There are very limited conflicts or complaints in the transactions; caller questions concerning the operation of the unit, batteries, or network coverage are transferred to a different department.

The agents serving CS 2 are also well-trained and effectively supervised by the account and the QA monitors. The account prescribes "high courtesy" through the use of polite and respect markers throughout the transactions. Phone-handling strategies that focus on personalization of service are given special attention during training. Trainers usually suggest that agents "smile" while talking to their callers. Furthermore, agents are reminded of various customer service principles related to selling products, maintaining customer loyalty, and establishing rapport. In trying to address these principles, agents' turns are highly addressee-focused and polite. Instead of straightforward question and answer sequences in the transactions, CS 2 agents often preface their responses with polite structures (e.g., "*Ok, I would be happy to check that for you ma'am, may I have uhh, her cell phone number please?*"; "*Thank you so much for that information, Mr. Johnson, for a moment, I'll check your account here.*")

Most of the transactions in CS 2 involve payment procedures. Agents strictly follow confirmatory checks with the callers and provide a summary

of the transaction before ending the call. The agents also make sure that the callers are reminded of their purchase, expiration and roll-over of minutes, and relevant dates and offers. Although CS 2 is not a troubleshooting account, agents also provide procedures in activating mobile phone minutes that are similar in structure to troubleshooting steps (e.g., *“Ma’am, please turn it on now, then call the same 800 number after you get the dial tone.”*). Instructions about checking remaining minutes or using the automated service (instead of calling the call center) are also similar in linguistic characteristics to technical accounts like TECH 1.

Text Sample 3.7 CS 2: Purchase cell phone minutes

Agent: Thank you for calling [XX Company], this is Chris, how can I assist you?
 Caller: Yeah, I would like to add airtime to my phone
 Agent: Yes, sir glad to assist you in adding airtime minutes, to start with, may I please have your cell phone number?
 Caller: 444-555-6666 [modified]
 Agent: Thank you again, that’s 444-555-6666
 Caller: Uh-huh
 Agent: Alright, let me search for your account, using this number, this will take just a few seconds, and sir, just for uh, verification, may I please have your name and address?
 Caller: Uh, my name is Fred, you’re talking to Fred [interruption]
 Agent: That’s Fred?
 Caller: The name on the phone is uhm, Clyde Button [names were changed]
 Agent: And, how about the address sir? Just for verification
 Caller: Uh you don’t have the address, it’s not under my name
 Agent: Uh
 Caller: You’re talking to Fred
 Agent: And how about your last name sir?
 Caller: Orlando
 Agent: Orlando?
 Caller: Uh, yeah
 Agent: Alright, thank you Mr. Orlando, let me just take a look at the account [long pause]
 Caller: Uh-huh?
 Agent: Alright, it shows here the account is active, what we’re going to do right now Mr. Orlando, is to process, uhm a one- time use to add minutes to your phone.
 Caller: Ok.

3.3.2.4.3 Inquire The two accounts in the inquire category provide answers to technical questions about tools, spare parts, and equipment. Callers may also ask

for delivery estimates, store locations, or pricing quotes for a particular spare part or equipment. The two accounts comprising the inquire category are:

1. CS 3 – Instrument and equipment
2. CS 4 – Tools, software, and spare parts

CS 3: Instrument and equipment and CS 4: Tools, software, and spare parts

CS 3 and CS 4 accounts comprise a large group of agents supporting technical questions for a leading global supplier of products and services related to automation and process-related operations for a variety of corporations and businesses. CS 3 and CS 4 agents are grouped into various departments such as measurement and analytical instruments, final-control devices, and systems and software. Although the agents follow very similar service protocols in answering questions, their specific product support varies. In the corpus, CS 3 agents handle queries about instruments and equipment (e.g., compressors, ventilators, batteries, etc.), while CS 4 agents answer questions about spare parts, tools, and software.

All of the agents in these two groups of accounts have taken the same language and phone-handling training. Product training varies in focus and duration, and quite a few of the agents have been trained extensively for their specific responsibilities. The agents are mostly engineers or have degrees in industrial technology or other related fields. The accounts are highly specific when it comes to the educational background and training of their potential agents. Experience with the products and services offered by the company is given preference in the hiring process. The age range of CS 3 and CS 4 agents selected for the corpus is from 22 to 48 years old. There are several agents with no prior call center experience before they joined the accounts.

Almost all callers in the files selected for these two accounts are specialists (e.g., engineers, technicians), all connected with a particular company. Callers have an extensive and detailed understanding of the equipment and services with clear expectations about what they want to hear from the agents. In most transactions, the speakers make use of codes and jargon that would not be easily understood by an “unschooled” observer. Successful exchanges assume the structure of question-and-answer sequences with limited elaboration. Transactions in CS 3 and CS 4 are straightforward and frequently short in duration (from around five to eight minutes). The agents are able to answer questions about equipment and shipment of orders utilizing an array of tools and network support to which they have access during the calls. Many agents have previous contacts with their callers, and a number of these interactions are very genial.

Text Sample 3.8 CS 3: Instrument and equipment

Agent: [CS 3] Service Support, this is Janalyn, how may I help you?

Caller: Yeah I'm Mike Robinson I'm a CE, I have a customer that said they sent in a uh response to a battery quote [name was changed]

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: And they have not gotten the battery or anything

Agent: Excuse me?

Caller: And they have not gotten it yet

Agent: Uh Mike do you uh, ok [interruption]

Caller: And we don't have a 12 ticket generated

Agent: Mike do you have the ticket number?

Caller: Uh I have a quote number

Agent: Ok?

Caller: It's 11504

Agent: 11504 ok let me check that

Caller: Ok

Agent: Thank you, for moment please

Text Sample 3.9 CS 4: Tools, software and spare parts

Agent: [CS 4] and [XX Company] this is Janet, how can I help you?

Caller: I'd like to find out how I can get a wiring diagram for one of your variable frequency uh uh motor power supplies?

Agent: Ok, can I have your name sir?

Caller: Uh my name is Robert Stewart [name was changed]

Agent: Ok, and do you have the model number for that?

Caller: Uh I have a model number of the controller which is E-E-1-1-0-0-9.

Agent: Ok uhm the model number for control uh controllers, this is a controller?

Caller: Yeah, this is a controller

Agent: Ok, that is 1-1-0-0-9, is that correct sir?

Caller: Yes

Agent: Ok, uhm, I am looking at my um [interruption]

3.3.2.5 *Additional categories*

My experience in language training and monitoring for this call center in the Philippines leads me to believe that account categories also display additional, unique variations in the linguistic features evident in speakers during the course of the transactions. These groups of accounts in the corpus represent the common types of transactions and primary communicative task in outsourced call centers. In addition to these primary account groups, I also add (1) callers' background,

Table 3.5. Additional account categories in the Call Center corpus.

Code	Account Category	Callers' Background	Level of Pressure or Potential Conflict
1. TECH 1	Troubleshoot	Lay	Low
2. TECH 2	Troubleshoot	Lay	Mid-High
3. TECH 3	Troubleshoot	Specialist	Mid-High
4. TECH 4	Troubleshoot	Lay	Mid-High
5. CS 1	Purchase	Lay	Low
6. CS 2	Purchase	Lay	Low
7. CS 3	Inquire	Specialist	Mid-High
8. CS 4	Inquire	Specialist	Mid-High

and (2) level of pressure or potential conflict, summarized in Table 3.5, in the analysis of the statistically correlating linguistic features in the discourse discussed in Chapter 4.

3.3.2.5.1 Callers' background Callers' background is categorized as either "lay" or "specialist/expert" as used by Wood (2001). Lay callers do not have particular training or expertise related to their main concern in initiating the transaction. These callers rely on the agents for information and resolution of their concern or problems. For example, callers in TECH 2 asking for help in connecting to the internet are lay callers. Specialist callers have related expertise and experience with the accounts' products and services. These callers call for support during the conduct of their regular work shift and activities. In TECH 3, IT personnel operating and managing software and servers have a thorough understanding of the issues related to the problem; many of these specialist callers conduct initial troubleshooting steps before they call for assistance. CS 3 and CS 4 callers are engineers and technicians who need specifications or pricing for parts and equipment with which, for the most part, they are quite familiar. In the corpus, accounts could generally be grouped into these two categories. TECH 1 (office personnel operating the machine), TECH 2 (a variety of callers with no internet connection at home), TECH 4 (homeowners having trouble with their garbage disposers), CS 1 (sales consultants or general public), and CS 2 (mobile phone owners) are accounts with lay callers while CS 3 and CS 4 (engineers and technicians) and TECH 3 (IT managers, computer engineers) are accounts with specialist callers.

3.3.2.5.2 Level of pressure or potential conflict Another grouping category across accounts involves the level of pressure and potential occurrence of conflicts in the transactions. This category also includes the likelihood of receiving calls from irate callers. Agents have expectations relative to the extent, likely intensity, and types

of customer issues they support, and they are aware of the level of pressure generally prevalent in their respective accounts. The pressure to solve issues successfully may affect the collective performance of agents and may also influence the general patterning of linguistic features in the discourse. This pressure may come either from customers or from account supervisors. In this category, the level of pressure or potential conflicts across accounts is further classified into: (1) low, and (2) mid to high.

Accounts with “low” pressure or potential conflicts include CS 1, CS 2, and TECH 1. Almost all transactions in these accounts are solved easily. Speakers, especially the agents are polite, and transactions are facilitated in a friendly tone. All these accounts take calls from lay callers. TECH 4, CS 3, and CS 4 comprise “mid-pressure” accounts. Callers from these accounts are specialists. Although many agents have also easily solved issues in these transactions and several are able to banter with the callers they are familiar with, some callers have shown impatience and frustration with slow, indecisive advice. Finally, TECH 2 and TECH 3 are “high-pressure” accounts. Agents in these accounts have higher likelihood of getting angry callers and managing complaints directed at the companies’ quality of service and equipment. The callers’ frustration is often precipitated by long wait times and the series of procedural questions the agents are required to ask before they initiate actual solutions to the callers’ problem. TECH 2 callers are lay callers while TECH 3 callers are specialists. However, the level of pressure in these two accounts appears to be very similar. Callers react negatively to barriers coming from agents’ language variables and limitations in providing easily-understandable explanations.

3.3.2.6 *Summary of speaker groups in the corpus*

As previously mentioned, the outsourced Call Center corpus has various possible speaker groups defined by demographic information gathered for each of the agents/callers and accounts in the transactions. For this book, speaker groups such as role (agents vs. callers) and gender and account categories are easily identified and have been grouped together in the corpus for linguistic processing. The different sets of computational programs used in the analyses allow quick processing of linguistic data from these speaker groups in the corpus. Other relevant categories (e.g., age and university degree of agents) could be considered for future related research. To summarize, the following comprise the speaker groups in the Call Center corpus:

- Role and gender of speakers
- Agents’ performance evaluation scores
- Agents’ experience with current accounts
- Callers’ background
- Level of pressure

3.3.3 The American Conversation sub-corpus

The American Conversation sub-corpus used in this book was obtained from the Longman Grammar corpus of spoken American English. The Longman Grammar corpus has approximately over four million words and was designed to be a representative corpus of American conversation covering a wide-range of speech types (e.g., casual conversation, service encounters, task-related interaction), locations or settings (e.g., home, classroom), geographic regions in the U.S., and speaker characteristics (e.g., age, gender, occupation). I collected only text files of face-to-face conversations from the Longman Grammar corpus to comprise my American Conversation sub-corpus in this present study. Text Sample 3.10 below shows an excerpt of a transcribed text of conversation from the Longman Grammar corpus.

Text Sample 3.10 Transcribed text excerpt from the Longman Grammar corpus

Sample Portion of Header Information from the Longman Grammar corpus:

⟨HEADER_BEGINS⟩	
⟨TAPE_#⟩	1098
⟨TAPE_TITLE⟩	Costume Shop
⟨DATE_RECORDED⟩	13-Sep-94
⟨TIME_RECORDED⟩	11 am to 3 pm
⟨EVENT_TYPE⟩	Face-to-face conversation
⟨EVENT⟩	speakers/friends are hanging around the shop

⟨?⟩ This is the thing ... it's ready to go?

⟨?⟩ Yes it's going right now.

⟨?⟩ Okay so this, this is a very sensitive mic?

⟨?⟩ It's a very sensitive mic.

⟨?⟩ So it will pick up everything?

⟨?⟩ Yeah I don't want to put it by the fan or else it [will]

⟨?⟩ [Right].

⟨?⟩ Pick up the fan. But um, it doesn't have to be in the middle of the table even. It could be if, if it's gonna bother people (unclear).

⟨?⟩ Oh it's not gonna bother anyone.

⟨?⟩ Not at all.

⟨?⟩ And, and where do we stop it?

⟨?⟩ You don't even stop it. Let it go on.

⟨?⟩ Even if, even if

⟨?⟩ If, if somebody says something really private and they don't want it on there just take the mic out and just let it, just let it keep going. I don't know what you guys do down here. But if something happens that isn't supposed to be taped

⟨?⟩ Okay.
 ⟨?⟩ That's why I thought that this would be a fun place you know.
 ⟨?⟩ ⟨nv_laugh⟩ Knowing Alex ⟨unclear⟩
 ⟨?⟩ Yeah
 ⟨?⟩ Knowing Alex, by the way are we not supposed to say bad stuff here? ⟨nv_laugh⟩
 ⟨?⟩ We'll talk just like how we talk you know?
 ⟨?⟩ Oh yeah

The collection of text files included in this sub-corpus was done manually following header information in the texts. As mentioned above, I collected only face-to-face conversations to comprise this comparison corpus and did not include telephone interactions or service encounters. The American Conversation sub-corpus has a total of 200 text files with approximately 1.1 million words. Table 3.6 shows the composition of the sub-corpus for this present study.

Table 3.6. Composition of the American Conversation sub-corpus.

Speech Types (all face-to-face conversations)	Number of Texts	Number of Words	Average Number of Words per Text
Casual Conversation	120	772,211	6,435
Work-Related Conversation	80	393,848	5,221
Total	200	1, 166,105	5,828

3.3.4 The Switchboard sub-corpus

The Switchboard corpus is comprised of spontaneous conversations of “telephone bandwidth speech” between American speakers. The corpus was collected by Texas Instruments and funded by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). A complete set of Switchboard CD-ROMs available from the Linguistic Data Consortium includes about 2,430 conversations averaging six minutes in length (with over 240 hours of recorded speech), and about three million words of text, spoken by over 500 speakers of both sexes from every major dialect of American English (“Switchboard: A Users’ Manual,” 2004). As previously mentioned, the Switchboard sub-corpus used in the current study is provided by the American National Corpus (ANC) project. The final composition of this corpus was randomly collected from the list of transcribed text (.xml) files from the ANC. A total of 600 files with approximately over one million words comprise the Switchboard corpus. Table 3.7 shows the summary composition of the Switchboard corpus for the present study.

Data for Switchboard were collected under computer control and without human intervention. Interaction with the switchboard system was conducted

Table 3.7. Composition of the Switchboard sub-corpus.

Number of Files	Number of Speakers	Approximate Number of Words	Average Length of Conversation
600	120	1,057,830	5 minutes 56 seconds

via touchtones and recorded instructions given to the participants. The topics for conversation (e.g., “*What do you think about dress codes at work?*” or “*How do you feel about sending an elderly family member into a nursing home?*”) were randomly identified by the system. The two speakers, once connected, were allowed by the system to “warm-up” before recording began. The speakers did not know each other personally and had no previous information about each other’s personal background before the warm-up conversation. The collection of speakers’ sound files was transcribed following a documented transcription convention (see Switchboard Manual available at http://www ldc upenn edu/Catalog/readme_files/switchboard.readme.html) and encoded with a time-alignment file to show the beginning time and duration of specific words and turns in the transcripts. Transcriptions were checked for formatting and accuracy by an automated scripting program. Information about the speakers, together with the dates, times, and other pertinent data about each phone call, was recorded in a database. This supplemental demographic information was provided in the accompanying corpus files. The text sample below shows an excerpt of telephone conversation from the Switchboard corpus.

Text Sample 3.11 Transcribed text excerpt from the Switchboard corpus

<xces:u>0001: okay uh first um i need to know uh how how do you feel about uh about sending um an elderly uh family member to a nursing home</xces:u>
<xces:u>0002: well of course it's you know it's it one of the last few things in the world you'd ever want to do you know unless it's just you know really you know for and for their uh you know for their own good</xces:u>
<xces:u>0003: yes yeah</xces:u>
<xces:u>0003: i'd be very very careful and uh you know checking them out uh our had to place my mother in a nursing home she had a rather massive stroke about uh</xces:u>
<xces:u>0005: um-hum</xces:u>
<xces:u>0004: uh six eight months ago i guess</xces:u>
<xces:u>0005: and uh we were i was fortunate in that</xces:u>
<xces:u>0006: i was personally acquainted with the uh people who uh ran the nursing home in our little hometown</xces:u>

- <xces:u>0007: yes</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0007: so i was very comfortable you know in doing it when it got to the point that we had to do it but there's well i had an occasion for my uh mother-in-law who</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0008: had fell and needed to be you know could not take care of herself anymore was confined to a nursing home for a while that was really not a very good experience uh</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0009: it had to be done in a hurry i mean we didn't have you know like six months to check all of these places out</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0010: and it was really not not very good uh</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0011: deal we were not really happy with the</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0009: yeah</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0012: nursing home that we finally had fortunately she only had to stay a few weeks and she was able to to return to her apartment again</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0013: but it's really a big uh big decision as to you know when to do it</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0011: yeah</xces:u>
 <xces:u>0014: you know is there something else we could have done you know in checking out all the places that uh might be available course there's you know there's not one on every corner especially in you know smaller areas smaller towns</xces:u>

3.3.5 Summary of corpora used in the present study

Table 3.8 summarizes the composition of corpora used for register comparison in the present study.

Table 3.8. Composition of corpora used in the present study.

Corpora	Number of Text Files	Approximate Number of Words	Average Number of Words per Text File
Call Center	500	553,765	1,108
American Conversation	200	1,166,105	5,828
Switchboard	600	1,057,830	1,763

3.4 Data coding and corpus processing

For my initial corpus processing, the transcribed files in the corpora were tagged for parts of speech and semantic categories using the “Biber tagger.” The Biber tagger is a

computer program developed by Biber to provide a grammatical ‘tag’ or annotation for each word in a text file. For example, the short excerpt:

Agent: Your name again?

Caller: Alex Smith with Markline Gas Company. [caller name/company name changed]

Agent: yeah?

Caller: I need to order an acquisition board for a Machine, Mark III

is transformed into the following tagged version:

Agent: ^spkr+clp+1++=Agent:
: ^spkr+clp+++=EXTRAWORD
Your ^pp\$+pp2+++=Your
name ^nn++++=name
again ^rb+tm+++=again
? ^?+clp+++=EXTRAWORD
Caller: ^spkr+clp+2++=Caller:
: ^spkr+clp+++=EXTRAWORD
Alex ^np++++=Alex
Smith ^np+++??+=Smith
with ^in++++=with
Markline ^np+++??+=Markline
Gas ^nn++++=Gas
Company ^nn++++=Company.
. ^.+clp+++=EXTRAWORD
Agent: ^spkr+clp+1++=Agent:
: ^spkr+clp+++=EXTRAWORD
yeah ^uh++++=yeah.
? ^?+clp+++=EXTRAWORD
Caller: ^spkr+clp+2++=Caller:
: ^spkr+clp+++=EXTRAWORD
I ^pp1a+pp1+++=I
need ^md"++pmd"++=need
to ^md+nec+++=to
order ^vb+vsua+++=order
an ^at++++=an
acquisition ^nn+nom+++=acquisition
board ^nn++++=board
for ^in++++=for
a ^at++++=a
Machine ^nn++++=Machine,

, ^,+clp+++ =EXTRAWORD
 Mark ^nn++++ =Mark
 III ^np+++?? =III.
 . ^,+clp+++ =EXTRAWORD

Tags follow every word, speaker ID, or punctuation in the text. The tag symbols and tag fields represent the grammatical and semantic annotation identified by the tagger. For example, the agent's first word "*your*" in the sample above has a "pp\$ + pp2" tag which means that "*your*" is a possessive determiner + 2nd person pronoun. Tagged texts allow easy and immediate processing and counting of the rates of occurrences of linguistic/grammatical features. A complementary "tag-count" program also created by Biber automatically provides normalized counts per single files of up to 150 different grammatical or semantic features occurring in a corpus.

I used a combination of computer programs in order to obtain data for the different types of linguistic analyses in this book. These programs processed tagged and untagged corpora depending on the focus of my analysis in a particular section or chapter. Some of these programs are available for free through their creators' websites, e.g., Antconc 3.1.302 – (Anthony, 2007) (see Laurence Anthony's website at <http://www.antlab.sci.waseda.ac.jp/>) or for purchase, e.g., MonoConc Pro (Athelstan, 2007) (<http://www.athel.com/mono.html>), Advanced Find and Replace (Abacre, 2007) (<http://www.abacre.com/afr/index.htm>), while some were designed specifically for this book. For concordancing, I used MonoConc Pro v.2.2 and Advanced Find and Replace to obtain specific frequency counts and key-word-in-context (KWIC) samples from the corpora. For a particular analysis, e.g., keyword analysis, I used Antconc and rechecked results using WordSmith 5.0 (Scott, 2006) (<http://www.lexically.net/wordsmith/version4/faqs/answers.htm>).

I have developed six different Delphi and Perl-based programs that allowed me to obtain data for specific features that are not captured by the Biber tagger (e.g., politeness and respect markers, filled-pauses, backchannels) and the commercially available software programs mentioned above. I also designed programs for repeats (two to four-word repeats), clarifications sequences, and automatic grouping/processing of files based on header information in the Call Center corpus. I ensured that the frequency counts obtained by my additional software programs were accurate by manually counting features from a sample text and comparing results from the automated counts.

Among the commercially available corpus-based software programs, I found Advanced Find and Replace to be highly useful for concordancing and obtaining frequency counts for individual files in the corpus. Results of the search feature

(which works for both tagged and untagged data) in this program can be easily imported into a spreadsheet like MS Excel or SPSS. In addition, Advanced Find and Replace works very well for batch replacement of features needed to edit or clean a corpus. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 below show screenshots of Antconc keyword analysis output and KWIC/frequency count results from Advanced Find and Replace.

3.5 Norming

I normalized the rates of occurrences of all linguistic features used in the analyses per 1,000 words. Norming in typical quantitative research is necessary to correctly compare the distribution of these linguistic features across corpora and speaker groups with varying lengths or sizes (i.e., number of words) (Biber, Conrad, & Reppen, 1998). The approximate number of words in the American Conversation and Switchboard (sub)corpora are comparable in size but the Call Center corpus is half a million words less than these two corpora. In addition, the total word counts in the various speaker groups of the Call Center corpus vary. I normed frequency counts per 1,000 words to be consistent with the tag-counted results from Biber's tag count program. All data presented in the results of analyses in tables and figures in this book are normalized per 1,000 words.

3.6 Linguistic features

The selection of the linguistic or discourse features analyzed in this book is based upon previous related research on spoken interaction and my personal experience conducting language monitoring and assessment of performance in the call center industry in the Philippines. As previously mentioned, the main source of inspiration in my selection of features is the LGSWE's discussion of the grammar of British and American conversation (Chapter 14, pp. 1038–1125). The LGSWE outlines corpus findings that show the general characteristics of spoken interactions. I included many of these linguistic features found to be frequent in many registers of conversations in planning my analysis. I then considered related corpus-based studies, in particular, Connor-Linton (1989), White (1994), Precht (2000), Quaglio (2004), and Friginal (2008) in rechecking the relevance of these linguistic features in similar interactions such as job interviews, conversations and TV sitcom dialogues, and televised cross-cultural interaction. Previous studies using spoken corpora (e.g., Aijmer, 1984; Scott, 2001; McCarthy, 2002) and Biber's (1988, 1995, 2006) linguistic variation studies all contributed to the final composition of features to study in my empirical chapters (Chapters 4 to 10).

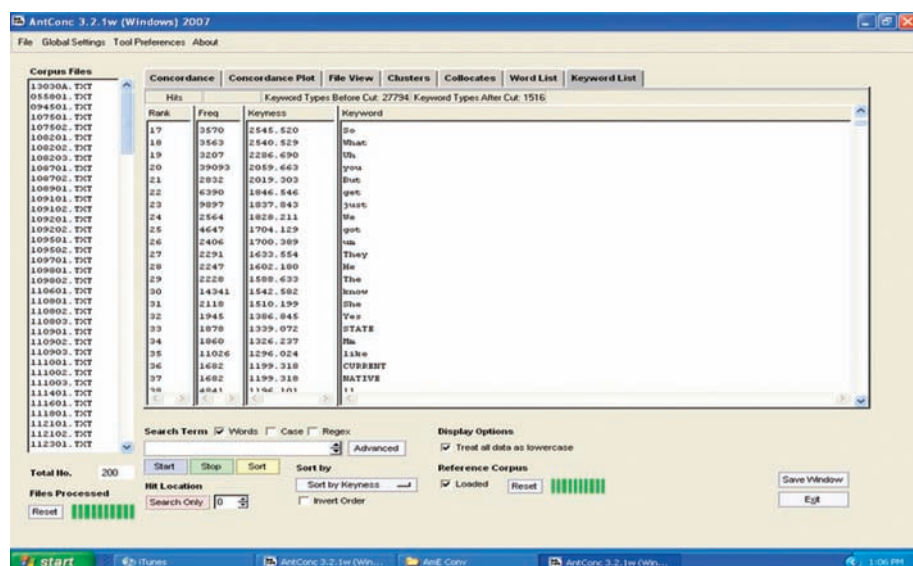


Figure 3.1. Sample keyword analysis output from Antconc (Anthony, 2007).

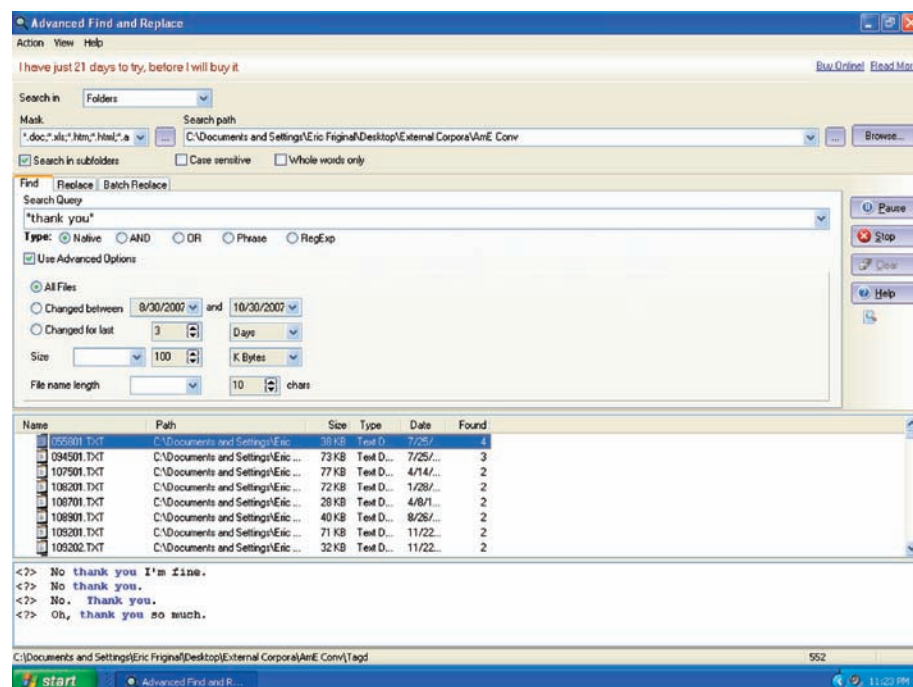


Figure 3.2. Sample KWIC and frequency count result from Advanced Find and Replace (Abacre, 2007).

I added linguistic and discourse features that I thought were important to cover in the context of call centers (e.g., instances of caller clarifications, procedural language features, politeness and respect markers). Table 3.9 shows the summary of linguistic/discourse features (including caller clarifications) and related studies discussed in the following chapters.

Table 3.9. Linguistic features analyzed in the book.

Linguistic Features	Related Study	Chapter
1 Multi-Dimensional Analysis 37 grammatical features listed in Chapter 4	Biber, 1988, 2006; Connor-Linton, 1989; White, 1994	4
2 Lexico/Syntactic Features	LGSWE; Aijmer, 1984, 1987;	5
a. Content words	Anthony, 2007; Baker, 2004;	
b. Pronouns	Barbieri, 2006, 2008; Biber, 1988;	
c. Common lexical verbs	Chafe, 1985; Quaglio, 2004;	
d. Hedges/nouns of vague reference	Scott, 2001	
e. <i>Let's/Let us</i>		
f. Prepositions		
g. Coordinators/conjunctions		
h. Word length		
i. Nominalization		
j. Vocabulary size (type/token ratio)		
k. Keywords		
3 Grammatical Stance Features	LGSWE; Biber, 2006;	6
a. Modal and semi-modal verbs	Precht, 2000, 2003	
b. Stance adverbs		
c. Complement clauses controlled by stance verbs, adjectives, or nouns		
4 Politeness/Respect Markers	Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003;	7
a. Polite speech-act formulae (<i>thank you, thanks, appreciate</i>)	Beeching, 2002; Blum-Kulka, House-Edmondson, & Kasper, 1989; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005; Holmes, 1993, 1995; Locher, 2004; Mills, 2003	
b. Apologies (<i>sorry, apologize, pardon</i>)		
c. Polite requests (<i>please</i>)		
d. Respect markers (<i>ma'am, sir, Mr., Ms., titles</i>)		
5 Inserts	LGSWE; Biber, 1988; Biber, 2006; Condon, 2001; McCarthy, 2002; Muller, 2005; Peltzman & Fishburn, 2006; Schiffrin, 1987; Taguchi, 2002; Tottie, 1991; White, 1989; White, 1994	8
a. <i>OK</i>		
b. <i>Alright</i>		
c. Marker of participation (<i>I mean/You know</i>)		
d. Marker of cause and result (<i>because, so</i>)		
e. Marker of transition (<i>next, then</i>)		
f. Discourse particles (<i>oh, well, anyway</i>)		
g. Backchannels (<i>uh-huh</i>)		
6 Dysfluencies	LGSWE; Quaglio, 2004; White, 1994	9
a. Pauses (transcribed – short and long pauses)		
b. Filled-pauses (<i>uh, erm, uhm, OK</i>)		
c. Repeats		
d. Holds		
7 Caller Clarifications	Connor-Linton, 1989; Gumperz & Roberts, 1991; Mortensen, 1997	10

3.7 Chapter summary

Chapter 3 introduced the sponsoring call center company in this study, the design and collection of the Call Center corpus in the Philippines, and the specific speaker groups representing cross-cultural communication and the demographics of speakers in outsourced call center discourse. I provided a contextual description of the different account categories and the typical interactions in these accounts. My goal in discussing the accounts and giving excerpts of call center interactions was to show the unique communicative tasks handled by agents and callers as they participated in transactions. The settings of the calls contributed to the overall quality and tenor of the interactions. I emphasized that the different situational contexts such as callers' background, level of pressure or potential conflict, gender of callers, or agents' performance evaluation scores contributed to the way speakers used language and paralinguistic features in their turns.

I also briefly discussed the design of my assessment instrument and the call evaluation process I followed in giving each agent a performance score based on their recorded transaction. This evaluation/assessment process and the instrument I developed for the study could be used for actual evaluations in a quality assurance department of an outsourced call center company in the Philippines. The results of performance evaluations using this instrument appeared to capture the overall quality of task and linguistic performance of agents serving American callers.

Finally, Chapter 3 introduced the comparative corpora: American Conversation and Switchboard, as well as my corpus-based approach in processing data, norming of frequency distributions of features, and the corpus tools and computational programs I used in obtaining linguistic data. I also outlined the linguistic features analyzed in the next empirical chapters and provided the motivation for my use of these features in the book.

Multi-dimensional analysis

4.1 Introduction

In my attempt to further describe the unique linguistic characteristics of out-sourced call center interactions, I utilize in this chapter Biber's multi-feature, multi-dimensional (MD) analysis. The specific goals of this analysis are to (1) identify the statistically correlating groups of linguistic features based on their frequency of occurrences in a corpus, and (2) to interpret what these groupings of features mean. I present a relatively detailed explanation of the processes and procedures of MD analysis in the sections below. A more extensive discussion of the theoretical and statistical basis of corpus-based MD analysis can be found in Biber (1988, 1995), White (1994), and Biber and Conrad (2001).

What is corpus-based, multi-dimensional analysis? I have, on several occasions, tried to explain this section of my study to people with limited background in corpus linguistics and multivariate statistics. I am still not sure if I am able to successfully describe the technical processes involved in this type of analysis, but there seems to be an easy way to explain this concept of linguistic co-occurrence by pointing out how we know, intuitively, at least, the difference between speech and writing. In general, we know the common differences in the linguistic composition of various types of registers. For example, spoken registers are different from written registers, for the most part, because of factors such as the use of dysfluencies and the co-occurrence of linguistic features that show immediate interactivity (e.g., questions and responses, speech-act formulae, or inserts). Specific linguistic features such as pronouns, past tense verbs, and nouns often go together whenever speakers engage in everyday conversations and talk about their experiences or recent events. These same features could also appear together with very high-frequency in written, first person narratives or soliloquies about past events.

With computational tools such as Biber's grammatical tagging program, it is then possible to identify and list these groups of co-occurring linguistic features and compare how they are used by different speakers or writers. In the Call Center corpus, for example, it is possible to compare how groups of speakers (e.g., agents vs. callers or lay callers vs. specialist callers) make use of these statistically correlating features and describe their unique functions derived from the speakers' distinctive demographic characteristics. It is also possible to compare the

whole corpus of call center interactions against other registers such as face-to-face conversation following the same groups of correlating features. These groups of features tell something about the detailed linguistic composition of the discourse which is not normally seen in qualitative observations. By identifying and clearly isolating these groups of linguistic features, we can define further both the internal and external qualities that form the building blocks of the discourse.

4.2 Multi-feature, multi-dimensional analytical framework

Biber's multi-feature, multi-dimensional analytical framework has been applied in the analysis of a range of spoken and written registers and used in the interpretation of various linguistic phenomena. MD data come from Factor Analysis (FA) which considers the sequential, partial, and observed correlations of a wide-range of variables producing groups of occurring factors or dimensions. According to Tabachnick and Fidell (2001), the purposes of FA are to summarize patterns of correlations among variables, to reduce a large number of observed variables to a smaller number of factors or dimensions, and to provide an operational definition (a regression equation) for an underlying process by using these observed variables. The purposes of FA support the overall focus of corpus-based MD analysis which aims to describe statistically correlating linguistic features and group them into interpretable sets of linguistic dimensions. The patterning of linguistic features in a corpus creates linguistic dimensions which correspond to salient functional distinctions within a register, and allows cross-register comparison.

Various MD studies of spoken registers have covered topics such as stance and dialects (Precht, 2000), gender and diachronic speech (Biber & Burges, 2001; Rey, 2001), television sitcom dialogues and real-world conversation (Quaglio, 2004), televised cross-cultural interaction (Connor-Linton, 1989; Scott, 1998), and job interviews (White, 1994). Of these, White's analyses of structured, professional interactions exemplified in job interviews share commonalities with the focus of this study. Several of the social categories and linguistic features in White's resulting dimensional frames are directly replicable in the analysis of customer service transactions. The extracted linguistic dimensions in job interviews are: (1) Informational/Involved Style, (2) Immediate Speech/Personal Narrative, (3) Interactional Sequence, (4) Enthusiastic Pace/Tentative Projection, (5) Esprit, and (6) Personal Reference. White finds that participants in job interviews show variations in using the linguistic features of the six extracted factors. Distinctions in speech patterns are observed across gender, age, roles (as interviewer or interviewee), level of education, job category, and success in the interview (whether or not the interviewee was hired). Interviewees are found to talk more if they are older, more educated, and if they are applying for literate jobs with higher salaries. Significant differences

are found between interviewers and interviewees, men and women, literate and manual jobs, and successful and unsuccessful applicants across the six factors.

The extraction of co-occurring linguistic features of call center discourse through MD analysis has not been conducted in previous research. The identification of linguistic dimensions through the statistical co-occurrence of lexico/syntactic items in the Call Center corpus offers unique information about the linguistic choices of agents and callers that are not yet surveyed by researchers connected within the call center industry. In addition, these dimensions help distinguish the discourse of outsourced call centers from other kinds of conversations.

After the extraction and interpretation of statistically co-occurring linguistic features in the Call Center corpus, I present in this chapter how speakers in American Conversation and Switchboard corpora compare with speakers in call center interactions across these extracted linguistic dimensions. I then compare how speaker groups generally use these dimensions in their collective turns. In addition to role, gender, categories of accounts, and agents' experience and performance evaluation scores, I also consider two speaker groups in this chapter: (1) callers' background, and (2) level of pressure or potential conflict in the transactions. I provided a brief description of these two speaker groups in Chapter 3. I found in my pilot study that these two speaker groups also influenced the way participants, especially the agents, used lexico/syntactic features of speech in service transactions.

4.3 Steps in MD analysis

The following steps describe the MD analytical procedure (from Biber, 1988) starting from data preparation and data screening to the computation of factor scores of each individual subject or observation in the Call Center corpus.

4.3.1 Segmenting texts, part-of-speech tagging, tag-counting

Initial data processing for FA required an automatic segmentation of the text documents of transactions into groups of agents' and callers' texts in order to analyze the language of agents and callers separately. A total of 1,000 segmented files, from 500 transcripts of transactions, of callers' and agents' turns comprise the corpus for MD analysis. The segmented texts of the transactions were tagged for parts-of-speech and semantic categories using Biber's tagging program. Next, the tagged features in the corpus were counted and normalized per 1,000 words by a tag-count program also developed by Biber.

4.3.2 Identifying linguistic features, initial FA runs

The composition of the tag-counted linguistic features used in the book was based primarily on prior studies, especially Biber (1988) and White (1994). Additional features

not captured by the tagging program but relevant to telephone-based service transactions (e.g., filled-pauses, politeness markers, length of turns) were included in the dataset. A combination of computational tools developed for the study was utilized in order to extract the normalized frequency counts of these supplementary items.

Table 4.1. Linguistic features used in the analysis.

Linguistic Features	Description/Example
1. Type/Token	Number of words occurring in the first 400 words of texts
2. Word Length	Mean length of words in a text (in letters)
3. Word Count	Total number of words per agent/caller text
4. Private Verbs	e.g., <i>anticipate, assume, believe, feel, think, show, imply</i>
5. <i>That</i> Deletion	e.g., <i>I think [Ø] he's gone.</i>
6. Contractions	e.g., <i>can't, I'm, doesn't</i>
7. Present Tense Verbs	All present tense verbs identified by the tagging program
8. 2nd Person Pronouns	<i>you, your, yours, yourself</i> (and contracted forms)
9. Verb <i>Do</i>	<i>do, does, did</i> (and contracted forms)
10. Demonstrative Pronouns	<i>that, those, this, these</i>
11. 1st Person Pronouns	<i>I, me, my, mine, myself</i> (plural and all contracted forms)
12. Pronoun <i>It</i>	Instances of pronoun <i>It</i>
13. Verb <i>Be</i>	Forms of <i>Be</i> verb
14. Discourse Particles	e.g., <i>oh, well, anyway, anyhow, anyways</i>
15. Possibility Modals	<i>can, could, might, may</i>
16. Coordinating Conjunctions	<i>and, or, but</i>
17. WH Clauses	Clauses with WH (<i>what, which, who</i>) head
18. Nouns	All nouns identified by the tagging program
19. Prepositions	All prepositions identified by the tagging program
20. Attributive Adjectives	e.g., <i>the small chair</i>
21. Past Tense Verbs	Past tense verbs identified by the tagging program
22. Perfect Aspect Verbs	Verbs in perfect aspect construction
23. Nominalizations	Words ending in <i>-tion, -ment, -ness, or -ity</i> (and plurals)
24. Adverb Time	Time adverbials e.g., <i>nowadays, eventually</i>
25. Adverbs	Total adverbs (not Time, Place, Downtoners, etc.)
26. Prediction Modals	<i>will, would, shall</i>
27. Verb <i>Have</i>	<i>has, have, had</i> (and contracted forms)
28. Average Length of Turns	Total number of words divided by number of turns
29. Filled-Pauses	<i>uhm, uh, hm</i>
30. Respect Markers	<i>ma'am, Sir</i>
31. Politeness Markers – <i>Thanks</i>	<i>thank you, thanks, [I] appreciate [it]</i>
32. Politeness Markers – <i>Please</i>	<i>please</i>
33. Discourse Markers – <i>OK</i>	<i>ok</i> (marker of information management)
34. Discourse Markers – <i>I mean</i>	<i>I mean</i> and <i>You know</i> (marker of participation)
35. Discourse Markers – <i>Next/Then</i>	<i>next, then</i> (temporal adverbs)
36. Discourse Markers – <i>Because</i>	<i>because, 'coz, so</i> (marker of cause and result)
37. <i>Let's</i> or <i>let us</i>	Instances of <i>let's</i> or <i>let us</i>

There was a need to run several FAs piloting various combinations of over 70 tag-counted features in order to finalize the list of items comprising the dataset. Linguistic features that correlated below .250 in communality values after extraction and did not load in any of the factors were excluded. After a series of tests, 37 lexical and syntactic features, shown in Table 4.1, were used in the final FA.

4.3.3 Data screening and final factor analysis

After finalizing the dataset for analysis, initial data screening using SPSS v.14.0 was conducted to test for multivariate outliers, multicollinearity, singularity, and normality in the distribution of variables. Results indicated that the dataset met relevant assumptions of FA. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure for Sampling Adequacy ($KMO=.724$, middling) and Bartlett's Test for Sphericity (Approx. Chi-Square=13101.705, $df=667$; $p<.0001$) also indicated that partial and observed correlations in the data were sufficient for FA. SPSS Principal Axis Factoring with Promax rotation was used in the extraction of factors. Results from a three-factor solution, listed in Table 4.2, were deemed to be the most interpretable merging of features after running tests that included four and five-factor solutions. The three-factor solution reported a 34.29 cumulative percentage of Initial Eigenvalues (Total Variance Explained). With a cut of $\pm .30$ for inclusion of a variable in interpretation of a factor, eight out of 37 features did not load on any factor. Appendices B and C show the Structure Matrix and the Scree Plot of Eigenvalues of the three-factor solution.

4.3.4 Computing factor scores

The factor scores of the 1,000 agents/callers' texts were computed using the standardized scores of the features that loaded in the three factors. For each of the 1,000 texts, the standardized scores of the variables were added together to obtain the factor score of every subject. The normalized frequencies of linguistic features were standardized so that they all have means of 0.0 and standard deviations of 1 (Biber, 1988). Calculating factor scores was necessary to compare the means of the groups in the subject categories across the three extracted factors. The texts with high or low factor scores helped in interpreting the meaning of the co-occurrence of features. Mean factor scores of the various groups in the three subject categories are shown in the comparative figures below. Factorial ANOVA and Independent t-tests were used to test if differences in the means of the subject categories across the three factors were statistically significant. I then followed the same procedure in the computation of factor scores for the individual texts in the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora. This process provided me with the

comparison data of the three registers relative to the extracted dimensions. In the following sections, the analysis and interpretation of individual factors include the comparison of the mean factor scores of groups and speaker categories along a dimensional scale.

4.4 Results

Table 4.2 presents the FA results showing the composition of the three extracted factors (i.e., linguistic dimensions) of the Call Center corpus. In the following sections, I provide my analysis and interpretation of these statistically co-occurring linguistic features in call center transactions.

Table 4.2. Summary of the linguistic features of the three factors extracted from the Call Center corpus.

Factor 1		Factor 2	
2nd Person Pronouns	.683	Word Count	.821
Word Length	.612	Length of Turns	.678
<i>Please</i>	.523	Type/Token	.630
Nouns	.515	2nd Person Pronouns	.515
Possibility Modals	.445	<i>Next/Then</i>	.417
Nominalizations	.394	Word Length	.422
Length of Turns	.376	Adverb Time	.409
<i>Thanks</i>	.325	Prepositions	.383
<i>Ma'am/Sir</i>	.309	<i>Please</i>	.369
		Present Tense Verbs	.341
Pronoun <i>It</i>	-.687	Nominalizations	.321
1st Person Pronouns	-.663	<i>Because/So</i>	.310
Past Tense Verbs	-.609	<i>Let's</i>	.300
<i>That</i> Deletion	-.506		
Private Verbs	-.439	Discourse Particles	-.312
WH Clauses	-.397		
Perfect Aspect Verbs	-.345		
<i>I mean/You know</i>	-.338		
Verb <i>Do</i>	-.321		
		Factor 3	
		Discourse Particles	.947
		<i>OK</i>	.865
		Adverbs	.845
		<i>Let's</i>	.422
		Length of Turns	-.349

4.4.1 Dimension 1: Addressee-focused, polite, and elaborated information vs. Involved and simplified narrative

A total of 18 linguistic features comprise Factor 1 with nine features on each of the positive and negative sides of the factor. Positive features include politeness and respect markers (e.g., *thanks*, *please*, *ma'am* and *sir*), markers of elaboration and information density (e.g., long words and turns, nominalizations, and more nouns), and 2nd person pronouns (e.g., *you*, *your*) which indicate “other-directed” focus of talk. Possibility modals (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*) also loaded positively on this factor. The features on the negative side of this factor, especially pronoun *it*, 1st person pronouns, *that* deletion, private verbs, WH clauses, and verb *do*, resemble the grouping in the dimension “Involved Production” identified by Biber (1988) and White (1994). These features are typical of spoken texts and generally contrast with written, informational, and planned discourse. Also on the negative side of the factor are past tense verbs, perfect aspect verbs, and the use of discourse markers *I mean* and *You know*. These elements point to an accounting of personal experience or narrative that tries to explain the occurrence of a particular situation. *I mean* and *You know* are considered by Schiffrin (1987) as markers of information and participation; *I mean* marks speaker orientation toward the meaning of one’s own talk while *You know* marks interactive transitions.

The co-occurrence of features on the positive and negative side of Factor 1 appears to capture how information is exchanged across accounts, e.g., whether typical account procedures often involve elaboration of information or not. Similarly, Factor 1 distinguishes between caller or agent roles based on how they communicate a concern or provide a response. In other words, the merging of features in this dimension seems to represent the contrast between the dominant objectives of speakers’ utterances. This means that participants who use more positive features are likely aiming to give details, explanations, and solutions. In the process, these interactants use more nouns, nominalizations, and longer utterances or turns to deliver the information. In addition, the information density in these turns is high because of the higher average word length in the texts (Biber, 1988). The turns of participants are elaborated and also hint at giving detailed explanations, likelihood, or risks through the use of a significant frequency of possibility modals (e.g., “A reboot *can* cause problems when you connect to the external modem.”). The high-frequency of second person pronouns indicates that the transfer of information is highly addressee-focused.

The grouping of features on the negative side of the factor appears to illustrate personal narratives and experiences, and highly simplified information. The combination of past tense verbs, private verbs, pronoun *it*, and discourse markers *I mean* and *You know* demonstrates the specific goal of the utterances to provide a

personal account of how a situation happened. The involved production features (e.g., 1st person pronouns, WH clauses, verb *do*, and *that* deletion) and *I mean*, *You know* serve a communicative purpose in the maintenance of the interaction, establish personal orientation (White, 1994), and purposely ask for response or assistance. Turns are not elaborated and respect markers are not frequently used. The majority of utterances on the negative side of the factor have smaller word counts and are significantly shorter in length.

The consistent use of addressee-focused politeness and respect markers on the positive side of Factor 1 characterizes the overall nature of outsourced call center transactions. Service encounters commonly allocate for courteous language and the recognition of roles; call center agents are expected to show respect and courtesy in assisting their customers (D'Ausilio, 1998). In this factor, the frequency of politeness and respect markers differentiates the discourse of callers and agents. Although callers also use polite words (e.g., *please*, *thanks*, *appreciate*) and some *ma'ams* or *sirs* in the transactions, agents have very high frequencies of these features across the board. More research is called for to explore the use of *ma'am* and *sir* by Filipino agents in the corpus (additional discussion of these respect markers can be found in Chapter 7). The frequency of these markers may distinguish Filipinos from Indian or American call center agents. It is likely that Filipino agents overuse *ma'am* or *sir* because of their interlanguage background and the way service is typically conducted in the Philippines. Directing respect markers towards customers is highly expected during service encounters in this country. It is possible that this expectation transfers to the way Filipino agents interact with their callers.

To summarize, the combination of positive and negative features in Factor 1 shows a linguistic dimension (Dimension 1) that differentiates between addressee-focused, polite, and elaborated information and involved and simplified narrative portraying how informational content is produced in the discourse. Figures 4.1a and 4.1b illustrate the range of variation between corpora and the speaker groups in the Call Center corpus for Dimension 1.

The collective factor scores of the three registers fall mainly on the negative side of the dimensional scale as shown in Figure 4.1a (FS for Call Center = -0.144 ; Switchboard = -0.766 ; American Conversation = -1.496). These figures generally agree with the results from Biber (1988) and White (1994) which characterize spoken discourse as highly involved and interactive. Linguistic features that describe spoken narratives (e.g., past tense verbs, pronouns, *that*-deletion, etc.) are also very common in these interactions especially in face-to-face conversations from the American Conversation sub-corpus. The Call Center corpus, primarily because of the high frequency of politeness and respect markers as well as features of elaboration and information density, is closer to the positive side of the scale

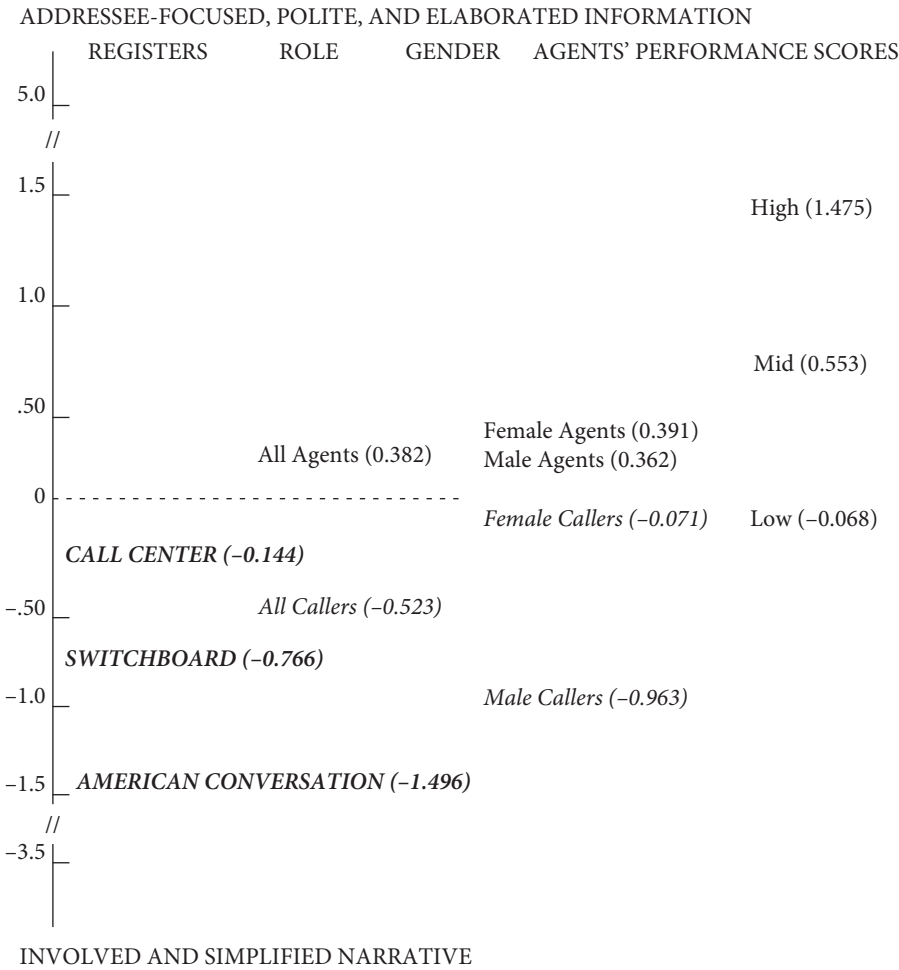


Figure 4.1a. Comparison of factor scores for Dimension 1: Addressee-focused, polite, and elaborated information vs. Involved and simplified narrative.

Factorial ANOVA: Registers, $F=3.112$; $p<.05$; Role, $F=3.674$; $p<.05$; Gender Agents: $t=-3.11$ ($df=356$); $p<.01$; Gender Caller, ns.; Agents' Performance Scores, $F=2.988$; $p<.05$.

than the two comparison corpora. In Chapters 5 (*Lexico/Syntactic Features*) and 7 (*Politeness*), I provide a more detailed look at the distribution of Dimension 1 features such as 2nd person pronouns, nouns and content word classes, and specific politeness and respect markers such as *thanks*, *please*, and *sir/ma'am* across registers and speaker groups in the Call Center corpus.

As shown in Figures 4.1a and 4.1b, Dimension 1 reveals differences in the way participants' roles, gender, agents' performance evaluation scores, and categories

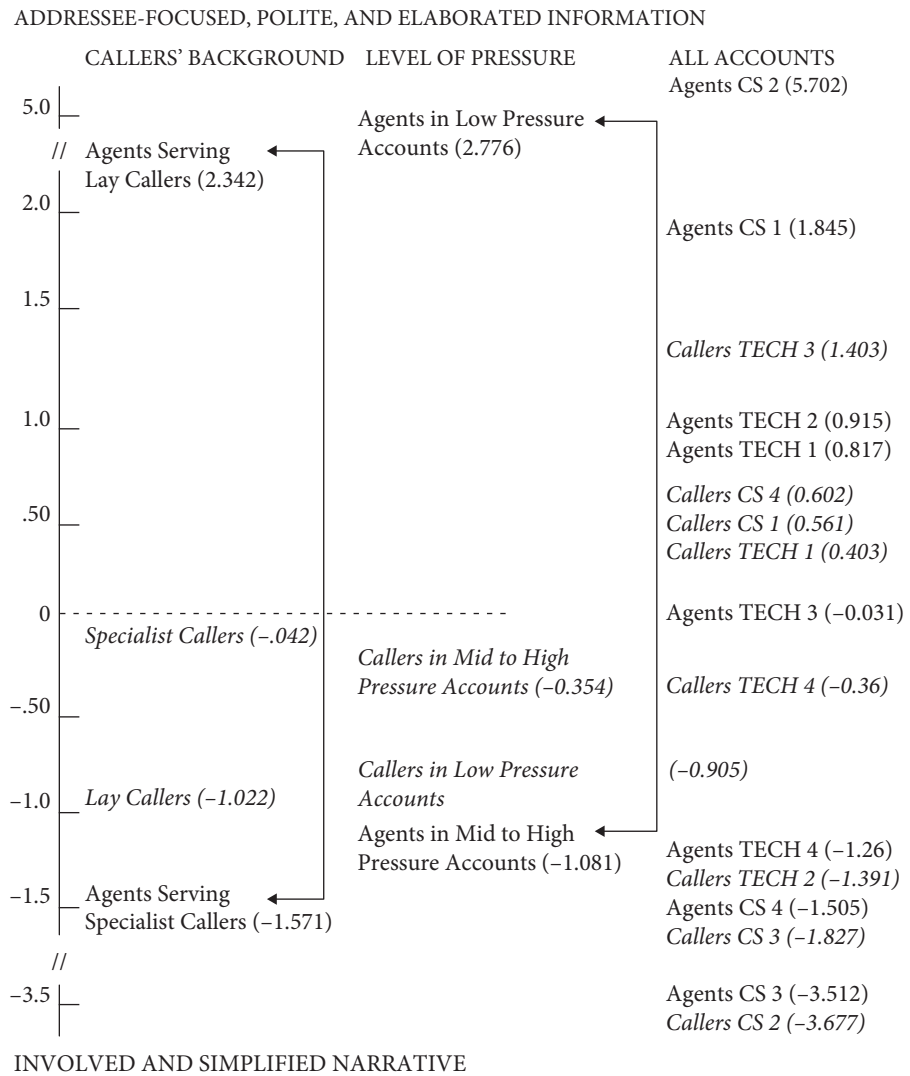


Figure 4.1b. Comparison of factor scores for Dimension 1: Addressee-focused, polite, and elaborated information vs. Involved and simplified narrative.

Factorial ANOVA: Corrected Model, $F=5.444$; $p<.0001$; All Accounts, $F=4.827$; $p<.001$; (interaction between categories not presented in this study); Callers' Background for Agents, $F=3.341$; $p<.001$; Level of Pressure for Agents, $F=2.753$; $p<.001$. Callers' Background for Callers, ns; Level of Pressure for Callers, ns.

of accounts determine the use of linguistic features in the Call Center corpus. Independent samples t-test for gender in Dimension 1 indicates significant mean difference between male and female agents ($t = -3.00$; $p<.01$), but not with male

and female callers in spite of the bigger mean difference (Female Callers = -0.071 ; Male Callers = -0.963). Nevertheless, a pattern in the dimension scale (Figure 4.1a) shows that female callers and agents use more positive features of this dimension than their male counterparts. Initial data on politeness markers show that female agents and callers are more “polite” than males in the transactions. Male agents, however, have comparatively higher frequency of respect markers than female agents (discussed in Chapter 7). In addition, for agents, females use noticeably more 2nd person pronouns and have slightly longer average length of turns than male agents.

It appears that the combined positive and negative features of Dimension 1 are used differently by agents belonging to the three performance evaluation groups. There is an interesting contrast between the FS of High-performing (1.475) and Low-performing agents (-0.068) in Figure 4.1a. High-performing agents consistently have more positive features of Dimension 1, which suggests that these agents are able to provide a more extensive, possibly more detailed explanations of issues together with more polite turns. It is encouraging that the co-occurrence of linguistic features extracted from MD analysis potentially predicts quality of performance in outsourced call centers. Based on the data in Dimension 1, Low-performing agents would need to increase elaboration, politeness, and information density features in their turns and, at the same time, control the transactions by not allowing the callers to dominate the exchanges with complaints and long series of questions.

Overall, agents plot slightly on the positive side of the factor while callers are on the opposite. This pattern suggests that agents have the information and answers while the callers call to state their problems and ask questions. However, there is a wide-range of variation between the agents and callers’ factor scores relative to the eight groups of accounts (Figure 4.1b). Although, participants’ roles report adequate statistical significance ($F=3.674$; $p<.05$), variations in the eight accounts indicate that differences in Dimension 1, especially with agents’ discourse are largely identified by circumstances such as callers’ background and the level of pressure in each of the accounts (All Accounts, $F=4.827$; $p<.0001$; Callers’ Background for Agents, $F=3.341$; $p<.001$; Level of Pressure for Agents, $F=2.753$; $p<.001$). These two categories combine to explain significant variation in agents’ speech but, evidently, not in callers’ discourse. The type of transaction (e.g., Troubleshooting vs. Inquire) generally does not affect linguistic patterns in Dimension 1.

Figure 4.1b shows that agents use more positive features of Dimension 1 if they are supporting lay callers (TECH 1, TECH 2, CS 1, and CS 2, FS = 2.342) but less when they talk with specialist or mostly specialist callers (TECH 3, TECH 4, CS 3, and CS 4, FS = -1.571). Thus, callers’ background helps to determine the

linguistic choices of agents in the corpus. The agents are more addressee-focused and they make use of features of elaboration in addressing callers' needs in lay transactions. The opposite is shown when agents handle calls from specialist callers. In addition, the level of pressure or potential conflict also influences the agents' use of features in Dimension 1. The factor scores of agents in low-pressure accounts are on the positive side of the scale (TECH 1, CS 1, and CS 2, FS = 2.776) while the average factor scores of agents in mid to high-pressure accounts (TECH 2, TECH 3, TECH 4, CS 3, CS 4, FS = -1.081) are on the negative. A convergence of factors such as number of customers' questions, account practices, and agents' training perhaps contributes to these patterns in agents' discourse. Nonetheless, data from these categories of accounts appear to explain the co-occurrence of linguistic features in agents' discourse. Table 4.3 summarizes the comparison between categories of accounts in Dimension 1.

Table 4.3. Comparison between categories of accounts in Dimension 1.

Accounts	Callers' Background	Level of Pressure or Potential Conflict	Agents' Dimension 1 FS (±)*	Callers' Dimension 1 FS (±)*
1. TECH 1	Lay	Low	+	+
2. TECH 2	Lay	High	+	–
3. TECH 3	Mostly Specialist	High	–	+ +
4. TECH 4	Mostly Specialist	Mid	– –	–
5. CS 1	Lay	Low	+ +	+
6. CS 2	Lay	Low	+ + +	– – –
7. CS 3	Specialist	Mid	– –	– –
8. CS 4	Specialist	Mid	– – –	+

*number of + or – indicates higher positive or lower negative factor scores

The variation between agents supporting lay and specialist callers in low and mid to high-pressure transactions is illustrated by the substantial difference between the factor scores of agents in CS 2 (lay, low-pressure) and CS 3 (specialist, mid-pressure) in Text Samples¹ 4.1 and 4.2 below. The excerpt taken from CS 2 (Purchase Mobile Phone Minutes, FS = +5.713) shows longer explanation and additional information given to the lay caller. Technical information, business-related explanation, and politeness markers are provided by the agent in the excerpt.

1. Note that the language of agents and callers are separated in the analyses. All text excerpts in the sections below highlight both participants' use of features based on the extracted dimensions.

The agent engages the caller by using conventional customer service responses (e.g., “*I apologize for the inconvenience..*” or “*Let me just verify the charges..*”). On the other hand, the CS 3 agent (Inquire/Order Equipment, FS = -3.513) concentrates more on short and simplified responses guided by the callers’ specific concern. The interaction in this sample is similar to question-answer adjacency pairs with very limited elaboration. The agent does not use politeness and respect markers and her turns are concise and straightforward.

Text Sample 4.1 Call excerpt: CS 2 (Purchase Mobile Phone Minutes, FS = +5.713); lay transaction; low-pressure

Agent: **Thank you** for calling [XX Company] **Payment Services**, my **name** is **Jane**, how can I help you?

Caller: Yes, uh, when are you **guys** gonna go back telling **us** when how much **time** is left on these phone **cards**? I mean on these **phones**?

Agent: I **apologize** for the **inconvenience** **sir**, I’ll, let me explain on that ok? **Please**, give me your **cell phone number** so I can check on **your minutes**

Caller: 333-333-3333, I **think it has run out** because I **wanted** to use it but it **said it didn’t** have enough time

Agent: Ok, let me just verify the charges at the **moment**, **please** give me **your name** and **address** on the account **please**

Caller: **John A. Doe**, 2635 **Something Road**, in **XX City**, **Ohio** [name and address were changed]

Agent: **Thank you** for that **Mr. Doe**, let me just pull out **your account** to check **your balance**, ok? **Mr. Doe**, you have now zero **balance** on the **account** and uh, ok **Mr. Doe**, you are notified of **your balance** when you reached below **\$10**, below [interruption]

Caller: There never **was** a word **said** anytime, I never **heard** anything, how am I **supposed** to be **notified**?

Agent: I see, well **sir** do **you**, ok just a **moment**, while I check on **your account**. Ok, **sir** did **you** give out any **e-mail address** where we can send **updates** regarding **your account**?

Caller: Yeah I **did**, but I don’t know, my computer is down right now

Agent: For the meantime **Mr. Doe**, **you can** also check **your balance** on **your phone** by calling 1-800-000-0000, and that is a free **call** always. Just choose the **option** for **you** to receive the **minutes** on **your account**, either through uh, or via **text message** or by speaking to a live **agent**, ok? For the meantime **Mr. Doe**, **you** have a zero [interruption]

Caller: [unclear] I have none?

Agent: **Sir**?

Caller: I have none?

Text Sample 4.2 Call excerpt: CS 3 (Inquire: Instrument and Equipment, FS = -3.513); specialist transaction; mid-pressure

Caller: I'm trying to find an electric motor for an air compressor

Agent: Ok?

Caller: And and I've **been through** a whole lot of different places and they're telling **me** that you supply the motor for that

Agent: And the **model number**?

Caller: Well the model number is a 6K794 A apple E E Z

Agent: **6K794AEEZ**?

Caller: 6K794 A like Apple E like E Z

Agent: Uh that doesn't look like **one** of our **models**

Caller: Well that's with the **date** and the **electric manufacturing** and **I went through** those **people you know**, and they told me [XX Company] **did** the **motor** for them and if I get uh and if I contact you the **stock number** would be 607840

Agent: Is that a **5 horse 3450 rpm**?

Caller: Say that again?

Agent: Is that a **5 horse 3450 rpm single-phase motor**?

Caller: Yes, yes **ma'am**, and it's got a **7/8-inch shaft**

Agent: Oh, so **444** on the **catalogue**

Caller: **444**?

Agent: Yes, do **you** have our **06 catalogue**?

Caller: Uh, let me check

Agent: Ok

Caller: [long pause] uh, I don't think so

Agent: It's also **online**, sir, uh

Caller: Ok, so I can check

Agent: Uh-huh?

The three categories of accounts do not determine the caller's use of linguistic features in Dimension 1. Callers' texts from lay and specialist transactions plot on the two sides of the dimension scale. The same result is shown in low and mid to high-pressure accounts. Unlike clear linguistic patterning from agents' texts, callers' data do not provide easily interpretable patterns based on current account categories. In looking at caller's texts with positive factor scores in the corpus, it appears that the use of some features such as 2nd person pronouns, nouns, word length, and length of turns could be influenced by the complexity of issues confronting the callers. Callers with complicated issues and those who are reporting dissatisfaction with service tend to have increased frequencies of these features. On the other hand, callers with less-problematic issues rely on the response from the agents once the context of the call has been established. Their

turns are limited to short questions and clarification sequences. Text Sample 4.3 (TECH 3, Internet Service for Business, FS = +3.414) shows an excerpt of a transaction with an irate caller characterized by long length of turns, several nouns, and 2nd person pronouns. The text still shows common caller features (e.g., past tense verbs, 1st person pronouns), but the primary objective of the call lets the caller elaborate and direct or control the transaction resulting in a positive FS for the text.

Text Sample 4.3 Call excerpt: TECH 3 (Internet Service, Business, FS = +3.414); high-pressure

Agent: Yes, my **name** is Don and I'm with **computer research** with [XX Company] and how **may** I help **you** with regards to this **case**?

Caller: What was your name again?

Agent: Don sir from [XX Company]

Caller: Well I have nothing but **problems** with this **system your system** from **day one**

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: **Been** down as much as **12 days** one time **it's** been down **37 days** altogether

Agent: Uh-huh, ok, well [interruption]

Caller: And **it's** a **business** so I **lose** about a thousand **dollars** a day when **it went** down. I'm talking **30,000 dollars** of lost **income**, **it's** been constantly down **it's** been down **you can** see in the **ticket** and half of the **time** I **fix it myself** I've **gotten** to know what to do

Agent: Ok, sir, let [interruption]

Caller: But now but now right now **it won't** come up every time I **have** a problem **it's been** with **equipment** down time and now **you're** telling **me** I **may have** to pay a **bill** here to get the **thing** back on line and I **think** that's a bunch of crap

Agent: Uh-huh, uh [interruption]

Caller: **You** should **X Company** should be paying **me** for my lost **income** I should **be paid** for defective **system** the **system** never worked right from day one, the other person here in the **complex** who has this **system** he's suing **X Company** right now. I'm thinking about joining him because this is ridiculous now this **system** is defective **it does not** work properly **it's** not reliable, yeah **it's** not, I come in here sometimes and two to four **days** it will go down three to four **times** so I **have** to shut everything down and unplug and work on it before everything **can** come back up **you know** **it's** a constant hassle and **it's** causing me a lot **time** and **money** right now right now I'm supposed to get some **emails** right now I got a **ten, seven thousand dollar machine** sitting out here not operating coz I don't have the **program** I can't get it off the **email** because I can't access the **internet**

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: [unclear] not good at all

4.4.2 Dimension 2: Planned, procedural talk

The items that load on the positive side of Factor 2 include lexical specificity and information density features (type/token ratio, average word length), complex and abstract information features (word count, length of turns, and nominalization), temporal adverbs (*next/then*) and specific time adverbials (e.g., *eventually, immediately*), 2nd person pronouns, prepositions, cause and result discourse markers (*because/so*), politeness marker *please*, present tense verbs, and *let's* (including *let us*). Only discourse particles (e.g., *oh, well, anyway*) loaded on the negative side of the factor. The merging of features (see Factor 2 in Table 4.2) that indicate lexical specificity and complexity and abstraction of information differentiates call center discourse from general conversation or other forms of purposeful oral interactions. Biber (1988) states that these features are more common in academic written texts and less observed in spoken texts because of the influence of production circumstances. In typical, online conversations, general topic shifts allow for the occurrence of more common words and phrases and limited complex or abstract vocabulary. Shorter words based on average word length are often used with familiar vocabulary repeated during the interaction. Therefore, the information-packaging in the call center discourse is somewhat similar to written, planned texts because of the presence of features that are not commonly produced online. Due to the amount of information exchanged in transactions, more diversity in keywords is used in the utterances which increases type/token ratio and word count. More nouns, nominalization, and longer word length suggest that the information is technical and specialized.

The positive side of the factor signifies a one-way (addressee-focused) transfer of a large amount of abstract and technical information. In this case, the information appears to be “real-time,” procedural or process-based due to the presence of temporal adverbs combining with the imperative *let's*, prepositions (e.g., *in, on, below, above*), and, especially, present tense verbs. The frequent occurrence of present tense verbs in the texts illustrates the use of directives/imperatives in utterances (e.g., “*..then click next*”; “*..now, change your password to XX..*”). Instructional language is expressed through a series of directions marked by 2nd person pronouns (especially *you* and *your*), succession between steps (*next/then*) and progression through the discourse (*now*). It appears that the instructional tenor of the turns also includes explanations through the use of cause and result discourse markers (*because/so*) common in the factor. The recurrent use of *please* shows that the delivery of directive or procedural information is still mostly polite as in Dimension 1. Discourse particles, used very sparingly in this factor, perhaps indicate that the utterances are somewhat prepared or organized, and produced with limited hesitations or tentativeness. It follows that participants who provide

directive or instructional information should know their content and how to best facilitate its transfer to the receiver. In sum, the linguistic dimension (Dimension 2) shown here seems to capture the major features of planned information that primarily intends to give directives and procedures in the transactions.

As shown in Figures 4.2a and 4.2b, Dimension 2 makes a distinction between registers ($F=302.233$; $p<.0001$), agents and callers (Role, $F=286.133$; $p<.0001$), agents' performance scores ($F=9.349$; $p<.05$), accounts (All Accounts, $F=18.314$; $p<.0001$), and gender of agents (Gender Agents: $t=-3.468$ ($df=362$); $p<.001$). Callers' background (Callers' Background for Agents, $F=2.71$; $p<.001$) and level of pressure (Level of Pressure for Agents, $F=2.02$; $p<.001$) also help explain variation in agents' discourse but not callers' discourse as in Dimension 1. There is a significant difference between the mean scores of male and female agents in Dimension 2 ($t = -3.468$; $p<.001$). Female agents use more directive, procedural features than male agents in the transactions. A major chunk of this difference is associated with average length of utterances, *please*, and type/token ratio. These data support the gender-based findings briefly discussed in Dimension 1. Gender difference in the callers' mean scores for Dimension 2 is not significant.

Because of the turns of agents, the Call Center corpus has a collective FS (-0.022) that is very close to the positive side of Dimension 2. It is clear that both Switchboard (-5.124) and American Conversation (-7.988) have very limited positive features of Dimension 2. Procedures and instructions are not common in face-to-face interactions unless they involve the performance of tasks. Note that I did not include specific, task-based interactions in the American Conversation sub-corpus used in this study. In Switchboard, there are instances of short, procedural discourse especially in the beginning of the discussions when participants talk about the instructions following the automated prompts during the recording of their conversations. However, these instructions echoed by the speakers are also limited and not extensively repeated in the exchanges.

Agents use more of the features on the positive side of the factor and predictably engage in directive, procedural talk more than the callers. Agents' speech in this dimension is produced online but covers a wide-range of topics and makes use of a variety of specialized terms and jargon that comprise their set spiels or scripts (see Text Sample 4.4 below). In a way, agents' utterances in giving directions and steps are planned because they have clear expectations about the questions directed to them. The moves in assisting a caller are well-defined for many agents, and their series of procedures are commonly established from the time they started training. Many agents have memorized procedural spiels and are constantly reminded of them by accessible notes and tools during the calls (e.g., *“..first, we will look at your account and contract with [XX Company] to see if you qualify to, for the promotional code, then, you will have to confirm with me your*

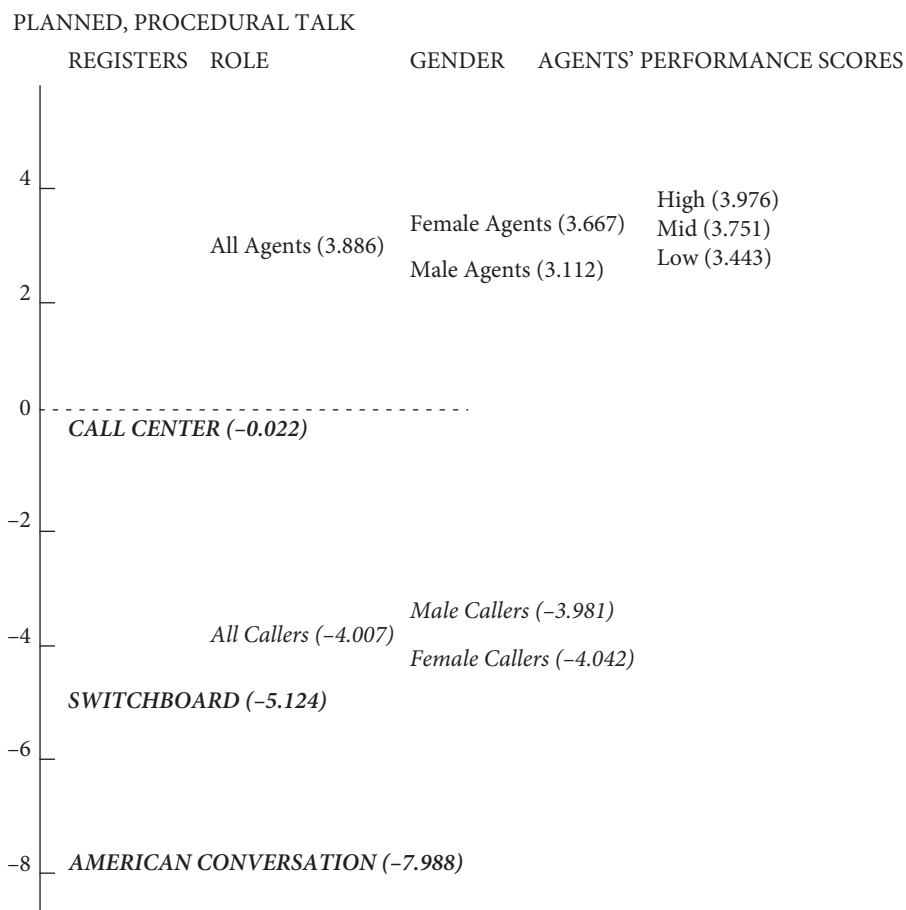


Figure 4.2a. Comparison of factor scores for Dimension 2: Planned, procedural talk.

Registers, $F=302.233$; $p<.0001$; Role, $F=286.13$; $p<.0001$; Gender Agents: $t=-3.468$ ($df=362$); $p<.001$; Gender Caller, ns; Agents' performance scores, ns.

account number.”). The callers, on the other hand, use limited positive features of Dimension 2 and relatively more discourse particles. The use of more discourse particles in the callers’ turns conceivably indicates a communicative shift to clarify, ask follow up questions, or express uncertainty (e.g., “*Uh, ok, well I did not seem to understand that error message, and [unclear] well, oh, it’s back again and I think I’m online again..*”). Several positive features of Dimension 2 appear in some caller texts whenever they repeat or echo a directive (e.g., “*Then remove the filter? Ok, next is the cartridge*”).

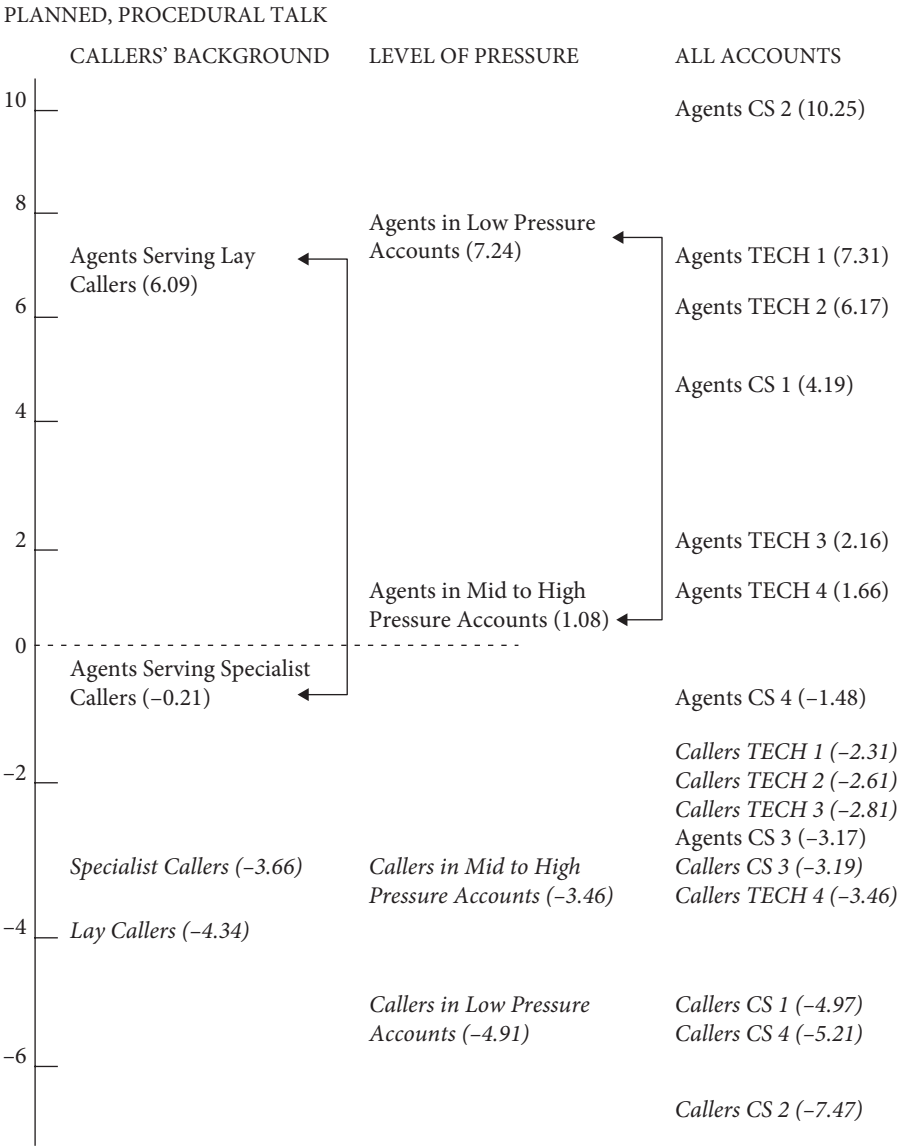


Figure 4.2b. Comparison of factor scores for Dimension 2: Planned, procedural talk.

Factorial ANOVA: Corrected Model, $F=33.62$; $p<.0001$; All Accounts, $F=18.31$; $p<.0001$; (interaction between categories not presented in this paper); Callers' Background for Agents, $F=2.71$; $p<.001$; Level of Pressure for Agents, $F=2.02$; $p<.001$. Callers' Background for Callers, ns; Level of Pressure for Callers, ns.

High-performing agents use slightly more positive features of Dimension 2 (3.976) than both Mid (3.751) and Low agents (3.443). This minimal difference in the factor scores of groups of agents based on their performance evaluation did not report statistical significance. It is clear, however, that the difference between High and Low agents suggests that the use of planned and procedural discourse features contributes to the overall quality of instructions given to the callers. The successful use of the combined features of Dimension 2 potentially helps callers to easily understand procedures and troubleshooting steps that are provided by the agents during the transactions.

Agents in lay transactions use comparatively more positive features of Dimension 2 than agents in specialist transactions. Similarly, agents who are serving low-pressure accounts have more positive Dimension 2 features than agents in mid to high-pressure accounts. These two categories again establish clearer distinction between agents' use of linguistic features across the eight accounts in the corpus. Although callers' data are not significant, a pattern in the dimension scale shows that lay callers and those in low-pressure transactions have very limited Dimension 2 features in their turns. This result suggests that lay callers in low-pressure accounts allow the agents to direct and control the transactions more than specialist callers in mid to high-pressure accounts. Comparative data of agents' factor scores support this observation. Table 4.4 shows a comparison between categories of accounts in Dimension 2.

Table 4.4. Comparison between categories of accounts in Dimension 2.

Accounts	Callers' Background	Level of Pressure or Potential Conflict	Agents' Dimension 2 FS (±)*	Callers' Dimension 2 FS (±)*
1. TECH 1	Lay	Low	++	-
2. TECH 2	Lay	High	++	-
3. TECH 3	Mostly Specialist	High	+	-
4. TECH 4	Mostly Specialist	Mid	+	--
5. CS 1	Lay	Low	++	--
6. CS 2	Lay	Low	++++	----
7. CS 3	Specialist	Mid	--	--
8. CS 4	Specialist	Mid	-	---

*number of + or - indicates higher positive or lower negative factor scores

Text Sample 4.4 shows an excerpt of planned, procedural interaction in TECH 1 (Troubleshoot Office Equipment, FS = + 8.333). This sample text features numerous new, technical words (e.g., *T1*, *DSL*, *Voice Over IP*, *broadband*) and nominalizations (e.g., *documentation*, *possibility*, *connection*) that are not necessarily

repeated over in the text. The use of these words increases type/token ratio, average word counts, and average length of turns in procedural accounts. Caller's background and level of pressure in the transaction affect the overall factor score for this excerpt. The agent knows that he is assisting a lay caller with very low pressure in the call. These factors allow the agent to maintain and control the transaction with ease and provide more planned, procedural information or explanation to the caller.

Text Sample 4.4 Call excerpt: TECH 1 (Troubleshoot, FS = + 8.333); lay; low-pressure

Agent: So uh Sarah uhm I'm gonna, do **you, you** don't need a 9 or an 8 to get an outside line **on the phone line you** have the **meter** hooked up to?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: So **then please** go ahead and hit the "No"

Caller: Hey **well** uh we require a 9

Agent: Oh, **you** require 9?

Caller: Yes

Agent: **Then** go ahead and **please** type in "Yes" and then hit 9

Caller: **Ok**, and then enter again?

Agent: Yes, uh-huh?

Caller: **Well** it just says dialing

Agent: Uh-huh, by the way Sarah just give me an **update** whenever the **message on the screen** changes so that I could uh put down **documentation** here

Caller: **Ok** [long pause] it says "connect phone cord and press," then it says "done press enter"

Agent: Hmm, it, it actually means Sarah that uhm the only reasons that the **postage machine** would say connect the "**connect phone cord message**" is **because** it's not detecting a dial tone **because** it's connect, it's hooked up to a wrong type of **phone line** or the **phone cord** itself is defective. **Now** we need a **connection**, uhm since this is a brand new **postage machine** uh there's a big **possibility** that the **phone line** that it's hooked up to is not correct, so uhm Sarah is it ok if I get the **phone number** where you have the **postage machine** hooked up to so that I could check if uhm if it's dialing out or not?

Caller: Yeah it's the office number, it's 777 888 7777

Agent: Are **you on** the same line as the **postage machine**?

Caller: Uhm **well** it's actually connected to a connector, **well** there's three of them

Agent: Oh you mean a **splitter**?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: **Now** that's actually the reason why it's not uh going out properly. As I said earlier uhm Sarah this **postage machine** needs a **dedicated analog line**, so when we say it's a **dedicated** line it should not be sharing the line with any other equipment, it

should not have a **rollover system**, uhm if the number has **extensions** uh we should be sure that those uh **extensions** doesn't have any **equipment** hooked up to it, and uh when we also say **analog** we have to make sure that it doesn't have **T1**, **DSL**, **Voice Over IP**, or even **broadband** on it. Now the best example for a **dedicated analog line** would be your **fax line**, so if we could just [interruption]

Caller: Uh, what, uh what?

Agent: Just find the, uh if you can see if the **phone line** is directly [interruption]

Caller: I'm sorry, say again?

Agent: I **need you** to find the **phone line** and check if it's connected to the, directly to the **postage machine**, uh **meter**

Caller: Ok [long pause]

Agent: [unclear] and make sure then to check the **connection**

Caller: [long pause] sorry what did you say?

Agent: Ok Sarah, I'll give you time to check

Caller: Ok

Agent: Ok, sorry for the **interruption**

Caller: [background – laughs]

The agents are trained as to their content and every account in this study follows specific procedures from greetings to closing sequences. It appears that Dimension 2 successfully teases out the differences in the procedures observed in the accounts through account categories such as callers' background and level of pressure. Although some accounts may have similar services, their agents use the positive features of Dimension 2 differently. For example, TECH 2 (FS = + 6.173) and TECH 3 (FS = + 2.165) both provide support for internet connection issues but they also have significant differences in the way directions and steps are relayed to the callers. Because TECH 2 agents assist lay callers, the general structure of their discourse comprises more complex and abstract features in giving procedures and clearing up the process of support. In TECH 3, due to the common understanding between agents and callers, procedures and additional instructions are clear-cut and detailed explanation of support processes is very limited.

4.4.3 Dimension 3: Managed information flow

The linguistic features on the positive side of Factor 3 are discourse particles (e.g., *oh*, *well*, *anyway*), the discourse marker *ok*, occurrences of *let's* (and *let us*), and adverbs – any adverb form occurring in the dictionary, or any form that is longer than five letters and ends in *-ly* (Biber, 1988). The adverbs comprising this list do not include time and place adverbials and those counted as amplifiers or down-toners. The positive features in this factor are very common in conversation. Discourse particles are regarded as necessary for conversational coherence (Schiffrin,

1994) and in monitoring the flow of information in talk (Chafe, 1985; Biber, 1988). *Ok* is also regularly used in conversation and purposeful interactions like service encounters, and serves as either a marker of information management (Schiffrin, 1987) or an apparent backchannel. The use of the imperative *let's*, discussed in the LGSWE (p. 1117) is characteristic of interactions that especially focus on the performance of tasks. The combination of discourse particles and backchannels could be interpreted as a conversational device to maintain and monitor the overall flow of transactions. More of these features emerge because the interactions are conducted over the telephone with defined turns and adjacency pairs. It is possible that backchanneling through *ok* and the use of discourse particles that initiate turns are preferred by participants to avoid dead air and long pauses. The LGSWE explains that adverbs typically indicate a form of expansion of ideas because they provide additional descriptive information in the texts, and are used as modifiers or adverbials attached in clauses. However, this interpretation is not supported by the lone negative feature in the factor. Length of turns on the negative side of the scale signals that discourse particles, *ok*, and adverbs co-occur with shorter utterances. Elaboration of information with adverbs does not hold up in this case because the turns of speakers tend to be shorter in length. It is possible that adverbs in this dimension are used for quick responses (e.g., *absolutely*, *exactly*) and as epistemic stance adverbials (e.g., *actually*, *basically*, *really*) that have been included in the agents' repertoire of conversational devices.

The grouping of linguistic features in Factor 3 signifies the speaker's attempt at managing the flow of information (Dimension 3). This dimension separates callers and agents in their use of discourse particles, *ok*, and adverbials intended to facilitate and monitor the transaction. There is a significant difference in the mean scores of agents and callers (Role, $F=33.08$; $p<.0001$), agents having substantially more positive features of the factor than the callers (see Figure 4.3 below for the dimension scale). There is no difference in the patterns of linguistic co-occurrence between categories of accounts and gender in Dimension 3. Agents' performance evaluations scores also do not affect the use of the positive features in this dimension. High, Mid, and Low agents have very similar frequencies of the collective features of Dimension 3. It appears that common account procedures and practices do not vary when it comes to the management of the flow of talk in the service calls. The type of transaction, callers' background, and, surprisingly, the level of pressure or conflict also do not influence the speakers' use of features in Dimension 3.

Because of the discourse of agents, the Call Center corpus plots on the positive side of the dimension scale (0.044) while Switchboard (-1.489) and American Conversation corpora (-2.222) are on the negative. However, there is only a slight difference in the factor scores of these registers in Dimension 3, which potentially

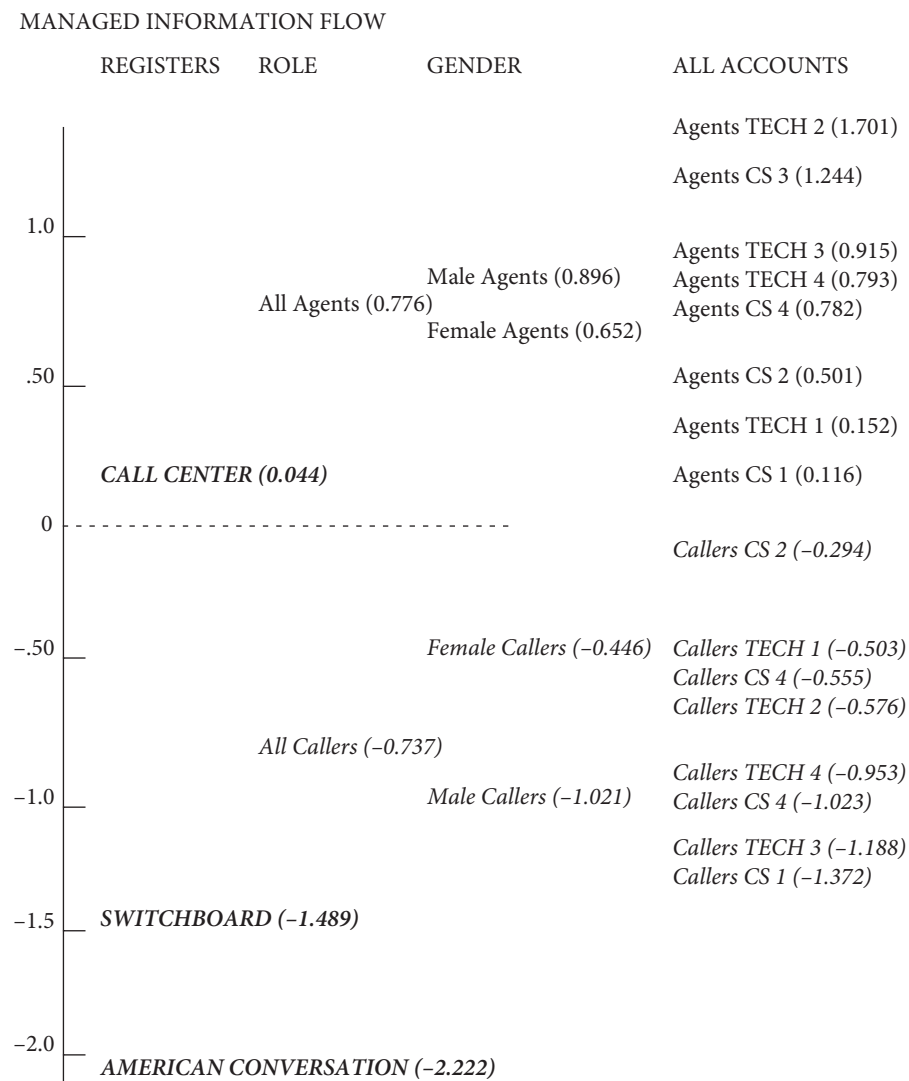


Figure 4.3. Comparison of factor scores for Dimension 3: Managed information flow.

Factorial ANOVA: Corrected Model, $F=4.174$; $p<.0001$; Registers, $F=45.988$, $p<.0001$; Role, $F=33.082$; $p<.0001$; (interaction between categories not presented in this paper); Gender Agents, ns; Gender Caller, ns; Account Categories for Agents and Callers, ns.

indicates that the use of these features is generally very similar in many registers of conversation. Discourse markers and *ok* are also commonly used in Switchboard interactions and face-to-face talk although not as repetitive and almost formulaic as call center interactions. However, the use of *let's* contributes to the difference

in the factor scores of the Call Center corpus and the two other comparison corpora. There is high frequency of *let's* and *let us* in the turns of agents potentially to signal the introduction of an instruction given to the caller (e.g., “*Ok, mām, let's go back to the previous page by clicking the back arrow.*”).

The use of the positive features in Dimension 3 by the agents could be related to common conventions in the register such as establishing rapport with the callers, avoiding dead air, as well as backchanneling to show attentiveness and focus in the transactions. Filipino agents undergo skills training in phone-handling, and some of the topics covered in many training sessions include backchanneling and providing confirmatory responses to control the flow of transactions. Some researchers have noted that Filipino agents tend to be quiet during callers' turns which may suggest to the callers limited engagement or low level of interest (Peltzman & Fishburn, 2006). Because of this awareness during training, it is possible that agents consciously backchannel in their turns. Chapter 8 (*Inserts*) provides additional discussions of backchanneling especially by agents in call center transactions.

It is important to note here that in Dimension 2, planned, procedural features co-occur with limited frequencies of discourse particles. In relation to Dimension 3, this result demonstrates that the information flow in agents' discourse is slightly less managed when the agents provide straightforward directives. In this case, agents' utterances are more organized and there are limited provisions for backchannels because the callers do not control the information exchange. Furthermore, because discourse particles may also indicate signals of uncertainty and tentativeness, it could be interpreted that agents engaged in procedural transactions may use more discourse particles when they are quite uncertain about the procedures they provide, but less when they are in control of the procedural steps in the transactions.

Some of the communicative markers in Dimension 3 are likely to have been overused by many agents and have become part of their mannerisms in handling calls. The use of *ok*, *actually*, *basically*, *well*, and *anyway* in agents' turns is common across accounts. In managing the flow of information and trying to control the transaction through the features in Dimension 3, it appears that the agents are serving three unique purposes: (1) direct management, i.e., avoiding dead air, confirming the message, initiating the turn; (2) indirect management through mannerisms acquired while supporting American callers; and (3) making use of the positive features to supplement fillers to “buy thinking time” before a response.

Text Samples 4.5 and 4.6 illustrate agents' use of the positive features of Dimension 3 in their transactions. *Ok*, *anyway*, *let's*, and *well* co-occur with adverbials *actually*, *supposedly*, *exactly*, and *basically*. *Ok* and other discourse particles often start the agents' turns, and sometimes are used together to mark the beginning of utterances. In several instances, *ok* is also used to signal transitions or turn

endings. The adverbials in the two text samples belong to different semantic categories with different discourse functions. Stand-alone adverbial *exactly* is used as a direct, confirmatory response in Text Sample 4.6, while stance adverbial *actually* implies verification of information (e.g., “..*actually* June 30”; “I *actually* checked your..”) in Text Sample 4.5. It is not always clear, however, if adverbials like *actually* and *basically* are purposely used in the discourse to realize a specific stance or semantic adverbial functions.

Text Sample 4.5 Call excerpt from CS 1 (Purchase – Home Products; FS = + 1.238); lay transaction; low pressure

Caller: [long pause] Uhm one of them was I believe was on I believe was on the 25th of June

Agent: **Ok?**

Caller: Two of them was on the 25th and one of them was on the 21st of June

Agent: **Ok, let's** just go ahead and check [long pause] **ok** [hold 22 seconds] the other one I believe was on the two you have **actually** won three recruits right?

Caller: Yes

Agent: **Ok** you have three recruits so let me just check [long pause] **ok** so it is here that since you recruited them just last 25th they **supposedly** [long pause] **ok** let me just go ahead and check on this, I'll call you back because I **actually** checked your [XX Account] and that coupon is not loaded in your [XX Account] **ok?**

Caller: [unclear] I don't see it there

Agent: Yes, yes and uh you know the start is **actually** June 30 **well** but **anyway** you have until the end of this month to redeem this coupon **basically**, so whatever, let me just go ahead and check why the coupon is not loaded

Text Sample 4.6 Call excerpt from TECH 2 (Troubleshoot Internet Service – Home; FS = + 1.451); lay transaction; high pressure

Agent: I understand, **well, ok**, first of all my name [interruption]

Caller: It says our subscription has expired

Agent: Uh, I see, I see, **ok, well**, I do apologize for all the convenience on that part, I'll, what I'm gonna do here right now is, **let's actually** verify it completely, i-identify [interruption]

Caller: **Ok**

Agent: We, uh, **ok**, need to identify the status, your account status, **ok?**

Caller: **Ok**

–

Agent: **Ok, ok** uhm could you also please give me a good contact number?

Caller: Uhm, I can give you my mom's number, it's 333-333-3333

Agent: **Ok** 333-333-3333?

Caller: Yup

Agent: **Ok**, now, **anyway** here's the thing, when I was asking you awhile ago, if you're online, uhm, we are **actually** trying to sign in on MSN, you can't because it's saying that your, your username or account, has expired, **now** [interruption]

—

Caller: Hey, that works, you think?

Agent: **Exactly**, **ok**, you will be, are able to log in there

Caller: Right, through Hotmail?

Agent: **Exactly**, through Hotmail **ok**?

Caller: And not through MSN?

Agent: **Ok**, right **exactly**, uhm, you did use your MSN email address in logging in to Hotmail, right? **Ok**, alright, right, **now**, I mean, it's working there but it's not on your, it's not working on MSN, so this would be an MSN issue already, so please, do stay on the line, while I try to transfer you over to a tech support agent, **ok**?

4.5 Discussion of results

There are notable differences in the use of the linguistic features of the three dimensions across registers. Call center interactions are more polite, addressee-focused, and generally elaborated than Switchboard and American Conversation interactions. Expectedly, there are more features of procedural language in customer service interactions than in face-to-face conversations or spontaneous telephone discussions. In addition, there is a consistent, explicit management of information in call centers that speakers in the two comparison corpora do not necessarily observe. The main variable accounting for the difference in factor scores across registers is the collective turns of agents in the Call Center corpus. Agents' discourse makes use of features that speakers in American Conversation and Switchboard typically do not use. Callers' discourse, on the other hand, sometimes resembles the features of Switchboard (e.g., in Dimension 2, FS all agents = -4.007 , FS Switchboard = -5.124)

Agent and caller discourses are statistically different in linguistic and textual composition across the three dimensions. The information coming from the agents is addressee-focused, polite, and elaborated; primarily planned and procedural; and constantly managed and monitored. Agents have the data to share as well as the instructions and procedures to apply to resolve an issue. The callers expect these procedures and information, for the most part, unless they call to complain or express dissatisfaction. In the spirit of service and personalization of support, agents use politeness markers frequently and try to engage the callers by giving sufficient information and explanation, and using discourse markers to monitor the flow of

talk. Callers' discourses, on the other hand are generally involved, personal, and simplified; non-procedural; and less managed. Most of the turns originate from a first person perspective and are based on the occurrence of a past issue or concern.

The ways accounts provide services through their agents are also captured by the resulting first two dimensions after FA. Different operational processes in customer support are illustrated by the manner in which information is delivered to the callers. Dimension 1 differentiates accounts based on whether information is elaborated or simplified. The extent of explanation given to the callers is demonstrated by the co-occurring features in this dimension. Some accounts require more elucidation and repeated confirmation of understanding while others rely on direct question-answer sequences. There are accounts that regularly include spiels reminding callers about products for sale or issues with legal or monetary implications. Whenever additional selling and explanation occur, features of elaboration in the texts increase. Dimension 2 uncovers the distinction between procedural and non-procedural accounts. Instructive discourse is common in the register and is characterized by the positive features of Dimension 2. Accounts that deal with troubleshooting machines and equipment use discreet features not often present in inquiry-based transactions.

The callers' background further explains variation in the discourse of agents in the corpus. Agents in lay transactions significantly use more positive features of Dimension 1 and Dimension 2 than agents handling calls from specialist callers. The agents understand the range of information or procedures expected by their callers based on experience with their current accounts and possibly from service principles acquired through training. In the same way, the perceived level of pressure or conflict in the eight accounts influences the agents' use of the linguistic features of the first two dimensions. There are significantly more elaboration and planned/procedural features in low-pressure accounts than in mid to high-pressure accounts. These two account categories influence the linguistic choices of agents across TECH and CS transactions in the corpus. However, callers' discourse is not directly influenced by these categories. A brief comparison of callers' texts across accounts suggests that additional exploration of callers' data is needed to supplement the results of the current study.

The initial analysis of gender-based differences in the corpus shows noteworthy results. Dimensions 1 and 2 report good enough gender-based variations both for agents and callers. For example, Filipino female agents have more features of abstraction and lexical complexity than Filipino males. Female agents also use a greater number of politeness markers (but not respect markers) in their transaction. Results of the current analysis suggest that gender differences exist in outsourced call center texts and could be examined further.

4.6 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I applied Biber's MD analytical procedures in describing the linguistic characteristics of call center interactions relative to face-to-face conversations and spontaneous telephone discussions. I also presented factor scores that compared the linguistic preferences of speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. The exploration of interactions in outsourced call centers using MD analysis has revealed several interesting and unique characteristics of the register. The wide range of information exchanged by agents and callers appeared to be described by the statistical co-occurrence of different linguistic features in texts. Comparisons across speaker groups in the three extracted dimensions likewise exposed marked attributes that distinguished speakers based on their roles, gender, and the nature of transaction they were engaged in. The three dimensions seemed to cover the major distinctions and patterns prevailing in the transactions. Specific foci on the amount of information required to be exchanged, the overall objective of the exchange, and ways of facilitating the exchange were interpretable through the linguistic dimensions. It would be very relevant to apply the same dimensions to parallel call center corpora, and examine how the Filipino agents compare with Indian or American call center agents.

Lexico/syntactic features

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the lexical and syntactic characteristics of the call center discourse relative to face-to-face conversation and Switchboard discussions. I also provide the distribution of selected lexico/syntactic features across speaker groups within the Call Center corpus starting in Section 5.3. The exploration of features of lexical specificity and information density in call center interactions, discussed in my MD analysis (Chapter 4), shows that this register differs from typical face-to-face conversation based on the range of complex or abstract vocabulary present in many service support interactions. In addition, the use of planned/procedural linguistic features (e.g., nominalization, average type-token ratio, temporal adverbs), especially by the agents, closely resembles the linguistic composition of some written registers. A closer look at the frequency of these lexico/syntactic features of spoken discourse will show a more detailed pattern of linguistic preferences of speakers across the three registers and various speaker groups in the Call Center corpus.

The potential topics and subjects for discussion in spoken discourse influence speakers' use of vocabulary and grammatical features (Quaglio, 2004). Other factors such as familiarity with the interlocutor, roles and relationships existing between speakers, and specific purposes of talk all contribute to the lexico/syntactic patterns of speech across macro and micro discourse (Altenberg, 1984). It is clear, by now, that there is a difference in the communicative purposes and the structure of information packaging of speakers in the three registers compared in this study. For example, face-to-face interactions in the American Conversation sub-corpus have a wide-range of topics and potential topic shifts not common in the directional issues and problems discussed by agents and callers in call center interactions. Call center agents are tasked to control the direction of transactions and are only able to answer questions that are supported by their accounts following a fixed set of procedures. In addition, although there is no specific "time limit" per se in call center interactions, agents are guided by account requirements to solve issues and wrap up transactions as quickly as possible. In contrast, although

Switchboard interactions do pursue one primary topic, speakers are given the latitude to discuss related subject matter. Speakers in Switchboard telephone interactions have more flexible turns and length of turns compared to the common expectations of speaker turns in outsourced call centers. Topics beyond the primary issue initially presented by the caller or additional comments and personal opinions not related to the main focus of the transaction are very limited in nearly all of the transactions included in the Call Center corpus.

To further distinguish the linguistic characteristics of call center interactions from face-to-face conversation and spontaneous telephone speech from Switchboard, I provide comparative data of selected lexico/syntactic features across registers in the tables and figures in the following sections below. I then apply the analysis and comparison of these features to the internal speaker groups within the Call Center corpus. These lexico/syntactic features of spoken discourse were selected based on Quaglio (2004), Biber (2006), Barbieri (2008), and the LGSWE section of the grammar of conversation (Chapter 14, pp.1038–1125). These studies have identified and described the vocabulary and grammatical characteristics of sub-registers of spoken interactions relative to other registers. For example, Quaglio examines the distribution of hedges and nouns of vague reference (e.g., *stuff*, *sort of*) to check how scripted television dialogues approximate patterns of hedging and “vague referencing” from actual conversation. He finds that sitcom dialogues consistently underuse these hedging features which, in effect, means that sitcom conversations do not necessarily reflect actual “shared context” of speakers and pressures from online production expected in real-world conversation.

For my part, I am interested in looking at the influence of tasks, roles and relationships, and related contextual variables such as agents’ performance scores or experience in the frequency distribution of hedges and nouns of vague references (as well as the lexico/syntactic features selected in this chapter) across registers of real-world interaction and sub-registers composed of speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. In finalizing the composition of the lexico/syntactic features included in this chapter, I used the results from the MD analysis in the previous chapter and conducted an initial review of the distribution of salient words and phrasal constructions characterizing call center interactions. This chapter, therefore, provides a more detailed presentation of the frequency distribution of some linguistic features extracted from the MD analysis (e.g., pronouns, nouns, nominalizations, *let’s*), the distributional data of features of lexico/syntactic complexity, and finally, “keywords” identified by a statistical keyword analysis using a specific target corpus or sub-corpus (e.g., corpus of agents’ turns vs. corpus of callers’ turns). The following items comprise the lexico/syntactic features or groups of features analyzed in this chapter.

- (1) Selected lexico/syntactic features
 - a. Content word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs)
 - b. Pronouns (1st, 2nd, and 3rd person)
 - c. Distribution of personal pronouns (*I, you, we, he, she, they*)
 - d. Hedges and nouns of vague reference (e.g., *kind of, stuff*)
 - e. Frequency of most common lexical verbs
 - f. Use of “*let’s*” or “*let us*”
- (2) Features of lexico/syntactic complexity
 - a. Vocabulary size (type/token ratio)
 - b. Prepositions
 - c. Coordinators/Conjunctions
 - d. Word length
 - e. Nominalizations
 - f. Complement clauses
- (3) Keywords (analysis and comparison of keywords)

5.2 Distribution of selected lexico/syntactic features across registers

The following sub-sections provide the frequency distribution of selected lexico/syntactic features across the three registers. The distribution of the collective features of lexico/syntactic complexity (Section 5.4) across registers, as well as results of the keyword analysis between call center interactions and face-to-face conversations (Section 5.5) are also provided in this chapter.

5.2.1 Content word classes: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs across registers

The distribution of content word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs) in the three corpora is shown in Figure 5.1. Nouns and verbs are the most common content word classes across these spoken corpora while adjectives and adverbs are used sparingly by speakers. The Call Center corpus has more nouns (187.976) but comparatively fewer verbs (106.821) per 1,000 words than the two other corpora (American Conversation – Nouns = 185.511, Verbs = 168.454; Switchboard – Nouns = 151.653, Verbs = 147.431). Adverbs are slightly more common in call center transactions than in face-to-face conversations and spontaneous telephone interactions. Both the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora have slightly more adjectives than the Call Center corpus.

The more frequent use of nouns, especially proper nouns, in call center interactions is illustrated by the text sample (Text Sample 5.1) below. The excerpt comes

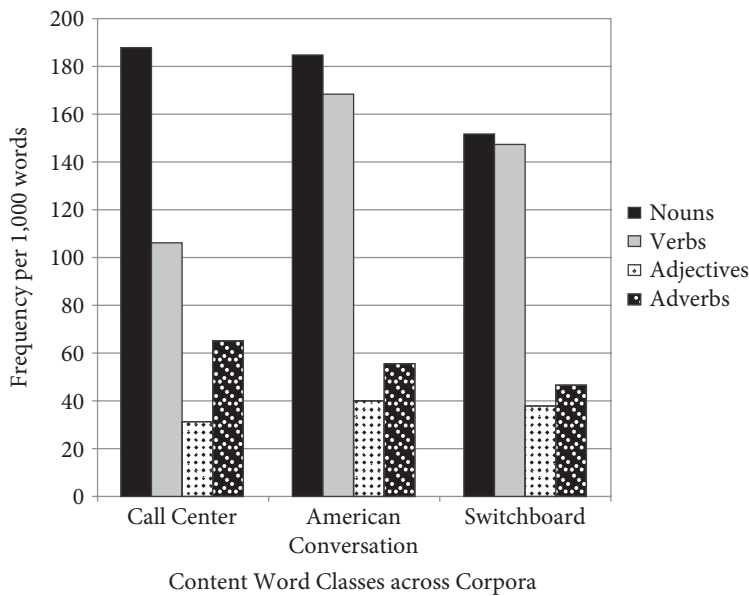


Figure 5.1. Content word classes across corpora.

from an Inquire account where callers typically ask for pricing, specific product information, access to additional web-based data or catalogues, and the availability of spare parts or tools for future purchase.

Text Sample 5.1 Use of nouns in call center interactions

Note: All proper nouns were changed:

Agent: [XX Industries] this is Alfred how may I help you?
Caller: Good morning how are you doing Alfred?
Agent: Doing good sir how are you?
Caller: Oh not too bad thanks this is uh David Michaels in Prescott, Arizona
Agent: Oh Dave [interruption]
Caller: I'm looking, yeah, it's Dave, I'm looking for some mini gas parts uh for Friction 432 I don't have a breakout of them I'm just wondering if you could help me
Agent: Uh ok sir let's I'll open the gas serving uh section sir ok, which uh spare part sir of the mini gas serving?
Caller: Ok I'm looking for uh oil an old one oil tube assembly for two inch mini gas [short pause] uh
Agent: Uh
Caller: Uh is is there a redress kit?
Agent: Excuse me sir redress?

Caller: **Redress kit** yeah this is uhm a **customer's** or whatever a **rep's specification** I've never seen any of so, he's got it down as a, should be **item 6A redress kit**

Agent: **6A**

Caller: That's an **oil oil tube assembly**

Agent: Um hm **Peacock coil** I don't see that **part** sir

Caller: [unclear] ok neither did I so uh what what **replacement part** do you have for the one inch **mini gas**?

Agent: Let me check, sir

Caller: Ok, also the **kit** and uh by the way is the **website or catalogue information** the latest you have? I don't seem to, uh [interruption]

Agent: What do you mean, sir?

Caller: In the **website catalogue information**?

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: I don't have, I don't see [interruption]

Agent: That's the one we have sir

Caller: Huh?

Agent: The latest

Proper nouns such as agents' and callers' names, places/locations, and specific brand names highlighted in the excerpt above are very common in call center transactions. These proper nouns increase the average number of nouns used by speakers in the Call Center corpus. Products and replacement parts are mentioned constantly in purchase and inquiry transactions, while agents in troubleshooting accounts also often mention brand names, software applications, and machine or equipment parts involved in fixing customers' problems. The smaller number of verbs in call centers compared to the two other corpora is perhaps influenced by the limited opportunities to talk about events (especially past events except for troubleshooting accounts) in call center transactions. Although verbs are used 107 times per 1,000 words by speakers in the Call Center corpus, typical face-to-face conversations have over 168 verbs per 1,000 words of speaker turns. Most of these verbs are used in narratives of past events (e.g., "*and he **gave** me the board after he **broke** it and we both **tried** to use it downhill, it **was** awesome ... **made** me sick, man [laughs]*"). Adverbs, especially temporal (*next/then*) and time and place adverbs are more commonly used in call center discourse than in the two comparison corpora.

5.2.2 Personal pronouns across corpora

The classes of personal pronouns in this section, 1st person, 2nd person, and 3rd person, are composed of singular and plural personal pronouns (e.g., *I, we, he, she, they*) and possessives (e.g., *my, your, his*) automatically obtained from the tag

count program. I included the 3rd person pronoun *it* in this section; the tag count program provides an output of a separate count for this pronoun.

Personal pronouns are very common in spoken interaction. The LGSWE reports that there are great differences in the distribution of individual personal pronouns across spoken and written registers; for example, forms referring to the speaker and the addressee (e.g., *I/me, you*) are more common in conversation than in written discourse (except for fiction). The high frequency of human reference pronouns (*I, we, you*) in conversation has to do with the general concern of speakers to explicitly express their thoughts and actions during the interaction. First and 2nd person pronouns referring to the speaker and the addressee are “naturally very common in spoken interaction because both participants are in immediate physical proximity with each other, and the interaction typically focuses on matters of immediate concern” (p. 333). Speakers are also aware of the functions of personal pronouns in conversations so that they use the necessary forms of these personal pronouns to demonstrate positive involvement and engagement.

Figure 5.2 shows that, aside from the use of more 2nd person pronouns (*you/your*), call center interactions have fewer personal pronouns and *it* than the two other registers. Face-to-face interactions from the American Conversation corpus contain more 1st person and 3rd person personal pronouns than both the Call Center and Switchboard corpora. The Call Center corpus shows very limited use of 3rd person pronouns (e.g., *he, she, her, they*). This result is clearly influenced by the communicative purpose in service transactions that does not commonly involve topics/narratives about a third person or accounts of what a third person in the conversation has said or done, especially on the part of the agents. However, callers may sometimes refer to a family member (e.g., “*My husband called earlier and he asked me to cancel the order.*”) or a particular collective noun (e.g., “*They told me to call you guys because they have no available service provider in our area, they told me.*”) using 3rd person pronouns. Switchboard interactions have the highest frequency of *it*, most often referring to concepts, ideas, or topics discussed by participants during the telephone exchanges.

As mentioned above, callers may sometimes use 3rd person pronouns referring to another person involved in the issue of the transaction, but these instances are quite limited in the Call Center corpus compared to how speakers focus on themselves (*I* or *we*) or the addressee (*you/your*). More often, callers are calling about their own personal questions, therefore increasing the use of 1st person pronouns in their turns. The text samples below (Text Sample 5.2) contrast a caller referring to an action by another person as the main issue of her call and a caller’s use of *I* to specify her references to personal issues or problems in the transaction.

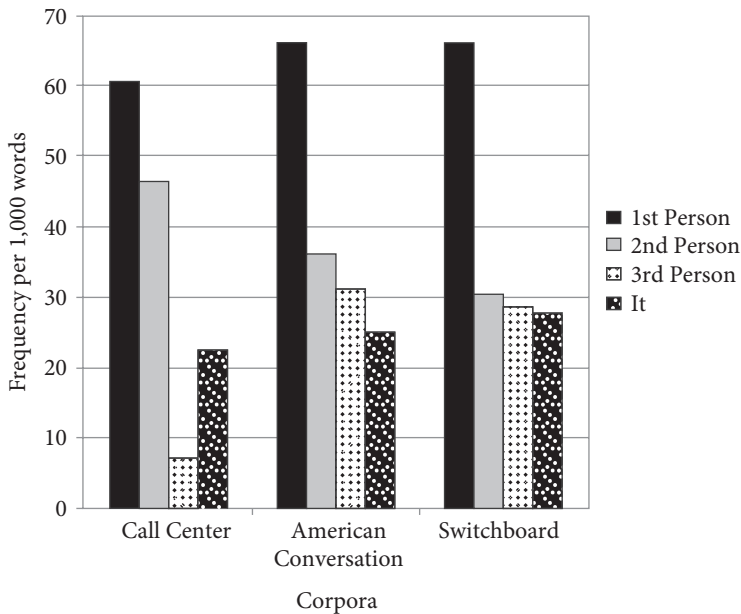


Figure 5.2. Personal pronouns across registers.

Text Sample 5.2 Use of 3rd person pronouns by a caller

Caller: And I was out of town this last week and **she** tried to put in **her** first party [interruption]

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: And **she** was having difficulty with putting it in **she** don't know how to do it **she** called customer care for some assistance and to be quite honest with you whoever helped **her** did not do a good job and **she** had put the party in wrong and did not get any **her** host guest

Agent: Oh

Caller: And the and the customer care that helped **her** uh submitted it the way that it was even with a negative total so uh, uh I'm a little disappointed kinda upset that customer care let **her** do this. I would think I mean you would think that **they** would know what **she** was doing and help **her** thru it

Agent: Oh, uh-huh?

Caller: And **she** was not happy

Agent: Ok, I understand, sorry for that

Caller: And **she** was worried to, um **she** doesn't want to do it again, you know [laughs]

Agent: I hope not

Caller: Well, **she** had [interruption]

Agent: Sorry about that

From the same account with similar concerns:

Agent: Ma'am what was the problem again?

Caller: I, I'm calling about the last order I placed last Monday July [unclear]

Agent: Yes?

Caller: Well I don't see it on my account so far and it has been a week, I was checking since last, uh two days ago and it's not there yet, I [interruption]

Agent: Ok, I [interruption]

Caller: I may have placed it wrong or punched in the wrong button but I thought I was charged for the order when I checked my balance, but I could be wrong and I need you to help me confirm my last transaction

Agent: Ok, I can help you with that

Caller: Good, thanks

Agent: Could you please give me your consultant ID number?

Caller: [xxxx-xxx-xxxx] [gave ID number]

Although *it* is used by call center agents and callers relatively more often than 3rd person personal pronouns to refer to neutral subjects, American Conversation and Switchboard both have more occurrences of this pronoun than the Call Center corpus. Finally, as shown in the text samples later in this section, both callers and agents use more 2nd person pronouns (especially *you* and *your*) than speakers from other registers of conversation.

5.2.3 Selected personal pronouns (*I, you, we, he, she, they*) across registers

As an extension of Section 5.2.2, Figure 5.3 shows the distribution of specific personal pronouns across registers. While Section 5.2.2 presented *all* the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person pronouns which included singular, plural, and possessive pronouns, this section provides only the distributional data of *I, you, we, he, she, they* to show how these pronouns are used across registers. I intend to point out specifically how *I* and *you* are both common in these spoken registers compared to 3rd person pronouns *he, she, and they*. *We* and 3rd person pronouns (*he, she, they*) are used more often in American conversation and Switchboard than in the Call Center corpus. In general, face-to-face conversations have the highest frequency of these specific personal pronouns. Call center interactions have the highest number of 2nd person *you* while 3rd person *they* is more common in Switchboard.

Face-to-face interactions and telephone exchanges in Switchboard generally include topics that allow speakers to talk about other people or events that often involve 3rd person subjects (especially *they* referring to things as antecedents). In many instances, speakers in these registers share common knowledge about these 3rd person subjects unlike in typical call center interactions as shown in

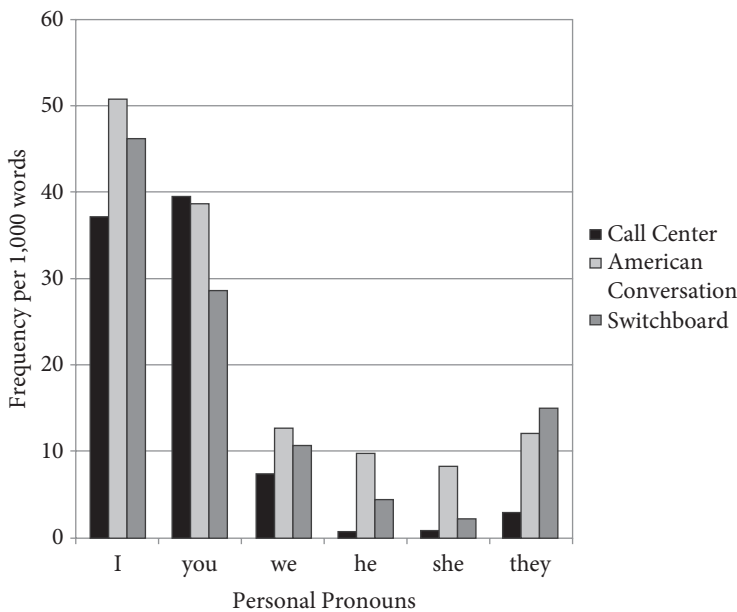


Figure 5.3. Selected personal pronouns across registers.

Text Sample 5.2. The two short excerpts in Text Sample 5.3 below illustrate the use of 3rd person pronouns (*he, they*) from the American Conversation sub-corpus. It is clear from these two short excerpts that the speakers share a common context related to the third party or subject discussed in the conversations.

Text Sample 5.3 Use of 3rd person pronouns in face-to-face interactions

- <1> But **he** can do that in marriage and **he** was an only child and **he** never had any children
 <2> **He** seems smart enough, though.
 <1> Oh, **he** seems real smart.
 <2> Uh-huh?
 <1> **He's**, I, I had him wearing two, I had him, **he** was wearing
 <2> [Mature **he** is?]
 <1> Yeah, **he** really [has]
 <2> [Yeah, **he** seemed] to be that way, yeah, uh-huh.
 <1> Oh yeah
 <2> but, **he's** got the job **he** likes
 <1> Good
 <2> **He** says, <mimicking>I hate it/<mimicking>, **he** said.
 <1> Oh, **he** didn't like it?
 <2> Oh no, **he** likes it

- ⟨1⟩ He likes it
⟨2⟩ Yeah, **he** should be happy with the you know salary, yeah
⟨1⟩ Good for **him**

Another example:

- ⟨?⟩ What gave you the idea to make **them** into triangles?
⟨?⟩ That's the way she said to do it ⟨nv_laugh⟩
⟨?⟩ I mean, uh are those triangles? **They**..
⟨?⟩ Oh
⟨?⟩ How are **they** normally, little balls or something?
⟨?⟩ Yeah **they're** like that.
⟨?⟩ In balls?
⟨?⟩ [unclear] **they're** like very funny
⟨?⟩ Well, you know you can buy them like at the grocery store **they're** just like
⟨?⟩ **They're** like ⟨unclear⟩ triangles, not triangles but **they're**
⟨?⟩ Snowballs?
⟨?⟩ Snowballs, yeah.
⟨?⟩ Snowballs, no, pyramids or something? No?
⟨?⟩ Or else **they're** just sort of little half round balls.
⟨?⟩ Yeah.
⟨?⟩ These are much more ⟨unclear⟩
⟨?⟩ ⟨nv_laugh⟩
⟨?⟩ **They're** like sweaty balls or ⟨nv_laugh⟩
⟨?⟩ Yes, goodness. I know where she came up with the idea.
⟨?⟩ **They** are like my dad's favorite cookie in the whole universe.
⟨?⟩ What are **they**?
⟨?⟩ **They're** like awesome stuff.
⟨?⟩ ⟨nv_laugh⟩
⟨?⟩ Yeah

5.2.4 Hedges and nouns of vague reference across registers

Conversation typically makes use of devices with vague reference (e.g., *stuff*, *thing* or *things*), coordination tags (e.g., *and stuff like that*, or *something like that*), and hedges (e.g., *kind of*, *sort of*) because speakers often share similar contexts and have the same pressure of immediate online production (Aijmer, 1984). These nouns of vague reference and hedges are features of casual interactions between participants who are not “required” to provide actual and more specific subjects to complete a turn. The use of these devices in casual conversation presupposes common understanding of topics and issues between speakers so that the failure to complete a thought unit is often tolerated and compensated for by continued turn-taking, responses, or immediate topic shifts. In most instances, these devices

are also used to mitigate potential threat to face created by an overly direct statement (Aijmer, 1987; McCarthy & Carter, 1995, 1997; Quaglio, 2004). However, for formal and performance-based interactions such as job interviews, broadcast talks, and lectures, these hedges and vague conversational devices may not be acceptable or preferred by listeners and may also affect subjective impressions about a speaker's ability to express clear and complete ideas and/or their knowledge and competence.

Figure 5.4 shows the distribution of hedges, nouns of vague reference, and coordination tags across registers. Both American Conversation and Switchboard interactions make use of these devices across the board a great deal more than call center exchanges. The need for speakers in purposeful, focused interactions such as service encounters to be more specific in communicating information to the listener potentially limits the use of these conversational devices. In call centers, more specific nouns such as brand names are needed by participants in order to efficiently resolve particular issues during the call. Because of the slightly formal

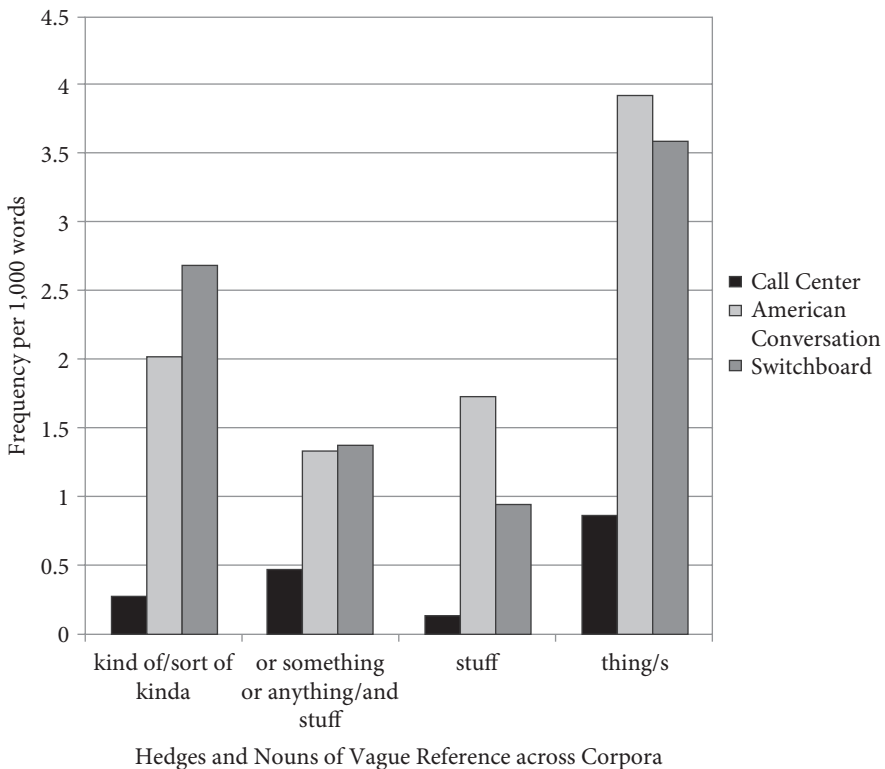


Figure 5.4. Hedges and nouns of vague reference across registers.

level of talk between agents and customers, participants also need to provide complete information and thoughts and not opt to utilize shortcuts in their turns as they might in casual conversation.

Nouns of vague reference (*stuff* and *thing/s*) are more common in face-to-face conversation than in telephone exchanges. Switchboard participants, on the other hand, use more hedges (*kind of*, *kinda*, *sort of* – *sorta* was also present in the corpora but relatively low in frequency). The high frequency of hedging in Switchboard is possibly influenced by the need of speakers to “moderate” their analysis of issues and indicate the subjectivity of their opinions. This is so because these speakers do not know each other personally and may not necessarily be certain of their analyses or opinions or of the potential reactions of the other speakers to them. These conversation devices have also formed part of typical speech mannerisms of many speakers as shown in Text Sample 5.4 (e.g., “*yeah, good stuff*”; “*usual stuff*”; “*that thing*”; “*that particular thing..*”). The excerpts below feature speakers’ repetitive use of nouns of vague reference and hedges (*stuff*, *thing/s*, and *kind of*) from the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora. Note that these features and how they are constantly repeated by speakers are not common in call center interactions.

Text Sample 5.4 Hedges and nouns of vague reference in American Conversation and Switchboard

AMERICAN CONVERSATION

- <1309> a lot of it or anything but I think they bought some good **stuff**
 <1308> Wednesday and doing a lot of **stuff** usual **stuff** you worry about in large crowds
 <unclear> so I keep how they do and **stuff** and then realized she didn’t see her mother
 has this **stuff** appear on your screen, but if you have a printer put my **stuff** on
 <1310> No we’re getting a lot of **stuff** for our software, we’re from the Land’s End Outlet? ...
 any particular, I mean the **stuff**
 <1310> A lot of computer-assisted **stuff** allergies because it’s **stuff** that’s sucked through the
 water up my **stuff** before I want to move up ... well I guess I could move
 <1309> And then you would bring the **stuff** up <unclear>
 <1311> And then we’d bring the rest of the **stuff** <unclear> that
 <1309> because most of the **stuff** I can actually fit in my car ours, we’ll take the extra seats out
 and just **stuff** ’em in <unclear> move her **stuff** her **stuff** up and spend a day or so there,
 then <unclear> written up some **stuff** that we’d do in Tucson and just cave **stuff** and,
 and cool imagery and symbols and it..

SWITCHBOARD

- <xces:u>0066: oh yeah they do that **thing** i mean in in in north Texas they do that quite a bit
 where you know if you want to go to this particular **thing** like movie or concert
 or a discounted **thing** the big **thing** down here is rodeos uh if you/<xces:u>

<xces:u>0085: i i just i just think the one **thing** they do so strongly about is what you're saying that i don't think kids have a sense of civic responsibility, that **thing**
 </xces:u>

–

<xces:u>: and uh last year i would i did it every day but i've **kind of** in ninety one i've **kind of** gone downhill, and i was walking and it got **kind of** dark and i was by myself and there was this fellow in this truck that kept circling the block and so i i **kind of** got frightened and i **kind of** use that as an excuse all i have to do is start earlier but i haven't walked since so </xces:u>

5.2.5 Common lexical verbs across registers

The LGSWE compares a variety of lexical features across spoken and written registers and reports that almost one third of all content words in spoken interactions are lexical verbs (also known as full verbs, e.g., *eat*, *dance*). Lexical verbs are extremely common in both conversation and fiction but quite rare in written registers such as news and academic prose. The single-word lexical verbs *say*, *get*, *go*, *know*, and *think* are the five most common verbs occurring in British and American conversation. The 12 most common lexical verbs identified in LGSWE (*say*, *get*, *go*, *know*, *think*, *see*, *make*, *come*, *take*, *want*, *give*, and *mean* – occurring over 1,000 times per million words), account for “nearly 45% of all lexical verbs in conversation” (p. 373). These findings have clear implications for language teaching and learning of spoken English. Second language speakers would, for example, benefit from an initial focus upon learning the usage and shades of meaning of these identified and most frequently-used lexical verbs to enable them to more successfully participate in most English conversations.

In this section, I compare the list of the 12 most common lexical verbs from LGSWE across registers, and later in this chapter, across internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. Figure 5.5 shows the distribution of common lexical verbs in the three registers.

The American Conversation and Switchboard corpora have relatively higher frequencies of these lexical verbs than does the Call Center corpus. *Know*, *get*, *go*, and *think* are the most commonly used lexical verbs, as illustrated in Figure 5.5. The distribution of these common lexical verbs in American Conversation closely matches the LGSWE data (except for *say*, *want*, and *mean*). Switchboard interactions utilize *know* more frequently than do the other two corpora, while *give* is the only lexical verb that is used more frequently in the Call Center corpus than in American Conversation and Switchboard. *Know* in Switchboard (Text Sample 5.5) is often used as a discourse marker of involvement (*you know*) illustrating the speakers' attempts at showing active participation and directly addressing and capturing the attention of the listener in their turns. Overall, the distribution of these

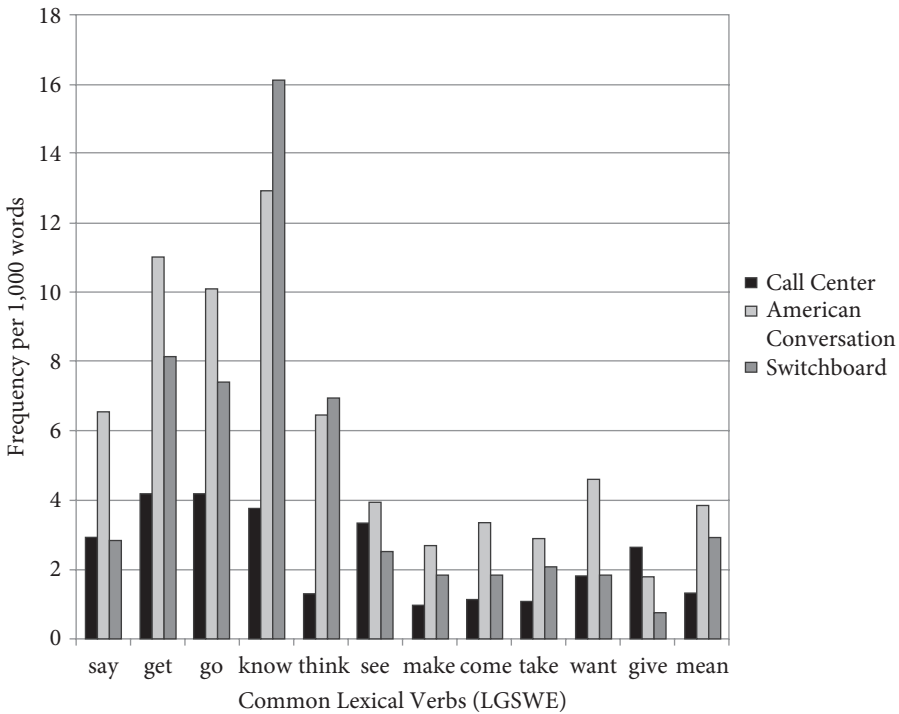


Figure 5.5. Common lexical verbs across registers.

lexical verbs in the Call Center corpus differs from the LGSWE data, although *get*, *go*, and *know* are also among the top three most common lexical verbs in the corpus. The short excerpts below show the typical occurrences of *get*, *know*, and *give* in the three registers. *Give* in call center interactions is used in requests (e.g., “..*can you give me the telephone number associated with the dsl...*”) and in responses (e.g., “..*I can give you the other telephone number...*”) by agents and callers.

Text Sample 5.5 *Get, know, and give* used in the three registers

GET in AMERICAN CONVERSATION

- <1405> You know, I think we ought to all **get** in the car and go
 <?> Yesterday Jackie said hello to me? It's when I had to **get** <laughing><unclear> I gotta **get** Hackworth on here/<laughing>
 <1405> Well let's do it, let's **get** over and **get** our butts over there **get** some doughnuts?
 <1405> <unclear> you **get** the <unclear> just hang onto it like ... (6) looks like Mike's gonna **get** you <unclear>
 <?> He, he tried to but the cops wouldn't **get** <unclear> ... you know
 <unclear> you know

- ⟨?⟩ Well damn, well I'm gonna **get** hit, next time I'll hit her they **get** a whole potato and drop it there
- ⟨?⟩ Maybe she just wanted to give, **get** back at the person [⟨unclear⟩]
- ⟨?⟩ **Get** what back? Sorry
- ⟨?⟩ Maybe she wanted to **get** back at that person

KNOW in SWITCHBOARD

- ⟨xces:u⟩ 0019: i don't **know** i just don't **know** as a matter of fact i had uh one of these conversations the other day where our topic was uh capital punishment and you **know** the death penalty and you **know** what you **know** we were talking about that/⟨xces:u⟩
- ⟨xces:u⟩ 0020: and one of the things that we kind of got to talking about is you **know** what is it we can do you **know** what can what can be done to stop it and i'm not sure that i **know** the answer to that question/⟨xces:u⟩
- ⟨xces:u⟩ 0038: i don't **know** that one/⟨xces:u⟩
- ⟨xces:u⟩ 0021: you **know** i mean one of the things that we talked about that i truly believe is you **know** you give somebody a you **know** a jury convicts somebody and they give them a sixty year sentence and the guys going to be out in twelve or thirteen years you know/⟨xces:u⟩
- ⟨xces:u⟩ 0022: yet they oh it's very wrong it's horrible you **know** i have i take a business law class um on Tuesday nights and my instructor is a practicing criminal attorney/⟨xces:u⟩
- ⟨xces:u⟩ 0021: Oh yeah?
- ⟨xces:u⟩ 0022: you **know**?

GIVE in CALL CENTER

- Agent: I would need to pull up the account information can you **give** me the telephone number associated with the dsl service?
- Caller: I think I just **gave** them my address last time but I can **give** you the other phone number I used to be associated with
- Agent: The dsl number please?
- Caller: Alright I'm not gonna **give** you that number from now on coz I know what's that under
- Agent: Ok I can go and **give** that, you let me just go and get the ip address here and just to verify [short pause] ok it, dhcp ok let me **give** you the gateway ip address
- Caller: What are you going to **give** me? The dynamic?
- Agent: Yes this is dynamic, I could not **give** you a specific ip address but I can **give** you the gateway which is 22.222.222.2
- Caller: What is this?
- Agent: I can **give** you the gateway [interruption]
- Caller: The what?

5.2.6 *Let's* across registers

The LGSWE provides a short discussion of the use of first person imperative *let's* in spoken discourse (although *let's* or *let us* by origin is a second person imperative). *Let's* in English conversation is used as a speech particle introducing independent clauses in which the speaker makes a proposal for action by the speaker and hearer (e.g., “*Let's go to the mall*”; “*Let's stop at the rest area*.”). Clearly, *let's* in spoken interaction entails mutual agreement or is used to verify that agreement about the plan or proposed action. Speakers assume, and also expect, concurrence and equal participation in order to accomplish the goal.

The frequency of *let's* in conversations varies according to the type of task, speakers' familiarity with each other, roles during the interaction, and potentially, the medium of conversation (e.g., telephone interactions where speakers are not physically proximate to each other have different tasks than face-to-face speakers). Purposeful interactions involving physical activities may provide more opportunities for *let's* imperatives posed by the active speaker.

In call center transactions, agents and callers may have various opportunities to request or propose a specific course of action during the call (e.g., “*Ok, let's make it five tumblers instead of three so I get, can get the extra coupon, right?*”; “*Let's change your log-in name here after we install Quickcare*”). However, the performance of these actions may actually be accomplished by only one participant and not the other, in contrast to face-to-face conversation where the speaker and hearer are both actively involved, for the most part. An agent, for example, may say “*Let's reboot your computer*” as a way of engaging and instructing the caller to do the necessary action. In other words, *let's* in call center transactions is also often used to introduce an independent clause that instructs or directs the hearer to do something on his/her end. The use of *let's* in this case relates to active participation and polite involvement that also mitigates the force of a directive or instruction. Agents may also substitute *let's* for *please* to achieve this mitigating or moderating effect when directives are necessary.

Figure 5.6 shows the distribution of *let's* (and *let us*) across registers. Call center interactions make use of slightly more *let's* (1.103) per 1,000 words than American Conversation (0.833) and Switchboard (0.271).

In many instances of *let's* in call centers, agents and callers use *let's* or *let us* to introduce a request for a course of action to be performed by the hearer. There are fewer situations where both participants actively pursue a single, common course of action as is the case in the typical performance of activities in face-to-face interactions. The use of *let's* in American Conversation generally matches this typical function in which participants are expected to engage in the performance of an activity together during the course of the conversation. In Switchboard, *let's* is used

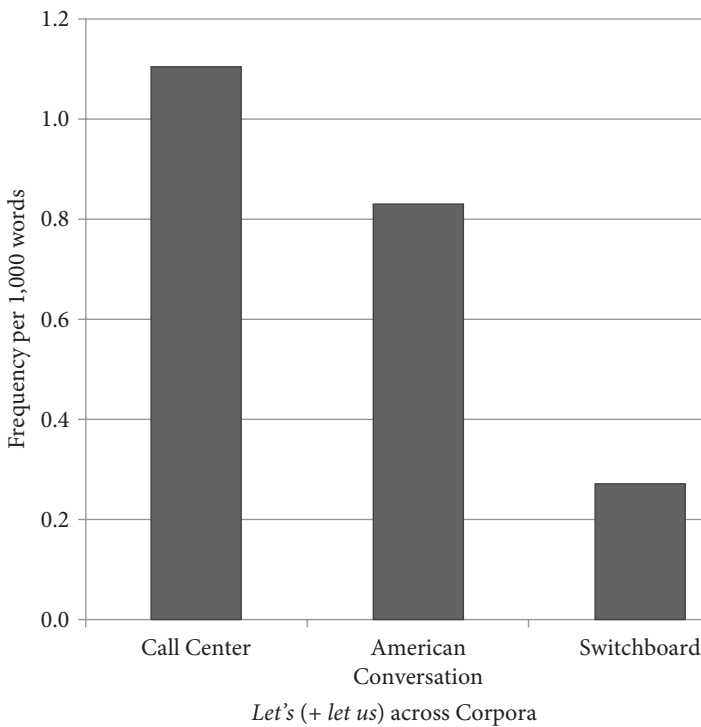


Figure 5.6. Use of *let's* (and *let us*) across registers.

to initiate the start of the interaction or to indicate the move to the next section of the call (e.g., “*Ok, Janice, let's start this thing...*”; “*What, can we now, I guess that we have covered that one, let's talk about the negatives here then.*”).

5.3 Distribution of selected lexico/syntactic features across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus

The following sub-sections present the frequency distribution of the selected lexico/syntactic features discussed above in the internal speaker groups (role, gender, agents' performance and experience groups, and categories of accounts) of the Call Center corpus.

5.3.1 Content word classes by role and gender

Figure 5.7 shows that agents have slightly more nouns and verbs than the callers in call center transactions. Both groups of speakers have very similar frequencies of adjectives and adverbs in their turns. More nouns indicate that the agents'

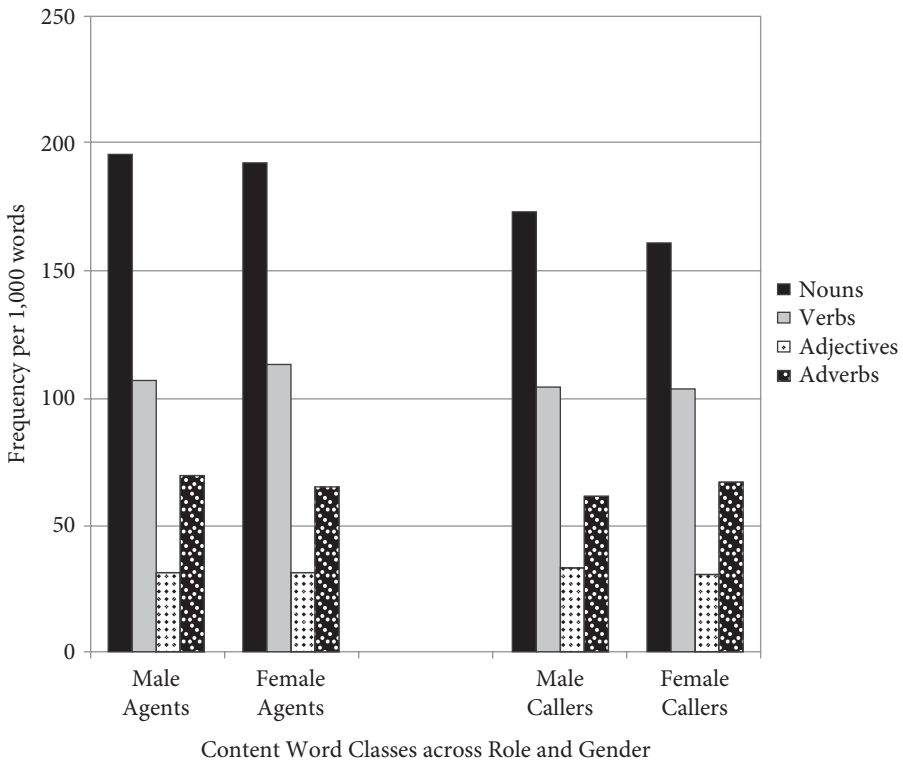


Figure 5.7. Content word classes across role and gender in the Call Center corpus.

discourse is slightly more informational and directive than that of the callers. Agents have higher frequencies of brand names and other related proper nouns as they give the callers specific product information. Callers, on the other hand, use more past tense verbs (not shown specifically in the figure but included in the total normalized frequency of all verbs) as part of their narrative in discussing a perceived cause of a problem or an account of what happened previously to a machine or equipment.

There is a pattern maintained across gender groups in the use of content word classes, especially nouns, which is consistent with previous research. Male agents and callers use more nouns per 1,000 words than female agents and callers in these service transactions (although the difference for male and female agents is slight). This result indicates that male speakers focus more on giving specific and also detailed information than females. Argammon, Koppel, Fine, and Shimoni (2003) report that male discourse is “informational” rather than “personal” or “involved” following Biber’s (1988) categories because of the use of more nouns occurring

together with articles and quantifiers. Results from my earlier study of informal written texts (represented by internet blogs) also show that male writers use more nouns than female writers (Friginal, 2006). It is possible that these data observed from informal written texts also translate to patterns from task-based spoken interactions like call center discourse. Female agents and callers in the Call Center corpus have slightly more verbs per 1,000 words than males, while the use of adjectives and adverbs is quite similar across role and gender groups in the corpus.

5.3.2 Content word classes across agents' performance evaluation scores

Content word classes across groups based on agents' performance evaluation scores show a surprising pattern of distribution (Figure 5.8), although the differences in these speaker groups are slight. This pattern suggests that the frequency of use of these content word classes potentially relates to quality in agents' linguistic and task performance. Agents belonging to the Low group have more nouns and adverbs, fewer verbs, and slightly fewer adjectives than the Mid and High groups of agents. This consistent distributional data of content word classes across agents' performance groups may enable the creation of language training activities that

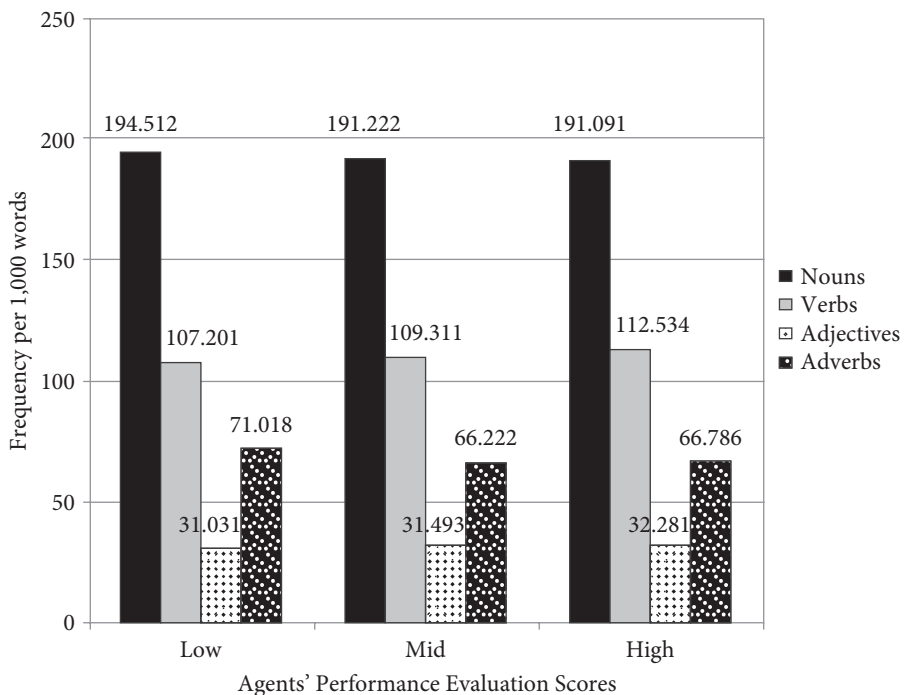


Figure 5.8. Content word classes across performance evaluation scores.

focus on the use of content words with the goal of improving clarity, directness, and completeness in the turns of Low-performing agents. The high-frequency of nouns and adverbs in agents' turns possibly shows unnecessary repeats of information such as brand names, addresses, and other proper nouns, as well as formulaic epistemic expressions which could be avoided in the interaction to focus on clearer, more direct delivery of data. More verbs and adjectives might be relevant in providing specific directional instructions that help the callers to easily follow suggested steps and procedures. The patterns of noun and verb usage between High and Low-performing agents are potentially influenced by a combination of many factors that are related to the agents' overall language ability and familiarity with account procedures. Low performing agents may find it more challenging to articulate a suggested action or instruction, and therefore, may need to use more verbs in their turns to successfully accomplish the necessary communication goals and intended result. In contrast, these agents may also need to limit the number of nouns they use by being more direct and by limiting repetitions of information.

5.3.3 Content word classes across categories of account

Figure 5.9 shows the distribution of content word classes across categories of accounts. There are slightly more nouns in Purchase and Inquire accounts than in Troubleshoot, indicating that more proper nouns such as specific products or brand names for purchase/order are common in these transactions. Troubleshooting accounts, on the other hand, have, as we might expect, slightly more verbs and adverbs than the other two account categories. More specific instructions and procedures in troubleshooting steps influence the use of more verbs and especially temporal adverbs in agents' turns (e.g., "*please **open** that black box there and **remove** the plastic..*" or "*you have to **change** your password **then open** a browser*"). As is the case with previous distributions in the internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus, the differences in the frequencies of these content word classes in the three account categories are not great.

5.3.4 Personal pronouns by role and gender

The distribution of personal pronouns and *it* across role and gender groups in the Call Center corpus is shown in Figure 5.10. In general, callers have more frequencies of these personal pronouns except for the agents' use of 2nd person pronouns (*you/your*). Agents use more 2nd person pronouns for directives or in giving instructions and coaching the callers to follow specific steps to fix a problem. As mentioned in Chapter 4, these 2nd person pronouns indicate that the flow of interaction is "other-directed" which is typical of call center transactions where the agents have the information to transfer to the callers. A contributing factor in the increased number of 2nd person pronouns is the use of polite speech-act formula

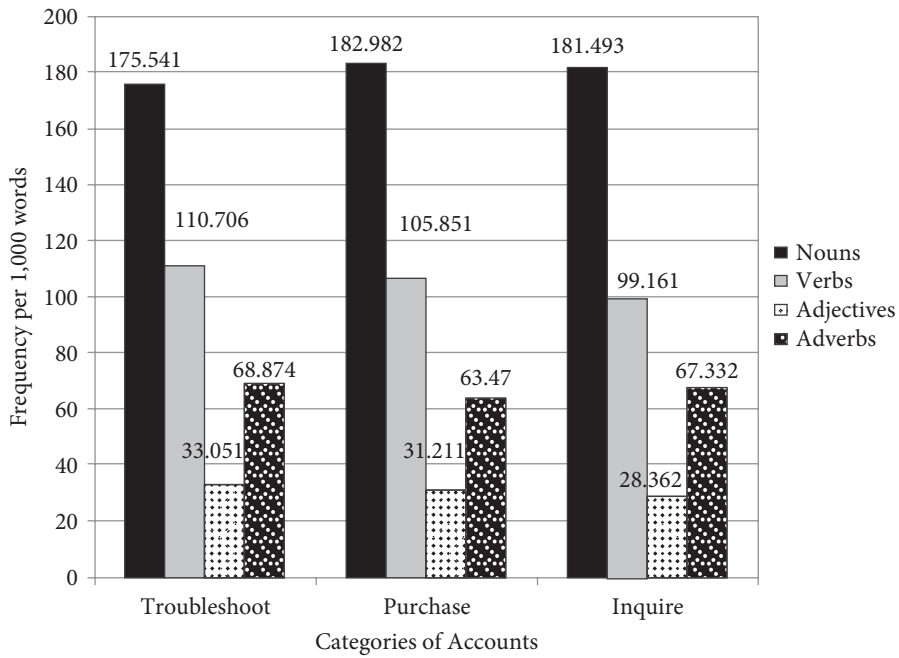


Figure 5.9. Content word classes across categories of accounts.

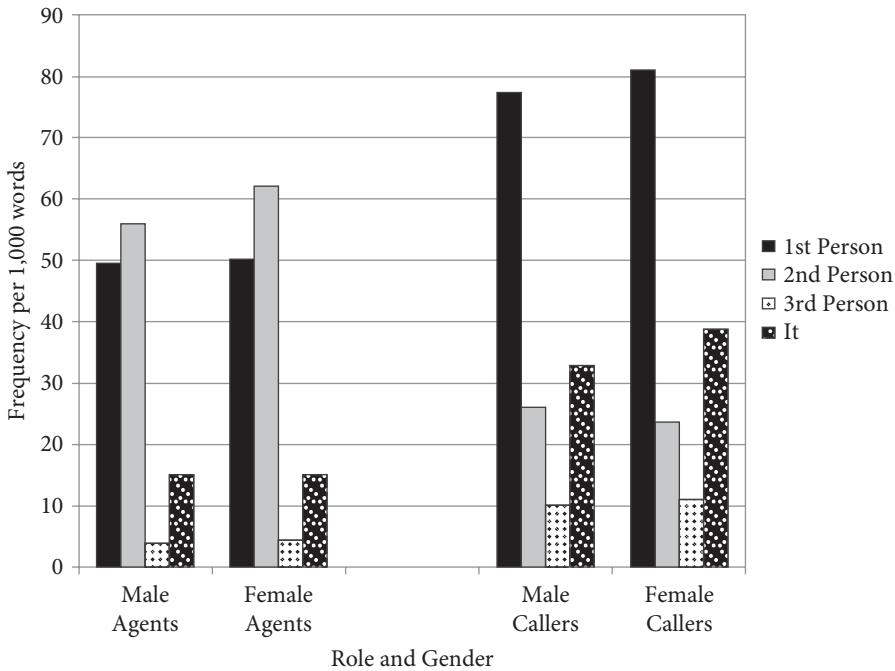


Figure 5.10. Personal pronouns by role and gender.

thank you in agents' turns to acknowledge the callers' business. Callers, on the other hand, use more 1st person pronouns (especially *I*) to explain their purpose in calling and express personal feeling and opinions about products and services.

There are consistent gender differences in the use of personal pronouns (and *it*) in call center interactions. Female American callers use more 1st person pronouns, slightly more 3rd person pronouns, and *it* than males. Male callers have more 2nd person pronouns than female callers. On the other hand, male Filipino agents use fewer 2nd person pronouns, 1st person pronouns, and 3rd person pronouns than female agents. Male agents use *it* slightly more than female agents. It appears that the pattern of use of personal pronouns does not generally transfer across cultures in this context. For example, Filipino females use more 2nd person pronouns than Filipino males but American male callers use more of these pronouns than their female counterparts.

5.3.5 Personal pronouns across agents' performance evaluation scores

Only minor differences in the distribution of personal pronouns are demonstrated in the data from speaker groups identified by the agents' performance evaluation scores shown in Figure 5.11. High-performing agents use slightly more 2nd person pronouns (61.133) and relatively fewer 1st person pronouns (46.501) per 1,000 words than Low-performing agents (60.788 and 56.622 respectively). Mid-agents, on the other hand, use fewer 2nd person pronouns (58.041) than Low-agents, but

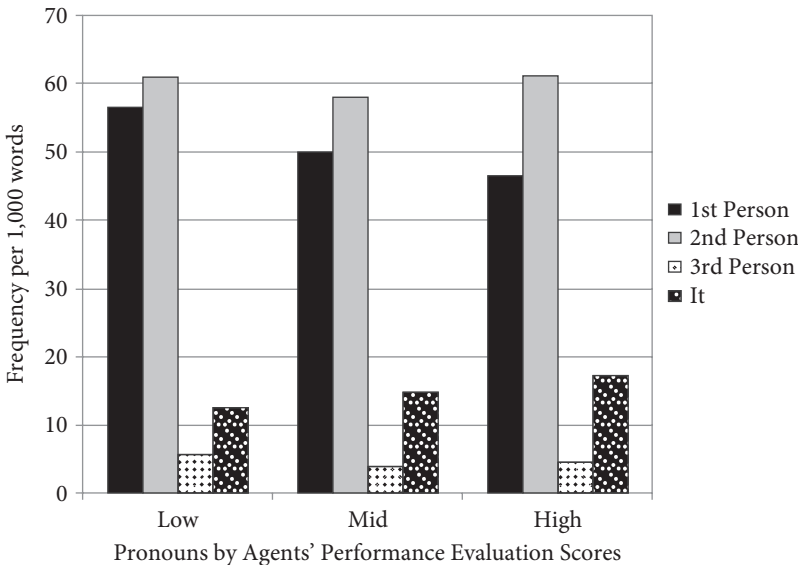


Figure 5.11. Personal pronouns by agents' performance evaluation scores.

also fewer 1st person (49.975), resulting in a linear pattern of use for this group of personal pronouns. Third person personal pronouns and *it* are generally not very common in call center transactions. These minor differences in personal pronoun use are quite difficult to interpret. However, the progressive decrease in the use of 1st person pronouns as agents' performance scores improve could indicate that High-performing agents focus more on directly addressing the issue and steps leading to solutions during the calls instead of referring to themselves or what they are currently thinking as they provide customer support.

5.3.6 Selected personal pronouns by role and gender in the Call Center corpus

There are clearer differences in the use of selected personal pronouns *I*, *you*, *we*, *he*, *she*, and *they* between agents and callers and also between gender groups in the Call Center corpus. Figure 5.12 shows that the pronoun *you* is consistently used more by agents while *I* is used more by callers. The use of these personal pronouns suggests the influence of the defined roles of speakers in call center interactions. Callers focus on their own personal experiences, preferences, and questions/requests while agents address their responses composed of instructions and information directly to the callers (e.g., “..*you* will have five days before the free trial expires.”). Text Sample 5.6 illustrates common occurrences of *I* and *you* used by agents and callers in call center interactions.

Text Sample 5.6 Use of *I* and *you* in call center interactions

Caller: Ok well I don't know, uh seriously I uh I really don't know, I'm kinda taking over this position from somebody else and I don't have, uh

Agent: Right

Caller: I wasn't here when we purchased it, I uh I haven't gone through every uh I've filed it I have it in a file but I haven't read all the fine print on everything, I really don't have time to do that, I was hoping maybe you could give me some information on the contract

Agent: Oh uh [interruption]

Caller: What is our service agreement with [XX Company]?

—

Agent: Alright here's what we're gonna do, actually the bowl, it's not available it's obsolete already, now when it comes to obsolete items what we do is send *you* a comparable replacement coz that item is covered under a lifetime warranty and we process your replacement for that item. What we're gonna do is send *you* a whole new bowl a new bowl that we have right now a replacement of that bowl that *you* have ok?

Caller: Ok

Agent: Ok let me see let me put **you** on hold for a minute as I look for a comparable bowl ok in our inventory?

Caller: Ok

Agent: [hold 1 minute 30 seconds] ok thank **you** so much for waiting Val alright what we're gonna do is we will send **you** an adaptable, this is a new bowl that we have, are **you** online right now or do **you** have a catalogue with **you**?

Caller: I can go online

Agent: Ok great so that I can show **you** what the item looks like it's actually thirty two cup capacity, how about that bowl that **you** have, can **you** tell me what's the capacity?

In general, callers use more *he*, *she*, and *they* than agents as shown in Figure 5.12 below. Both *he* and *she* are extremely rare in agents' turns. The slightly higher frequencies of these 3rd person pronouns in callers' turns shows that they talk about other individuals and other plural subjects or antecedents more than the agents (e.g., *".. they told me to call you back.."*; *"..no longer buy them because they break*

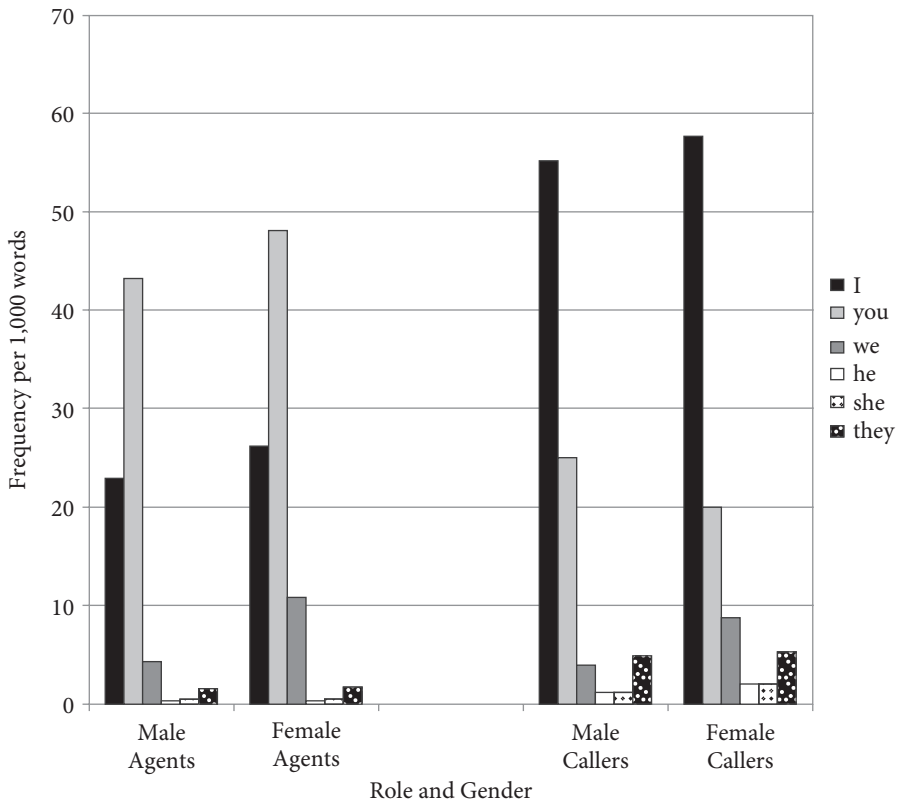


Figure 5.12. Selected personal pronouns by role and gender.

easily, what, what do you recommend instead?”; *“My son needs another lid for this and he asked me to call you guys about replacement..”*). Agents have slightly higher frequency of *we* in their turns. *We* used by agents often refers to the account/company or also to involve the caller in the support process (e.g., *“We provide 24-hour technical support.”* ; *“What we’ll do next is check your account balance.”*)

Female callers use slightly more *I, we, he, she, and they* than male callers. These gender-based differences between American male and female callers’ use of personal pronouns support earlier research (e.g., Beeching, 2002; Argammon et al., 2003; Mills, 2003) related to females’ preference for more active involvement and participation during the conversation. Female callers also often reference other individuals or groups of inanimate subjects more than males. The higher frequency of 2nd person *you* in male callers’ turns (25.321-males; 20.011-females per 1,000 words) potentially indicates that males are more direct in addressing the agent and have more specific requests that they want the agents to do in the course of the transaction than female callers. Female agents consistently use more personal pronouns across the board than male agents. These greater frequencies of personal pronouns in agents’ turns suggest that females are more involved and, at the same time, more directly engaged with their callers than are males.

5.3.7 Hedges and nouns of vague reference in the Call Center corpus

Callers use higher frequencies of hedges and nouns of vague reference than agents in call center interactions. However, note that based on the scale in Figure 5.13, these features are relatively infrequent in the Call Center corpus compared to American Conversation and Switchboard as discussed in the previous sections.

Thing/s used to refer to vague subjects, *kind of* or *kinda* as hedges, and coordination tags (*or something, and stuff like*) are used more by callers in their turns. It is obvious that American callers use these devices because they are not sure of the specific information or they lack the knowledge needed to complete their turns. These words and phrases also allow the callers to maintain the flow of their speech while indicating to the agents that they need a more particular set of information or procedures. It is possible that Filipino agents are aware that too-frequent use of these vague references demonstrates or suggests limited content, product, or procedure knowledge or general incompetence. It follows – and one might expect it might be commonly understood by the agents themselves – that agents ideally should be direct and specific in giving information such as brand names, item numbers, or steps in troubleshooting a malfunctioning machine. Many agents have also been trained to avoid vague

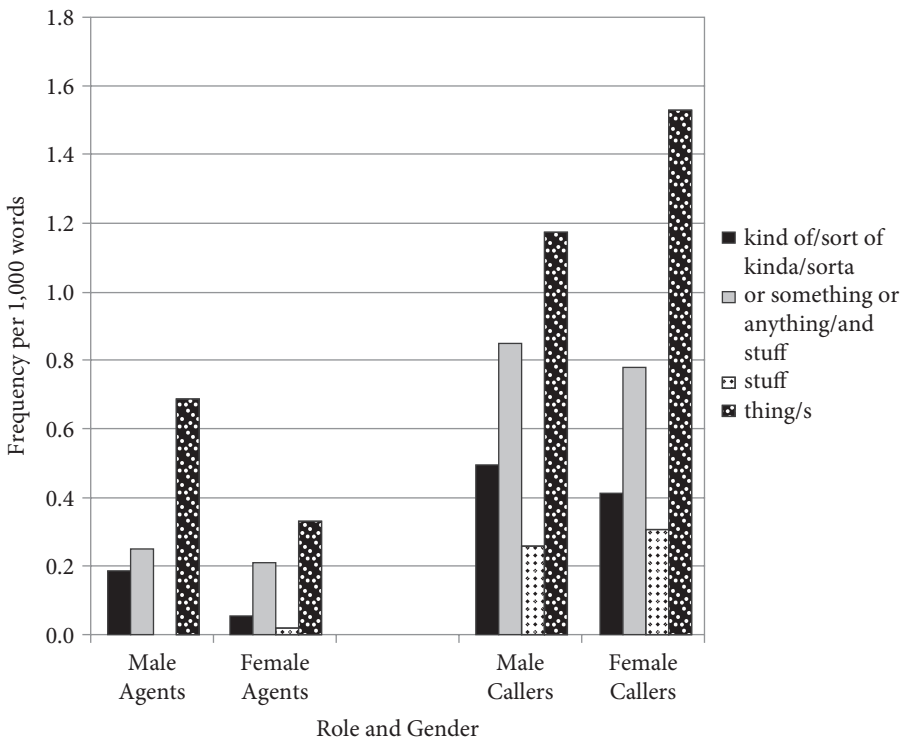


Figure 5.13. Hedges and nouns of vague reference by role and gender.

references and hedges. Those who have successfully memorized their scripts in common service transactions clearly have very few hedges and nouns of vague reference in their turns.

Female callers use more *thing/s*, *stuff* and lesser frequency of *kind of* (*kinda*), *sort of*, and coordination tags *or something*, *or anything*, and *stuff* than do male callers. The reasons for these differing linguistic preferences of male and female speakers are again difficult to clearly determine. It is possible that females use more nouns of vague reference (*stuff* and *thing/s*) because of their more limited experience than males with these kinds of specific information, including technical and mechanical terms, tools, or spare parts. Males, on the other hand, use slightly more hedges and coordination tags perhaps due to their difficulties in producing complete turns and clearer explanations than females. Again, these assumptions are not yet clearly supported by data in this book or from previous research. The short excerpt below illustrates the use of nouns of vague reference (*thing* and *stuff*) and coordination tag (*or something*) used by an angry male caller. *Or something* is

repeatedly used after the caller mentions specific information which may not be accurate (e.g., “..*connection station or the bridge or something*”).

Text Sample 5.7 Use of nouns of vague references/coordination tags by a caller

Caller: Yes well that's what we have here it's the same **thing** here, you know you're not providing the service you're supposed to be providing, and then you guys have the guts to tell me I'm going to be charged for it? You need to get this fixed and you have to do something about your liability you must owe a partner **or something** because it's always breaking down every time. I have a problem with our system and all these **stuff**, when they finally figured out what it is they say it's because the, of the connection station or the bridge **or something**. It's always the wrong connection wire **or something** flipped the wrong switch.

Male agents use more hedges and nouns of vague reference than female agents (except, slightly, for *stuff*). Male agents also use a relatively higher frequency of *thing/s* in their turns. It is possible that this pattern of use of hedges and nouns of vague reference by Filipino agents is evidence of limitations of overall language ability which also adversely impacts service performance scores. Female agents, as mentioned elsewhere in this book, have higher language ability and performance evaluation scores than male agents.

5.3.8 Common lexical verbs in the Call Center corpus

I provide a comparison of the distribution of the 12 common lexical verbs used by agents and callers in the Call Center corpus in Figure 5.14 below. Except for *see* and *give*, callers have higher frequencies of the common lexical verbs in conversation than agents. Because of the generally high level of English fluency in Filipino agents, it appears likely that the difference in the distribution of common lexical verbs in call center interactions is not due to second language limitations but, rather, an indication that callers have a wider range of topics, longer narratives of events, and initiate more questions and narratives in their turns than the agents. Agents have a very repetitive repertoire of responses, especially for accounts that allow them to easily memorize support protocols. The limited range of expected or scripted responses for agents requires them to use fewer common verbs in their turns.

More *see* and *give* in agents' turns may also be evidence of their limited, repetitive repertoire of questions or responses to the callers. *See* has been used by agents as part of a minimal response (e.g., “*oh, I see*”), confirmation of information (e.g., “*I can see here that you have 12 credits left in your account*”), or direct question during a troubleshooting procedure (e.g., “*Do you see a yellow strip under the*

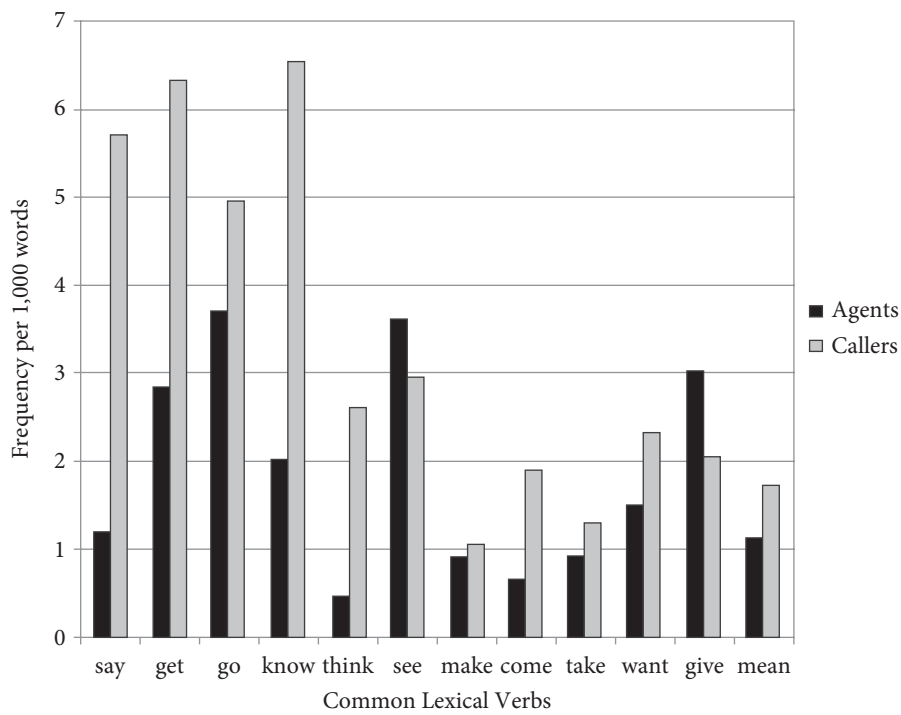


Figure 5.14. Common lexical verbs by speaker role.

cartridge?”). *Give* has been repeated in many requests from agents for specific personal information (e.g., phone numbers, addresses, or account numbers) from the callers.

5.3.9 *Let’s* in the Call Center corpus

The data for the use of *let’s* in 5.2.6 show that call center interactions use more of this first person imperative than face-to-face conversation or telephone exchanges in Switchboard. Figure 5.15 shows that agents have comparatively higher frequencies of *let’s* (including *let us*) than callers per 1,000 words. Agents appear to use *let’s* to directly involve the callers in the interaction and direct the flow of the transaction while, at the same time, also minimize the force of instructions.

Female agents and callers have higher frequencies of *let’s* than their male interlocutors (Female Agents = 1.743, Callers = 0.991; Male Agents = 1.532, Callers = 0.333). The difference in the frequencies of *let’s* used by male and female callers may again be related to the way these speaker groups prefer to structure their turns in relation to politeness, directness in information packaging, and involvement.

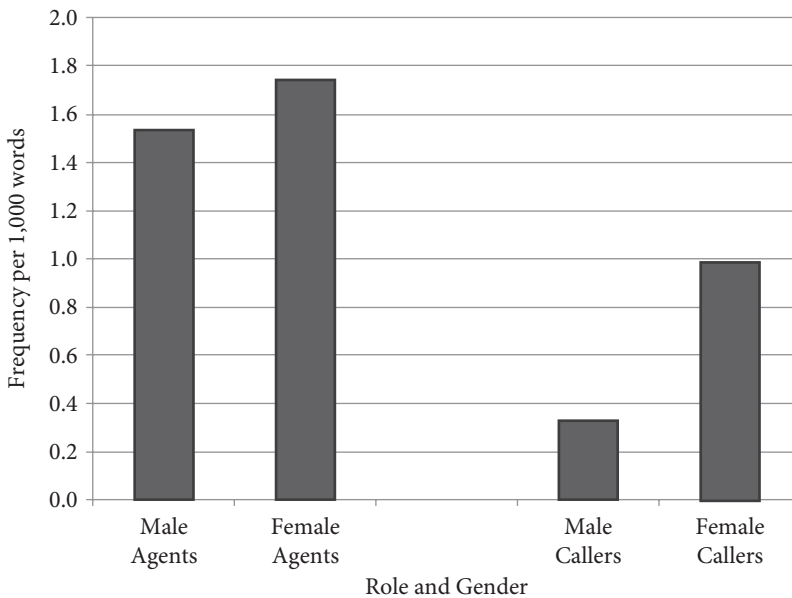


Figure 5.15. Use of *let's* by role and gender.

Female agents appear to be more engaged than male agents in interactions with their callers and also use other linguistic features that show explicit involvement and participation more frequently.

5.4 Lexico/syntactic complexity

I utilize a combination of features in the analysis of lexico/syntactic complexity across corpora and internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. These measures of complexity provide information about lexical specificity and information density (e.g., type/token ratio, average word length, nominalizations) and indicate syntactic intricacy (e.g., prepositions, subordinators and coordinators) of discourse (Biber, 1988; Barbieri, 2006). Although this is not a clearly-defined measure, the exploratory nature of analysis in this section assumes that the higher frequency of these lexico/syntactic features indicates lexical/syntactic complexity of discourse. In other words, more prepositions, higher vocabulary size, more nominalizations, or longer average word length, etc., may suggest that the discourse of a register or sub-register is more complicated (or complex) than others with lower overall average frequencies of these linguistic features.

Call center discourse makes use of specialized, technical terms and structures that may not be common in other kinds of conversations, especially face-to-face, casual interactions. The MD analysis in Chapter 4 reveals that vocabulary size (operationalized by type/token ratio) and average word length in call center interactions resemble patterns from planned discourses, and therefore complex, and, at the same time well-organized, more than patterns from online conversations. These same complex features are “heavily” repeated in the corpus but the range of topics discussed by agents and callers is more defined than in casual spoken interactions. Face-to-face interactions provide more opportunities for topic shifts but the overall quality of discourse could be less complex due to the use of informal and short vocabulary. On the other hand, Switchboard exchanges allow more unique topics discussed by the speakers due to the random prompts from the program. However, these guide questions also compartmentalize the nature of the conversation and limit the range of topic shifts by speakers.

The main goal of this section is to provide a comparison of the distribution of these selected features of linguistic complexity across corpora and internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. The following features comprise the lexico/syntactic measures of complexity utilized in this book:

- Vocabulary size (type/token ratio)
- Prepositions
- Coordinators/Conjunctions
- Word length
- Nominalizations
- Complement clauses

5.4.1 Features of lexico/syntactic complexity across registers

Tables 5.1 and 5.2 and Figure 5.16 show the distribution of type-token ratio, average word length, nominalizations, prepositions, conjunctions, and complement clauses used by speakers in the three registers. There is no clear and overwhelmingly consistent pattern suggesting greater overall comparative complexity of one register over the others, based on the combined features. It appears that each individual linguistic feature has to be analyzed as a single unit across registers for a more conclusive and meaningful result. However, call center interactions have the highest type-token ratio, average word length, and nominalizations, while Switchboard interactions have generally more conjunctions and complement clauses. Both the Call Center and Switchboard corpora have generally higher frequencies of these selected features than American Conversation, suggesting that these task-based telephone interactions are slightly more complex in vocabulary use and grammar than face-to-face conversation.

Table 5.1. Selected features of lexico/syntactic complexity across registers.

Corpora	Type-Token Ratio	Average Word Length	Nominalizations	Prepositions
Call Center	45.911	3.854	18.805	58.121
American Conversation	43.103	3.690	10.571	63.839
Switchboard	40.726	3.760	12.843	63.548

Table 5.2. Conjunctions across registers.

Corpora	Subordinating Conjunctions (Causative)	Subordinating Conjunctions (Conditional)	Subordinating Conjunctions (Other)	Coordinating Conjunctions (Clausal)	Coordinating Conjunctions (Phrasal)
Call Center	2.76	5.13	6.15	8.89	0.83
American Conversation	2.35	4.58	7.91	8.75	0.86
Switchboard	3.72	4.41	7.94	9.75	1.20

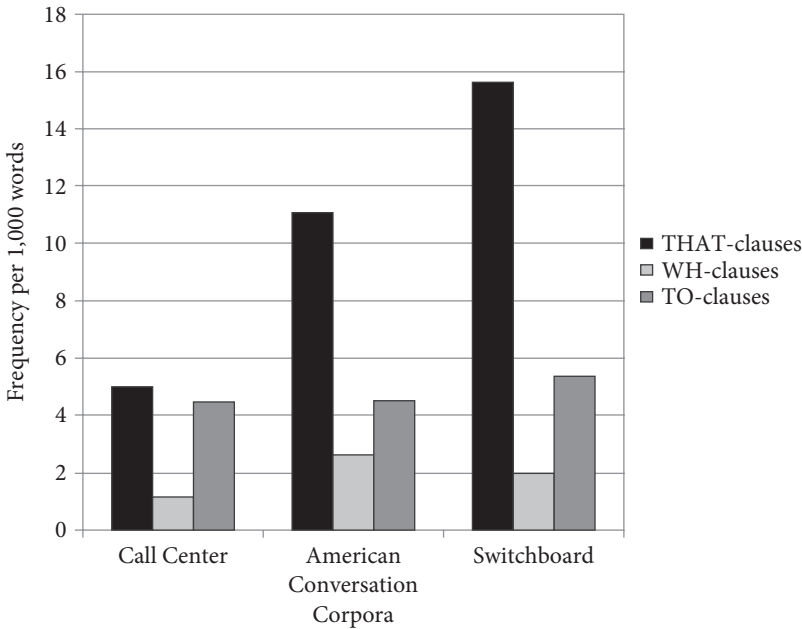


Figure 5.16. Complement clauses across register.

The higher type-token ratio, frequency of nominalizations, and slightly longer average word length in call center interactions again show that speakers in this register use more specialized and technical vocabulary than do the speakers in the two other registers. Technical terms are common in Troubleshooting and Inquire accounts that specify technical procedures and equipment during the calls. Switchboard interactions have relatively more subordinating and coordinating conjunctions than the Call Center and American Conversation corpora (Table 5.2).

The use of more conjunctions by participants in Switchboard discussions perhaps illustrates more elaboration or “extending the body” (LGSWE, p. 1078) by coordination/subordination in conversation units (e.g., “*Yes, I believe that, and, we know for a fact that women are more patient than men in these cases, and, women drivers tend to be more focused, as, well, and we’re more relaxed.*”). The need to elaborate and further support an idea is evident in Switchboard as participants attempt to convince the listener about the logic and validity of their personal opinions.

Figure 5.16 shows that *that* and *to*-complement clauses are used more frequently in Switchboard, while American Conversation has slightly more *wh*-clauses. Call center interactions have the fewest complement clause constructions among the registers in this study. The lower frequency of verbs and adjectives in the call center discourse reported in 5.2.1 potentially affects this overall distribution of complement clauses in the corpus. These complement clauses are “typically used to complete meaning relationship of an associated verb or adjective in a higher clause” (LGSWE, p. 658). The LGSWE reports that *that*-clauses and *wh*-clauses are more common in conversation (followed by fiction) but are relatively rare in academic prose. It is possible that the distribution of these complement clause structures in the Call Center corpus is related to the slight similarity in structure between planned discourse (like academic prose) and the specific, task-oriented interaction between agents and callers in call center transactions.

5.4.2 Features of lexico/syntactic complexity in the Call Center corpus

Data in Table 5.3 show that agents have consistently higher frequencies of nominalizations and prepositions, longer average word length, and higher type-token ratio than callers. These results suggest that agents typically have more technical and specialized vocabulary in their discourse than do callers. There are patterns that also show interesting gender-based differences, especially in the discourse of agents in Table 5.3. Female agents have higher frequency of nominalizations and prepositions, longer average word length, and higher type-token ratio than do male agents.

Table 5.3. Selected features of lexico/syntactic complexity by role and gender.

Speaker Role and Gender	Type-Token Ratio	Average Word Length	Nominalization	Preposition
Agents	47.349	3.817	21.219	60.857
Male Agents	46.018	3.808	20.029	59.762
Female Agents	48.681	3.855	22.391	61.934
Callers	42.691	3.610	13.750	51.270
Male Callers	42.814	3.627	14.519	53.925
Female Callers	42.574	3.601	13.017	48.721

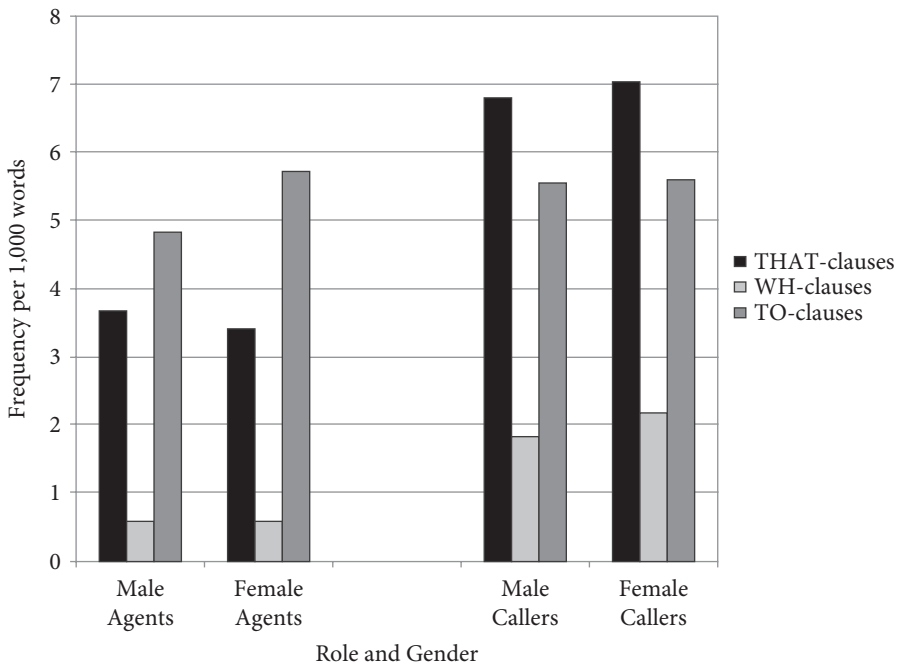


Figure 5.17. Complement clauses by role and gender.

Figure 5.17 shows that callers make use of more complement clause constructions than agents do. Consistent with my assumptions above, it is possible that callers are also more inclined to provide comprehensive information and explanations utilizing more frequent clause structures, while agents maintain a more economical, technical and almost academic discourse structure. However, because agents have slightly higher frequencies of verbs per 1,000 words than callers, the current data do not necessarily support this interpretation. There are only minor differences in the use of these complements clauses between male and female

callers. Female agents, however, have more *to*-clauses but slightly lesser *that*-clauses than male agents.

Finally, Table 5.4 shows that the distribution of nominalizations, prepositions, average word length, and type-token ratio in the Call Center corpus is somewhat influenced by agents' performance evaluation scores. High-performing agents have consistently used higher frequencies of nominalizations and prepositions, longer average word length, and higher type-token ratio than Mid and Low agents. These data suggest that High-performing agents have more complex technical and specialized vocabulary and grammatical structures in their turns especially than those agents who did not perform well in their evaluated transactions. It is possible that these High-performing agents are able to provide more important information to the callers and support their instructions with additional technical details that help in effectively serving callers.

5.5 Keyword analysis

Keyword analysis involves the use of a statistical procedure which identifies significant differences in the distribution of words used by speakers (or writers) between two given texts or corpora (Scott, 2001; Baker, 2004; Barbieri, 2008). Scott (1997) defines a keyword as “a word which occurs with unusual frequency in a given text” (p. 236). This “unusual frequency” is based on the likelihood of occurrence of the word in a target text from cross-tabulation. To identify keywords in a corpus, it is necessary to compare data from the corpus with a reference (or target) corpus that is logically representing similar linguistic characteristics and qualities. Data from keyword analysis are obtained from specialized computer programs or software such as *WordSmith Tools* (Scott, 1996) or *AntConc* (Anthony, 2007). For this book, I used both *AntConc* and *WordSmith Tools* to confirm the accuracy of results. I needed to “clean” my target and comparison corpora to make sure that the programs properly captured and computed keywords and keyness values.

In this section, I identified keywords in the Call Center corpus relative to the American Conversation sub-corpus as a reference corpus. I then reversed the process with the Call Center corpus as the reference corpus to show keywords

Table 5.4. Selected features of lexico/syntactic complexity by agents' performance evaluation scores.

Agents' Performance Evaluation Score	Type-Token Ratio	Average Word Length	Nominalizations	Prepositions
Low	45.511	3.768	18.571	57.568
Mid	47.379	3.851	20.487	60.365
High	49.732	3.931	23.036	63.297

coming from face-to-face American conversation relative to call center interactions. I conducted a keyword analysis in order to obtain the list of unique words and the particular keyness values of these worlds characterizing these two registers of conversation. The list of keywords in Table 5.5 shows the 50 most common keywords in the two corpora. As it is also possible to compare groups of texts (or sub-corpus) within one corpus, I also provide results of a keyword analysis comparing the discourse of agents and callers within the Call Center corpus. Table 5.6 shows the 50 most common keywords in agents' and callers' texts.

5.5.1 Keyword analysis between call center interactions and face-to-face American conversation

Results of the keyword analysis shown in Table 5.5 present the unique and frequently used words from the Call Center corpus relative to the American Conversation sub-corpus and vice versa. In call center interactions, it is clear that speakers use an “unusual frequency” of *ok*, *alright*, *oh*, and *well* as inserts/discourse markers in turns; 2nd person pronouns (*you* and *your*); and polite and respect markers (*sir*, *please*, *ma'am*, *thank*). These characteristic words in call centers are comparatively rare in face-to-face conversations based on a statistical cross-tabulation from the keyword analysis program. Nouns like *number*, *phone*, *account*, *address*, *code*, and *meter* are also “unusually frequent” in call centers as these words are constantly repeated by speakers (especially the agents) to obtain the necessary information to complete the transactions. Other specialized and technical words like *modem*, *email*, *internet*, and *DSL* are extremely common in troubleshooting and inquiry support transactions and repeated in many calls in the corpus. Words such as *calling* (“*Thank you for calling*”) *verify* (“*Could you verify for me your account number?*”) and *hold* (“*Can I put you on hold?*”) are commonly repeated in speakers' turns and have been used by many agents as parts of memorized lexical bundles.

Table 5.5. Keyword analysis: Call Center and American Conversation corpora.

Rank	Keywords: Call Center		Keywords: American Conversation	
	Keyness Value	Keyword	Keyness Value	Keyword
1	48951.490	ok	3457.513	he
2	35322.320	you	2566.398	she
3	6614.129	number	2280.112	was
4	4407.457	yes	2035.760	know
5	4200.339	and	1975.420	they
6	4067.009	sir	1615.080	like
7	3277.977	alright	1175.920	people

(Continued)

Table 5.5. (continued).

Rank	Keywords: Call Center		Keywords: American Conversation	
	Keyness Value	Keyword	Keyness Value	Keyword
8	3104.371	please	1088.175	think
9	3073.621	yeah	1080.309	really
10	3049.398	your	982.961	her
11	3021.151	oh	965.895	of
12	2801.629	ma'am	791.921	him
13	2584.824	thank	715.294	his
14	2364.694	phone	694.904	had
15	2330.760	so	647.577	don't
16	2015.942	it	627.299	stuff
17	2003.958	account	600.116	were
18	1902.718	that	567.131	mean
19	1632.085	I	552.502	going
20	1618.822	correct	550.444	didn't
21	1588.193	modem	547.308	kind (of)
22	1571.625	address	521.443	all
23	1565.762	calling	520.791	little
24	1511.068	hold	473.157	them
25	1488.009	meter	466.783	said
26	1484.599	thanks	458.743	thought
27	1479.997	because	445.715	about
28	1391.828	a	426.316	things
29	1385.484	check	419.771	their
31	1320.028	no	370.516	never
32	1265.744	for	369.545	say
33	1193.415	email	360.498	some
34	1191.339	card	355.751	did
35	1187.790	order	351.297	out
36	1184.352	party	349.198	come
37	1159.857	the	347.319	school
38	1116.089	internet	335.398	eat
39	1107.838	will	335.123	God
40	1070.375	let	330.613	big
41	1041.224	code	327.296	over
42	1039.644	verify	326.895	guy
43	1032.825	well	326.216	Mom
44	1021.905	may	318.889	who
45	1013.929	line	303.195	lot
46	994.044	me	302.099	there
47	962.817	third	300.885	wow
48	952.740	DSL	290.774	these
49	952.364	minutes	290.435	shit
50	878.177	right	285.469	always

Third person personal pronouns (*he, she, they* and also *her, his*); past tense *be*-verbs and other verbs (*was, were, had, did*); high-frequency lexical verbs (*know, think, mean*); and common nouns, vocatives (*God, Mom, guy, people*) are identified as keywords of the American Conversation corpus relative to the Call Center corpus. Other informal expressions, intensifiers, and expletives such as *wow, really*, and *shit* register with higher frequency in face-to-face interactions compared to the slightly-formal, business and task-oriented exchanges in call centers.

5.5.2 Keyword analysis between agents and callers in the Call Center corpus

Table 5.6 lists the keywords and their respective keyness values between agents and callers' texts in the Call Center corpus. The differences in the high-frequency words used by agents and callers again show the main structures and functions of their specific discourse. Agents have more 2nd person pronouns (*your, you*) utilized to clearly provide instructions and information to the callers; politeness and respect markers including titles addressed to customers in service transactions (*please, sir, ma'am, apologize, Ms., Mr.*); and words that often form part of common lexical bundles (*calling, check, verify, assist, kindly, and inconvenience*).

Callers use more 1st person and 3rd person personal pronouns (except *you/your*) and past tense verbs (*was, said, went, did*) as well as high-frequency lexical verbs in their narratives as they explain the problem to the agents. There are many contractions in the callers' texts (*I'm, I've, didn't, doesn't*) as well as some progressives (*saying, trying, looking*). There are also some question words in callers' texts (*what, where*) and informal words and short responses (*guys, stuff, yeah, yup*), addressed to the agents, in most instances.

Table 5.6. Keyword analysis: agents' and callers' texts.

Rank	Keywords: Agents		Keywords: Callers	
	Keyness Value	Keyword	Keyness Value	Keyword
1	2584.229	your	2840.458	I
2	1818.770	you	1759.235	it
3	884.097	for	785.826	my
4	880.216	sir	611.58	was
5	842.985	please	562.625	know
6	641.785	may	537.367	don't
7	394.174	check	525.311	got
8	366.916	will	507.341	I'm
9	320.486	be	415.54	had
10	298.678	calling	411.032	they

(Continued)

Table 5.6. (continued).

Rank	Keywords: Agents		Keywords: Callers	
	Keyness Value	Keyword	Keyness Value	Keyword
11	275.648	ma'am	382.366	I've
12	269.900	account	300.231	says
13	268.713	let	296.984	think
14	255.499	assist	277.638	no
15	251.938	verify	270.113	didn't
16	237.718	moment	257.081	get
17	228.173	Ms.	253.958	said
18	219.709	the	210.345	he
19	212.411	welcome	205.806	what
20	187.561	help	181.112	fine
21	184.232	number	177.303	little
22	164.137	using	164.889	guys
23	160.863	alright	163.984	not
24	155.051	name	152.565	went
25	153.700	also	142.661	too
26	149.547	case	139.023	she
27	145.351	kindly	138.806	a
28	143.159	apologize	130.858	guess
29	141.542	Mr.	126.335	been
30	140.520	here	121.492	them
31	136.245	first	119.116	saying
32	135.778	address	116.357	yup
33	135.256	thank	110.965	stuff
34	131.510	can	108.751	trying
35	120.641	actually	108.556	where
36	115.004	us	105.375	yes
37	109.481	would	100.943	work
38	107.151	try	100.698	find
39	105.714	have	99.687	yeah
40	105.630	waiting	98.611	thought
41	94.684	card	93.735	doesn't
42	94.306	regarding	92.824	did
43	92.994	press	92.551	but
44	92.729	inconvenience	90.573	never
45	91.996	pull	89.58	second
46	90.968	by	86.614	told
47	90.409	this	85.532	looking
48	89.023	modem	85.441	nothing
49	88.073	reference	84.535	came
50	84.242	seconds	84.365	correct

5.6 Chapter summary

I presented in Chapter 5 the distribution of selected lexico/syntactic features across registers and internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. The selected features were based on the LGSWE and previous studies such as Quaglio (2004) and Biber (2006). I also added in this chapter a section showing the distribution of features of lexical and syntactic complexity and a brief comparison of keywords unique to call center discourse with reference to face-to-face American conversation and the language of agents with reference to the callers' turns. The main goal of this chapter was to provide a description of how speakers in these registers and internal groups in the Call Center corpus used these features in carrying out the tasks involved in their interactions. Results showed that there were features of discourse that characterized call center interactions relative to the two comparative corpora. Call center interactions systematically made use of technical and specialized vocabulary and used features that referred to the listener (addressee-focused features) more frequently than interactions in American Conversation and Switchboard. The keyword analysis comparing call center and face-to-face conversations highlighted the 50 most common words appearing with "uniquely high" frequencies after cross-tabulations. These keywords were consistent with the general distribution of content word classes and supported the major patterns of linguistic data discussed in Chapter 4.

The variation in the use of linguistic features across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus also showed important patterns that described the characteristics of agents and callers' turns in customer service interactions. The agents' performance evaluation scores and the categories of accounts also provided interesting results that described the influence of contexts and speakers' skills and abilities in the linguistic composition of discourse. For example, the distributional data on vocabulary use by agents suggested that High-performing agents had more complex technical and specialized vocabulary and grammatical structures in their turns than Low-performing agents. I briefly interpreted this difference and similar patterns in the corpus as something that related to the role of language proficiency and task familiarity of High-performing agents in how they provided information and instructions to their callers.

Grammatical expression of stance

6.1 Introduction

Stance is defined as the linguistic mechanisms used by speakers (and also writers) to convey their personal feelings and assessments (Biber et al., 1999). Stance expressions in speech suggest a range of personal attitudes that speakers have about a specific item of information and how certain they are about its veracity (Biber, 2006). In spoken registers, the expression of stance is evident both in the lexico/syntactic patterns of speech and also the prosodic features and other paralinguistic devices speakers utilize to directly and accurately express their feelings and opinions. These various linguistic and paralinguistic markers affect the flow of talk and influence the way participants engage each other during the conversation. The use of stance markers also reflects the relationships existing between speakers in conversation (Precht, 2000, 2003). This relationship may include power and the recognition of roles (e.g., as server or servee in face-to-face service encounters) as well as the level of familiarity speakers have with each other. It is clear that an effective understanding of speaker roles or power relationships positively contributes to achieving success in the conversation, thus, avoiding misinterpretation of meaning and information and facilitating a smooth flow of communication. This understanding of relationships, speakers' intentions, and the context of conversation influences the use of stance markers characterizing the interaction.

There have been several approaches to the investigation of stance (e.g., Labov, 1984; Chafe, 1986; Biber & Finegan, 1989; Ochs, 1989; Hyland, 1996, 1998; Conrad & Biber, 2000; Hunston & Thompson, 2000; Precht, 2000, 2003; Biber, 2006) ranging from detailed exploration of a single text or episode of conversation to a broader investigation of stance patterns from corpora. The term "stance" has also been labeled as "hedge," "affect," "intensity" or "evaluation" in various studies of discourse. The investigation of specific stance or evaluative features of conversation is established and interpreted by researchers to fully describe the linguistic characteristics of speech in different contexts. Many researchers are especially interested in the identification and documentation of grammatical stance features used by speakers to express forms of metadiscourse (Mauranen, 2003). This documentation process in spoken discourse is often accomplished through discourse or conversation analysis of speakers' turns.

Many corpus-based analyses of stance features, for example Biber and Conrad (2000), Precht, (2000, 2003), Biber (2006), and the LGSWE provide a more specific description of grammatical stance features across spoken and written registers that are not commonly achieved in the studies of stance using qualitative discourse analysis. The use of corpora also produces more conclusive and generalizable data from various groups of speakers and writers. However, most corpus-based analyses of stance in spoken discourse have limitations when it comes to including relevant phonological and prosodic features of speech representing stance expressions. For example, some features of “intensity” in speech as described by Labov (1984) would not be captured in corpora unless text transcriptions include phonological tags. Clearly, in spoken discourse, stance can be explicitly expressed through “value-laden word choice” or paralinguistic devices (Biber et al., 1999) with potentially more immediate effect upon personal feelings than grammatically marked stance features such as those shown in corpora. This study, however, is limited to grammatically marked stance excluding markers that are not captured electronically (e.g., suprasegmental features and affective and evaluative word choice) in traditionally transcribed texts. Only grammatical stance features are included in the analysis in this chapter following Biber’s (2006) framework of stance attribution described below. Future related studies incorporating segmental and suprasegmental stance patterns are relevant and desirable to supplement the results discussed in this current study.

6.1.1 Expressing personal feelings in outsourced call center interactions

Expressions of personal feelings, value judgments, and assessments (Biber et al., 1999) are prevalent in many technical and customer service transactions. Callers in these service transactions are not hesitant to express their personal feelings, especially in reaction to ineffective service or faulty products. Value judgments about the agents’ level of service and sometimes use of language may likewise come from callers. Within the sub-registers of call center discourse, transactions that involve angry callers potentially have more explicit grammatical stance features than that of simple inquiry-type transactions characterized more by question-answer sequences. Conflicts and miscommunication in difficult transactions could increase the number of callers’ personal assessments and value judgments. In addition, some grammatical stance features identified in previous research, e.g., possibility and obligation modal verbs, are perhaps more common in call center interactions than in other spoken registers. The agents’ directives while troubleshooting sequences or addressee-focused responses to questions typically involve modal verb phrasings to articulate a specific instruction or detail. Detailed explanations, expressions of possibility, and explicit cause-result statements commonly make use of these modal verb constructions to provide sufficient information to

customers (e.g., “..and you *can* restart the system after the uh application is installed ...this *can* improve your machine’s performance..”). Polite requests, which are very common in the transactions, are also expressed by using these modal verbs (e.g., “*May I have your name and address, please?*”).

Because of the cross-cultural nature of outsourced call center interactions, there may be potential differences in the way Filipino agents express their personal feelings and judgments as well as their understanding of customer issues compared to call center agents with different cultural backgrounds. Filipino agents may not directly convey potential negative evaluations or assessment of issues/problems – or callers – because of how they perceive courtesy and respect in service encounters, influenced by typical conversational norms in the Philippines. Many Filipino agents show enthusiasm to support callers even beyond their specified primary service responsibilities, and, not surprisingly, therefore, they sometimes struggle to be forthright in denying service to the callers whenever their account policies require strict compliance and limited exceptions for service. For instance, in declining a customer’s request, Filipino agents may not directly say “no” (e.g., “*No, I can’t give you an extension.*”) to the caller. Instead, they might often offer other alternatives for the caller to consider or immediately invoke policies in an attempt to suggest unavoidable constraints precluding them from accommodating the callers’ requests, and, they might believe, thereby lessen, somewhat, the impact of their negative response. While exercising these alternatives rather than direct negative responses, Filipino agents normally employ prosodic patterns together with polite and respectful language that show deference to the callers’ feelings. Speakers do not emphasize the negative message and turns are usually delivered slowly and with low, unassertive volume and tone. This Tagalog and other regional language-based prosodic patterns typical in the Philippines indicate apologies and courtesy to save face while denying a request. Because the prosodic patterns of Filipino-English may not directly match the common expectations of American callers in the expression of feelings and assessments, misinterpretation of information could occur and callers may perceive the agents’ message differently and the affect and meaning comprehended by the caller might be quite different than intended by the agent. In the context of call centers, therefore, it appears to be necessary that Filipino agents clearly express their evaluation of the issue (whether positive or negative) through lexico/syntactic patterns to efficiently deliver the right information to the callers and avoid confusion. Moreover, these grammatical patterns should be matched by appropriate prosody approximating typical American-English stress and intonation. The direct expression of stance consequently allows the agents to effectively control the transaction especially when the callers are controlling the interaction excessively with complaints and requests. In summary, the use of these stance markers is important in maintaining control of the transaction

and providing effective service to customers and they may warrant greater focus in cross-cultural training in Philippine-based call centers.

One of the main goals of this chapter is to identify any relationship between the use of these stance markers and the agents' quality of service, language ability, and experience with their current accounts. It is interesting to investigate whether or not agents' task performance and language proficiency scores as well as the length of experience they have with their current accounts relate to the distribution of grammatical expression of stance in the transactions. Overall proficiency in English directly correlates with sociolinguistic understanding of how to express or convey feelings and attitudes, especially in difficult transactions or if the caller is obviously having trouble following instructions. In troubleshooting a technical issue, for example, the agents' delivery and control of support to a lay caller may contribute greatly to the success or failure of the transaction. It is possible that patterns of grammatical stance, as well as agents' length of service or familiarity with transactions and protocols, could indicate their service-level quality across categories of accounts.

6.2 Stance features included in the present study

As previously mentioned, the investigation of stance distributed across external and internal categories of texts in the present study is based on Biber's (2006) attribution of grammatical stance that incorporates three major lexico/syntactic features. These features are grouped into: (1) modal and semi-modal verbs, (2) stance adverbs, and (3) complement clauses controlled by stance verbs, adjectives, or nouns. Table 6.1 provides a detailed description of the composition of these groups of grammatical stance features.

Table 6.1. Lexico/syntactic features used for stance analyses (Biber, 2006).

- | |
|---|
| 1. Modal and Semi-Modal Verbs |
| – Possibility/Permission/Ability: <i>can, could, may, might</i> |
| – Necessity/Obligation/: <i>must, should, (had) better, have to, got to, ought to</i> |
| – Prediction/Volition: <i>will, would, shall, be going to</i> |
| 2. Stance Adverbs |
| – Epistemic |
| – Certainty: e.g., <i>actually, certainly, in fact</i> |
| – Likelihood: e.g., <i>apparently, perhaps, possibly</i> |
| – Attitude: e.g., <i>amazingly, importantly, surprisingly</i> |
| – Style/Perspective: e.g., <i>according to, generally, typically</i> |

(Continued)

3. Complement Clauses Controlled by Stance Verbs, Adjectives, or Nouns

3.1 Stance Complement Clauses Controlled by Verbs

3.1a. Stance Verb + *that*-Clause

- Epistemic Verbs
 - Certainty: e.g., *conclude, determine, know*
 - Likelihood: e.g., *believe, doubt, think*
- Attitude Verbs: e.g., *expect, hope, worry*
- Speech-Act and Other Communication Verbs (Non-Factual): e.g., *argue, claim, report, say*

3.1b. Stance Verb + *to*-Clause

- Probability (Likelihood) Verbs: e.g., *appear, happen, seem*
- Mental (Cognition/Perception) Verbs: e.g., *consider, believe*
- Desire/Intention/Decision Verbs: e.g., *intend, need, want*
- Speech-Act and Other Communication Verbs: e.g., *advise, remind, request*

3.2. Stance Complement Clauses Controlled by Adjectives

3.2a. Stance Adjective + *that*-Clause (often extraposed constructions)

- Epistemic Adjectives
 - Certainty: e.g., *certain, clear, obvious*
 - Likelihood: e.g., *(un)likely, possible, probable*
- Attitude/Emotion Adjectives: e.g., *amazed, shocked, surprised*
- Evaluation Adjectives: e.g., *essential, interesting, noteworthy*

3.2b. Stance Adjective + *to*-Clause (often extraposed constructions)

- Epistemic (Certainty/Likelihood) Adjectives: e.g., *certain, likely, sure*
- Attitude/Emotion Adjectives: e.g., *happy, pleased, surprised*
- Evaluation Adjectives: e.g., *essential, important, necessary*
- Ability or Willingness Adjectives: e.g., *able, eager, willing*
- Ease or Difficulty Adjectives: e.g., *difficult, easy, hard*

3.3. Stance Complement Clauses Controlled by Nouns

3.3a. Stance Noun + *that*-Clause

- Epistemic Nouns
 - Certainty: e.g., *conclusion, fact, observation*
 - Likelihood: e.g., *assumption, claim, hypothesis*
- Attitude/Perspective Nouns: e.g., *hope, view*
- Communication (Non-Factual) Nouns: e.g., *comment, proposal, report*

3.3b. Stance Noun + *to*-Clause: e.g., *failure, obligation, tendency*

6.2.1 Modal and semi-modal verbs

The semantic classes of modal verbs include possibility/permission, necessity/obligation, and prediction/volition modals expressing a variety of purposes following their explicit meanings. These modal verbs are used to give directives (e.g., “You *can* now enter your password.”), ask questions (e.g., “Did you say I *could* go to Home Depot and they’ll replace it for me?”), or outline procedures during the call (e.g., “What we *will* do is, we *will* replace your cartridge and clean your printer using the cleaning kit.”). The frequency of modal verbs used for requests and clarifications (possibility/permission modals: *can*, *could*, *may*) is very high in call center interactions because these modal verbs are repeatedly used in opening sequences of most transactions (e.g., “Thank you for calling [XX Company]. *Can* I have your phone number please?” or “Thank you for calling [XX Company] my name is Jane, agent ID is 333, how *may* I help you today?”).

6.2.2 Stance adverbs

Stance adverbs are divided into four major semantic classes: certainty, likelihood (epistemic stance adverbs), attitude, and style. These stance adverbs are found to be more common in spoken registers than in written registers except for style adverbs (e.g., *generally*, *typically*) that are more frequently used by writers in academic disciplines especially in textbooks (Biber et al., 1999; Biber, 2006). Stance adverbs in call center interactions may be used to indicate events that are likely to occur (e.g., “This *probably* will be returned to you with no charge.”), to identify or underscore the veracity of information (e.g., “*Obviously*, I’m not online right now, and *clearly* there’s something wrong with the ticket you gave me because I don’t receive, I can’t even locate our site.”), or to suggest options that might solve a problem (e.g., “Let’s remove the filter, the blue filter, this *possibly* will take you back to that welcome message.”).

6.2.3 Stance complement clauses

Finally, stance complement clauses comprise structures controlled by verbs, adjectives, and nouns followed by *that* or *to*-clauses. These verb, adjective, and noun-controlled *that* or *to*-clauses illustrate the functions of the semantic categories of the three part-of-speech classes (e.g., for verbs: certainty, likelihood, attitudinal, and communication) followed by clauses that complete the speaker’s expression of personal feelings and evaluations (e.g., “I *think that* it’s going to be cheaper for you to replace this machine than to send it to the service center for repair.”). Biber found that stance verb + *that*-clause constructions are much more common in spoken university registers than in written registers. Certainty (e.g., *conclude*, *know*) and likelihood (e.g., *believe*, *think*) verbs are found to be the two most common semantic categories of verbs controlling *that*-clauses.

6.3 Distribution of stance features across registers

Biber (2006) finds important register differences in university speech and writing in the particular kinds of stance meanings that are expressed, the grammatical devices used to express stance, and the overall extent to which stance is expressed at all. Results from Biber's study provide useful data related to register variation in how speakers make use of stance features in spoken and written registers.

The distribution of the major structural categories of stance features across registers is shown in Figure 6.1. Modal verbs are used more frequently in the Call Center and American Conversation corpora than stance adverbs and stance complement clauses. This result showing the frequent use of modal verbs as stance markers in conversation mirrors the findings from Biber's (2006) study of spoken university registers and relates to the distinction between modality and more specific stance meanings in the interpretation of the functions of these modal verbs in spoken discourse. For Switchboard, however, stance complement clauses are used more frequently than modal verbs and stance adverbs. It is likely that exchanges in Switchboard which use more certainty and likelihood verbs controlling *that*

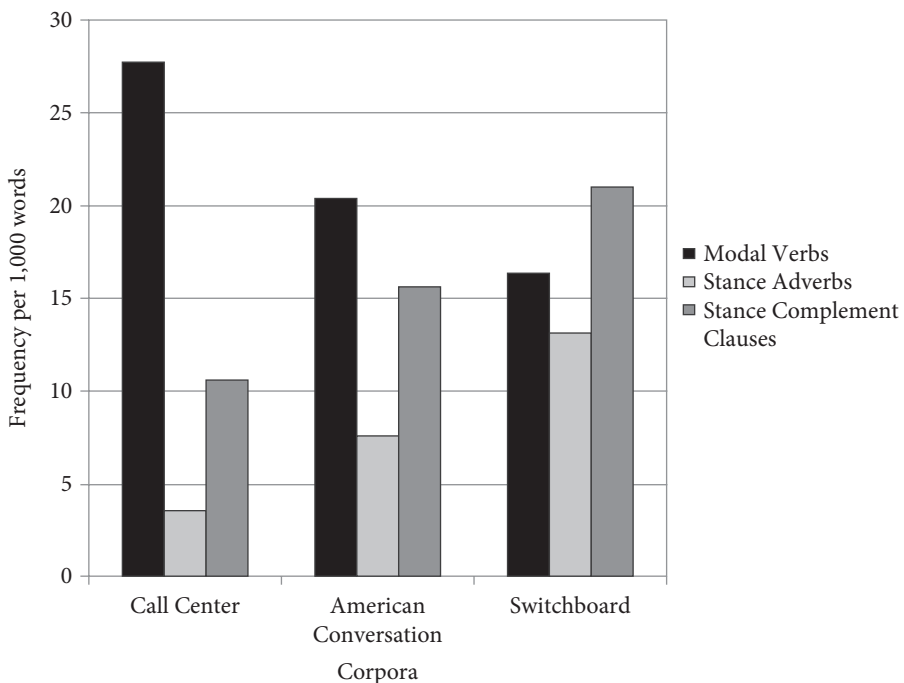


Figure 6.1. Major stance features across registers.

or *to*-clauses (especially in expressing personal opinions, e.g., “*I think that we should consider message from other religions and not be afraid of them when they are against, you know, western beliefs...that’s what I think*”) largely influence this distribution of stance markers across registers. Speakers in call center interactions have significantly more modal verbs and fewer stance adverbs and stance complement clauses than speakers in the other two registers of conversation in this study.

6.3.1 Modal verb classes across registers

Possibility, permission, and ability modal verbs (*can, could, may, might*) are the most commonly used modal verbs in the three registers of conversation as shown in Figure 6.2. In the Call Center corpus, the explicit expression of ability or permission (e.g., “*Yes, I can do that for you, no problem, sir.*” or “*..because you could return the meter, uhm, no cost.*”) is used frequently across accounts. There is a relatively high number of requests coming from both the agents and callers all throughout the service transactions. *Can* and *may* are frequently used in requests by speakers (e.g., “*May I have your name and account number, sir?*” or “*I don’t have my voice-IP, can you provide me with a new password?*”). The following short excerpts in Text Sample 6.1 illustrate the use of these possibility, permission, and ability modals in the sequences of technical support calls.

Text Sample 6.1 Possibility, permission, and ability modals as stance markers in call center interactions

Agent: Let me try if I **can** find that ticket number here using your uh b&t ticket [long pause] ok Joel we don’t have access to open your uh ticket

Caller: Uh what ma’am? Uh what do you mean?

Agent: We don’t have access to your ticket. So we **can’t** help you in that one the 6, the one that you gave the 660-660-660

Caller: You don’t have access to it you **can’t** pull it out?

Agent: I **can’t** pull out that one because, it’s possible you have an internal error

Caller: You **can’t** pull it out?

Agent: I **cannot**, sorry

–

Agent: Thank you, how **may** I uh help you today Susan?

Caller: Well I’ll tell you what we’ve got a postage meter that was uh it just kinda worked sporadically uhm it’s I **can** baby it along to get it to print me out some postage on occasion and then there are other times when it just won’t print at all, you have to like stick the envelope in like 5 or 6 times and get it in just the right spot, it’s the type of thing where you almost have to kick it to get it to work and if you’re lucky it might print and sometimes it won’t

Agent: Oh

Caller: You know what I'm saying? **Can** you fix it for me? [laughs]

Agent: Yes, ma'am, I **can**

Caller: You **can**? Awesome [laughs]

Agents and callers in the short excerpts above use modal verbs as stance markers in their turns. These modal verbs are utilized to express ability or permission, as part of a question, and also in the expression of requests. The agent's responses in the first excerpt illustrate what I referred to earlier as a potential cross-cultural indirect stance by many Filipino agents when denying service to the caller ("So, we *can't* help you in that one."). Instead of clearly and directly expressing this denial of service immediately to the caller, the agent provided an indirect explanation to the request ("Ok, Joel we don't have access to open your uh ticket."). As a result, this response was not immediately understood by the caller ("Uh what ma'am? Uh what do you mean?"), prompting the agent's more direct expression of denial of service in her next turn.

Figure 6.2 shows the distribution of modal verb classes across registers. The Call Center corpus has more possibility/permission/ability and prediction/volition modal verbs than the two comparison corpora. American Conversation has

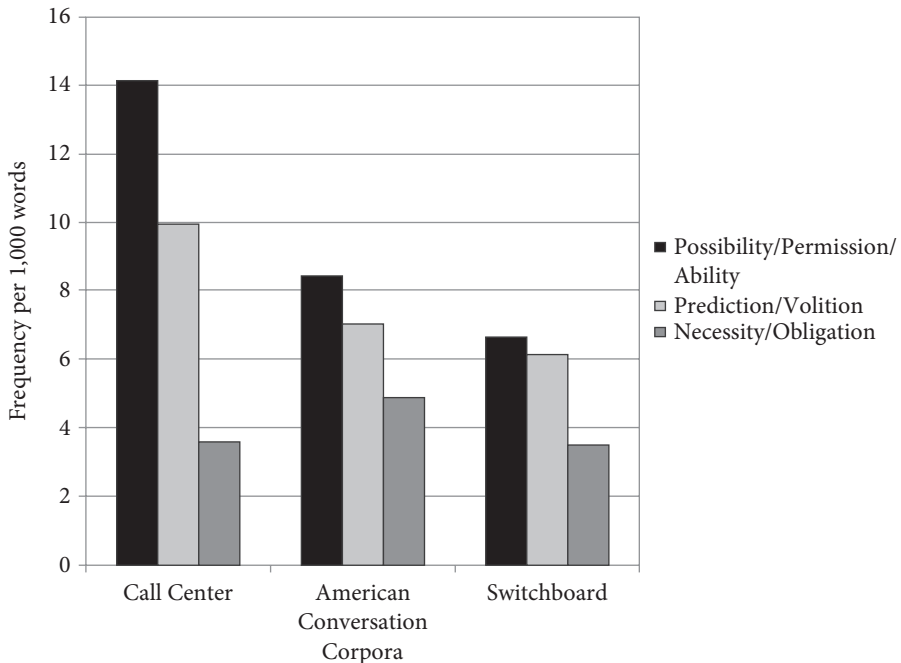


Figure 6.2. Modal verb classes across registers.

more necessity/obligation modal verbs than the Call Center and Switchboard corpora, although the differences are minimal.

Must, *should*, and *have to* are not frequently used in call center transactions compared to the modal verbs in the two other categories. These necessity/obligation modals are, however, used by the agents whenever they refer to account policies or service contracts (e.g., “...so you *must* return the meter, ma’am, to us within seven days to avoid paying the service fee..”). It is possible that the agents try to avoid using these necessity/obligation modals to lessen the predictable negative impact of invoking specific account policies, especially in difficult transactions. However, it is clear that callers complaining about products or services use these modal verbs to heighten the intensity of their message and, they hope, elicit an accommodating response from the agent. In spoken university registers, these necessity/obligation modals are also used infrequently by speakers but for institutional writing in universities, *must* and *should* account for 30 percent of all modal verbs used by writers to stress the importance of institutional rules and policies (Biber, 2006).

Prediction/volition modals are more common in the Call Center corpus than the other two corpora. *Will* and *would* are regularly used to explain future events to callers (e.g., “that *will* affect your machine’s performance if you continue using a different program..”) or procedures for troubleshooting in the transaction that the agents will follow (e.g., “Ok and just to inform you again, what we *will* do next is power cycle in a way, and when you purchase one or two ink cartridge uhm it *will* cost you for \$59.99 per piece but if you order 3 or more it’ll it *will* only be for \$120”).

The use of *would* in directives from the agents (e.g., “I *would* like you to..” or “*Td* have to ask you to unplug the modem..”) is common in the Call Center corpus. *Would* appears to have an indirect force and achieves a more polite way of giving directions to the callers. *Will* and *would* are also used repeatedly by the agents to confirm or clarify what the callers have said. This practice of confirming information is very common in accounts that handle order placement for products or services to make sure that the correct items or schedules are set. In Text Sample 6.2, the agent uses *will* or *would* to verify what the caller has specified in her order (“so that also *will* be in clear?”). This process of confirmation helps the agent in checking and organizing her electronic database of orders as well as in maintaining the flow of interaction while logging in orders.

Text Sample 6.2 Using *will* and *would* to confirm information from the caller

Agent: So this *will* be the uhm mold numbers so that *will* be the rack and save medium containers we have two colored choices in here we, clear and cosmo, what color do you like?

Caller: Clear

Agent: Clear, the clear color or the cosmo *would* be black for the container?

Caller: Yes, and then the 89 mold in clear also

Agent: So that also **will** be in clear?

Caller: Yes, yes, and by the way can I have, uhm the whole set of orders sent to the other address there?

Agent: Let me check here, ok?

6.3.2 Stance adverbs across registers

Much of the difference in the distribution of stance adverbs across registers as shown in Figure 6.3 is accounted for by the use of epistemic (certainty and likelihood) stance adverbs. The American Conversation and Switchboard corpora have significantly more frequencies of these stance adverbs than the Call Center corpus. The limited use of epistemic stance adverbs in call center transactions compared to the other two registers is an interesting result worthy of more detailed analysis in future related studies. It is possible that the focus of talk in call centers does not require more supporting words like stance adverbs (e.g., *actually*, *apparently*) to increase the intensity of the message or clarify information the way speakers attempt to stress their point in face-to-face conversation or

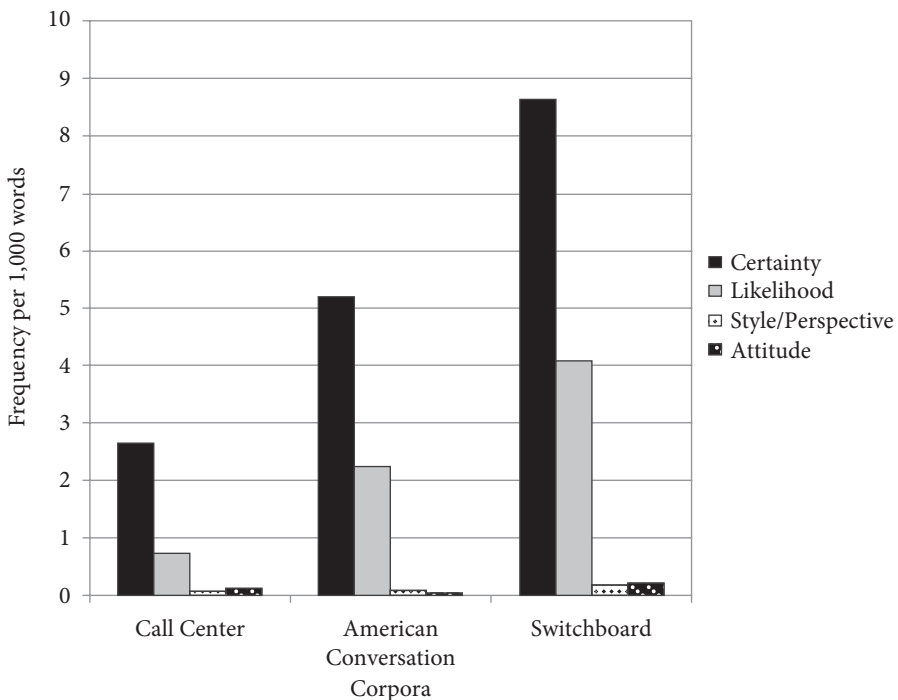


Figure 6.3. Stance adverbs across registers.

Switchboard discussions. The interactions from Switchboard have more stance adverbs across the four classes than both American Conversation and Call Center corpora. Style/Perspective and Attitude adverbs are not common in the three spoken registers.

The spontaneous discussions of a wide range of topics in Switchboard call for more personal opinions and elaboration of ideas from speakers. These telephone-based discussions often sound academic rather than casual primarily because of distance as well as the level of formality between the participants. There seems to be a need to further express epistemic stance through certainty and likelihood adverbs in supporting personal ideas or opinions as speakers discuss their assigned prompts. The short samples below illustrate the use of these stance adverbs in the Switchboard corpus which generally contrasts with the limited occurrences of these same features in call center interactions.

Text Sample 6.3 Common use of stance adverbs in Switchboard

<xces:u>0043: when you **certainly** can speak their language uh and there are problems with you know the wet back problem you know for everyone **certainly** knows what we're talking about when say wet back problem and then we should somehow</xces:u>

<xces:u>0044: yes, **obviously** that's the case, I agree with that, uh, **obviously** they know what it is although I wondered what **exactly** it was when I heard about it</xces:u>

<xces:u>0043: yes, uh-huh?

—

<xces:u>0042: and **certainly** you know knew that problem knew you know knew about apartment houses that would have eight or ten or twelve people living in them sleeping in the same bed in shifts and all that</xces:u>

<xces:u>0043: **exactly** yeah

<xces:u>0042: uh-huh, yeah

<xces:u>0043: **exactly**

—

<xces945> just so **amazingly** intelligent and educated people. I mean they uh were **amazingly** empowered by that system. In my mind I mean.

<xces946> that is right. Perhaps we can say that we can also be empowered by a similar system, although<xces:u>

<xcess945> yeah, although, I don't know, **possibly**, uh<xces:u>

<xcess946> it is possible I'm pretty sure

<xcess945> **possibly**

One might suspect that call center interactions demand a greater frequency of stance adverbs (especially certainty and likelihood) from both agents and callers because these speakers may need to explicitly express more direct or accurate information during the transactions. However, as noted above, interactions in American Conversation and Switchboard have significantly more certainty and likelihood stance adverbs than call center interactions. It is not easy at this point, given the distributional data of stance adverbs, to identify the specific factor or context primarily influencing the use of these stance markers in the Call Center corpus relative to American Conversation and Switchboard corpora. The most common class of stance adverbs in the Call Center corpus is certainty (*actually, definitely, obviously*) followed by likelihood (*maybe, probably, kind of*). Both style and attitude stance adverbs are rarely used in the Call Center corpus.

6.3.3 Stance complement clauses across registers

Figure 6.4 illustrates the distribution of the six classes of stance complement clauses across registers. These *that* or *to*-complement clauses are controlled by

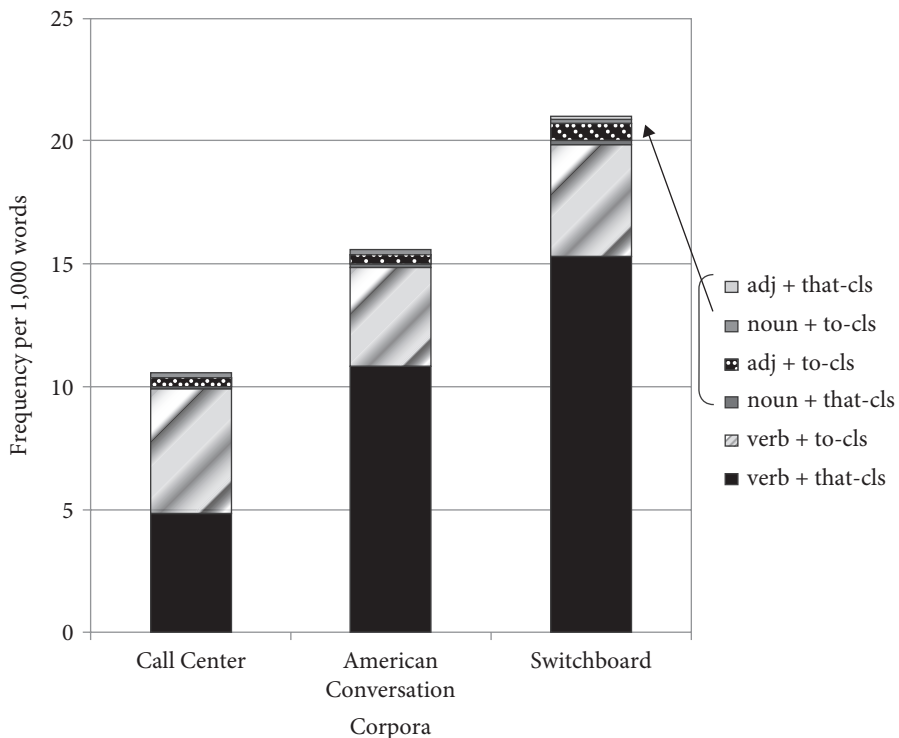


Figure 6.4. Stance complement clauses across registers.

verbs, adjectives, and nouns. As in the frequency of stance adverbs in 6.3.2, the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora outnumber the Call Center corpus in the combined frequency of stance complement clauses. Again, speakers in Switchboard interactions make use of the greatest number of grammatical stance markers in this section.

The most commonly used structure of stance complement clauses in the three registers is stance verb + *that*-clause as shown in the excerpts in Text Sample 6.4. Speakers across corpora show limited use of stance complement clause structures controlled by adjectives and nouns. The general usage of epistemic stance, this time through certainty (e.g., *know*) and likelihood (e.g., *believe*, *think*) verbs, is maintained in the distributional data of stance complement clauses. Attitude verbs (e.g., *expect*, *hope*) controlling *that*-clauses are also relatively common in the three registers.

Text Sample 6.4 Examples of verb + *that*-clauses across registers

AMERICAN CONVERSATION:

<?> I **believe that** uh, <unclear> performed a similar experiment can use it, uh, beyond touch.

Because I **believe that**, uh, actually, he, they know how controlling that is important.

<?> oh yeah? I sure **think that** people now pay attention to details like that.

I remember my mom telling me about those things in California, uh or somewhere when uh <unclear>

<?> Oh yeah

SWITCHBOARD:

<1446> mhm. mhm. Right. Yeah. Well let's **hope that** it's the beginning of a rapid recovery then, yeah. Yeah. <nv_giggle> Yeah. [Okay]

<1447> yeah, **hope that** this will be much much better

<1446> I know

CALL CENTER:

Agent: Ma'am, I **think that** it's not going to get there by July 17th because it's, they don't deliver during the break

Caller: Oh, is that so?

Agent: Yes ma'am because they close, are closed during holidays

Caller: But they, didn't they have to send it earlier?

Agent: Uh, ma'am, I **think that** they count starting that Friday

Caller: Oh

Stance verb + *to*-clauses are more frequent in the Call Center corpus. Verbs of desire (e.g., *like* or *want*) are the most common verb types controlling *to*-clauses across

registers (Biber, 2006) and especially more common in call center transactions. Verbs such as *try* (verbs of causation/effort) and the probability verb *seem* controlling *to*-clauses are also used frequently in the Call Center corpus. Text Sample 6.5 shows typical occurrences of these verb + *to*-clauses in call center interactions.

Text Sample 6.5 Examples of verb + *to*-clauses in the Call Center corpus

Caller: Yes, I would **like to** add minutes to my uh, friggin' phone card and my also my husband's

Agent: Oh, so you don't **like to** add over the automated voice system ma'am?

Caller: Yeah, that's what I need

Agent: Ok, uh

–

Caller: I can't **seem to** get the temperature to cool down, and I'm saying maybe I'm doing something wrong, now it would be cool at night, but it won't be cool when I really need it

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: What's wrong with it?

–

Caller: Is this a strange error message?

Agent: Uh-huh? Ok I see that's error 23 ok well uhm here's what we'll **try to** do ma'am we'll **try to** isolate here coz you're missing programs is dependent on your internet explorer program in your computer so if your internet program wouldn't work that means your MSN program is having a problem so we'll **try to** isolate first ok? I understand ma'am that this is important to you I'll **try to** do my best to help you out now Ms. White. I need you to close all windows right now and then open up your internet explorer [long pause] ok it's the letter e colored blue icon. I just need to know ma'am are you able to open a website or a homepage using internet explorer?

6.4 Distribution of stance features across internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus

This section illustrates the distribution of stance features in the internal speaker groups of the Call Center corpus. The use of grammatical stance may be initially influenced by the callers' overall message when initiating the transaction. Both speakers are then positioned to employ stance markers in their personal evaluations

of issues following the prevailing tone and seriousness of the call. The agents' level of performance and experience, as well as the categories of accounts, also potentially contribute to the distribution of stance markers discussed in this chapter.

6.4.1 Stance features across role and gender

There are differences in the use of stance features across agents' and callers' discourses in the Call Center corpus as shown in Figure 6.5. Agents have considerably more modal verbs per 1,000 words (31.433; callers = 21.145) but fewer stance complement clauses (8.761) than the callers (12.423). The frequency of stance adverbs used by agents and callers is similar (and these stance adverbs are not very frequently used). However, agents also use slightly more stance adverbs (3.832) than callers (3.411). Speakers in call center interactions have relatively more modal verbs as stance markers than stance adverbs and stance complement clauses.

Comparisons between speakers' gender show that only the use of modal verbs by male and female agents is slightly different in the overall distributional data of stance features. Female agents use more modal verbs (32.826) in the expression of stance than their male counterparts (30.026). Female agents also have slightly

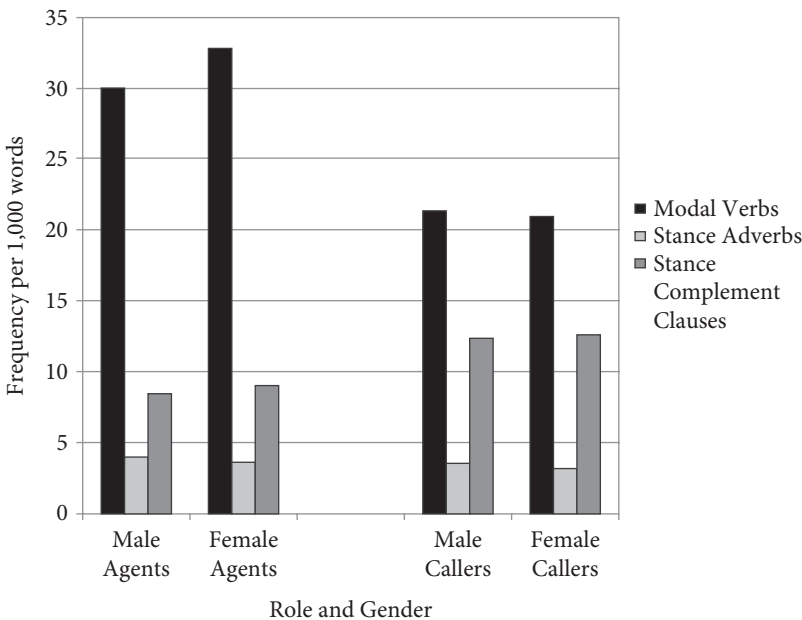


Figure 6.5. Major stance features by role and gender.

more stance complement clauses than male agents. Male and female callers have very similar frequencies of stance features across the three grammatical stance categories. Male callers have slightly more modal verbs and stance adverbs while female callers have more stance complement clauses. In general, there appears to be no clear gender-based pattern in the use of stance markers by speakers in the Call Center corpus.

6.4.2 Stance features by agents' performance evaluation scores

It appears that grammatically marked stance is an indicator of agents' quality of service and language ability in outsourced call centers. Figure 6.6 illustrates that there is a small but highly consistent, linear increase in the frequency of the three lexico/syntactic stance markers distributed across the groups of agents identified by their performance evaluation scores. Agents receiving high performance scores make use of more stance features than those from Mid and Low performance evaluation groups.

The high frequency of stance features by High-performing call center agents suggests that the explicit expression of feelings and assessments contributes to the effective delivery of service in call center transactions. Less successful transactions

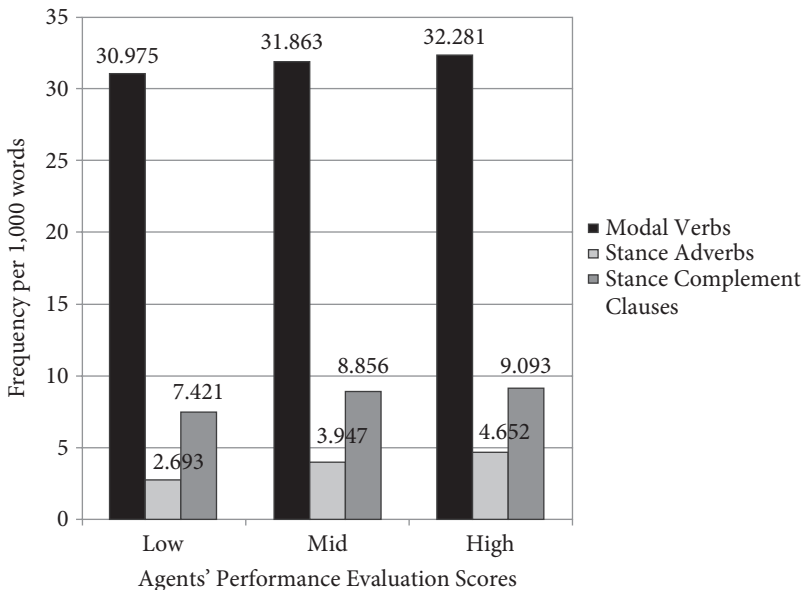


Figure 6.6. Major stance features by agents' performance evaluation scores.

during which the agents failed to exhibit sufficient mastery of information and service procedures are likely to have limited or misdirected expressions of attitudes and assessments. Agents in the Low-performance group receive more caller clarification discussed in Chapter 10. On the other hand, High-performing agents who are able to clearly express their feelings and assessments of customer issues perhaps relate to their callers well, create the perception of competence, and are able to avoid conflicts and miscommunication. By explicitly expressing personal feelings and assessments, agents are able to show personal involvement in the interactions. These stance markers also allow the agents to control the flow of transactions and answer specific questions directly. Agents with high performance and linguistic evaluation scores are also potentially able to use appropriate prosody in their message matching the expectations of American callers. The excerpt below illustrates the use of some stance markers by an agent with high performance evaluation scores.

Text Sample 6.6 Use of grammatical stance markers by an agent with high performance score

Agent: Alright **actually** uh Sharon with your kind of error message, the high value [interruption]

Caller: Uh-huh?

Agent: **In most cases**, it's just a warning that tells you that your meter cannot **actually** accept, it's, they're not used to accepting large amounts of money over \$1 so it's **kinda** like a question telling you 'are you sure this is the amount that you want to be printing?' All you **should** do is press enter twice to override that

Caller: Oh really?

Agent: You don't **have to** add postage or anything, that's just a warning that tells you, coz most of our prices that we normally run are \$0.39 and \$0.63 so it's not used to being printed like large amounts of money which is the high uh dollar

Caller: Ok, but I think I tried that and it didn't work, can you hold on just a moment?

Agent: Sure, go ahead and try that, ok?

Caller: What again?

Agent: You can go ahead and try that

Caller: Alright, thanks [long pause] I'm glad, I'm glad you're not looking at me right now coz my face is so red [laughs]

Agent: [laughs] That's ok, it's uh I know it looks like complicated but it's, it **should** be very easy

Caller: Right, well the first time that with the inspection coming on too I was like why is it that high?

Agent: I see

Caller: Oh no and now I ordered probably \$1000 worth of postage I didn't need

Agent: That's alright, **actually** uhm Sharon with inspection required or inspection due that's alright too coz I know that you had put in a large amount of money right now I'm, I'm **actually** looking at it in your account, so what's going to happen is with inspection due or required, it's just a way of our meter telling you that you haven't refilled for quite a long time and we're **in fact** just checking up on your account to see if the meter is not lost or stolen

Caller: I see

Agent: You **can** call, I'm going to give you a number when it happens again and you still have a large amount of money on your meter, you **can** just clear it out without adding uh without adding money on it, coz you don't need to add money not unless you do need the you uh you do need it

Caller: Ok

Agent: And uhm if you need it **have to** [interruption]

Caller: Ok, I, I

The agent in the excerpt above is able to clearly explain the issue to the caller with the help of the highlighted stance markers. The agent shows good mastery of support procedures and necessary ability to control the transaction. There is strong rapport between the speakers in this sample call and the caller appears to be satisfied with the agent's level of support. The agent has some necessity/obligation modals and certainty stance adverbs, especially *actually*. *Actually* used as certainty stance adverb is repeated over by the agent in the excerpt above (e.g., "I'm *actually* looking at it in your account") and is very common in the turns of many Filipino call center agents. In some instances, however, *actually* may not necessarily reflect its intended epistemic stance meaning as briefly mentioned in the MD analysis in Chapter 4. Some agents may use *actually* as an insert or discourse marker to maintain the flow of interaction in recalling data during quick oral production of turns.

6.4.3 Stance features by agents' experience with current account

As shown in Figure 6.7, there is no consistent pattern indicating the influence of agents' experience with their current account on the use of grammatical stance markers. However, both groups with less than two years of service experience (Less than 1 Year = 31.291; 1 Year to 2 Years = 32.359) use more modal verbs than the Over 2 Years group (29.854). The Over 2 Years group slightly uses more stance adverbs and stance complement clauses than the other two groups. In general, stance complement clauses are used with similar frequency by agents across experience categories.

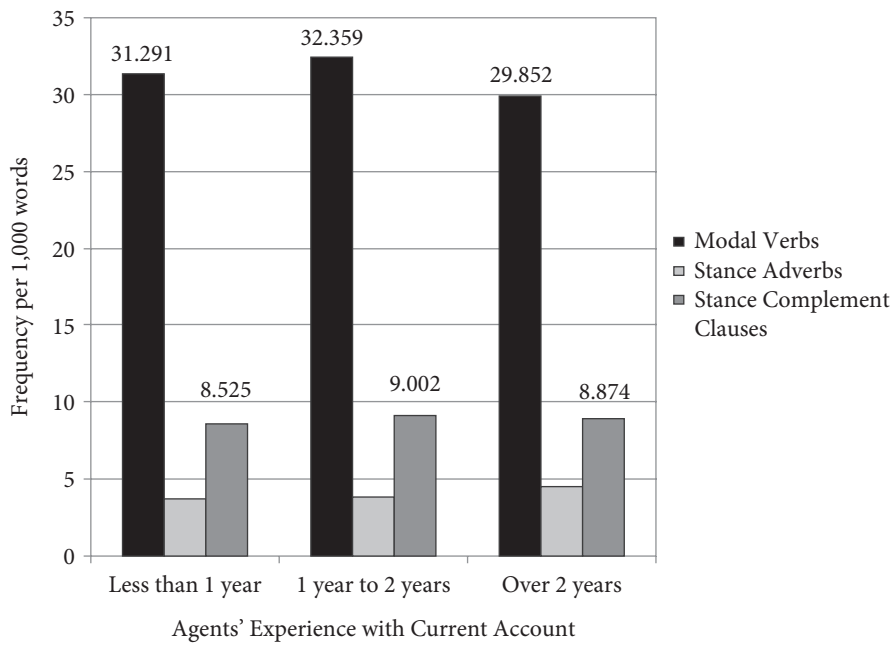


Figure 6.7. Major stance features by agents' experience with current account.

It is surprising that experience and familiarity with common service protocols across accounts do not consistently influence the use of more stance markers in the Call Center corpus as is the case with the agents' quality of performance scores. It is possible that experienced agents value immediate completion of support more than establishing personalized service through explicit expression of stance. In addition, these experienced agents may focus more on accuracy and limited repetitions of chunks that often feature stance markers (e.g., the use of possibility or permission modal verbs in questions and requests).

It is not possible, given the current data, to interpret the role of experience in the use of modal verbs and stance adverbs by Filipino agents. The lesser frequency of modal verbs in the Over 2 Years group compared to the other two experience groups indicates that agents who have been serving their accounts for more than two years are less direct in expressing ability, necessity, or volition in their messages to the callers. However, these experienced agents use slightly more stance adverbs that suggest more certainty and likelihood stance meanings in their turns.

6.4.4 Stance features across categories of accounts

Different account categories illustrate variations in the use of stance features in the Call Center corpus. Inquiry-based accounts have fewer stance features than

troubleshooting and purchase/order accounts. In Inquire accounts, there are fewer requests for additional caller information such as credit card or telephone numbers. As noted earlier, these requests usually increase the frequency of modal verbs in agents' turns. Purchase/order accounts have more modal verbs and stance complement clause structures than the two other account categories. On the other hand, troubleshooting accounts have slightly more stance adverbs than the other account categories in the corpus. Agents and callers potentially use more epistemic stance adverbs to make sure that the transfer of information is clear and to guarantee that speakers understand the problems completely as they work together to fix machines and equipment.

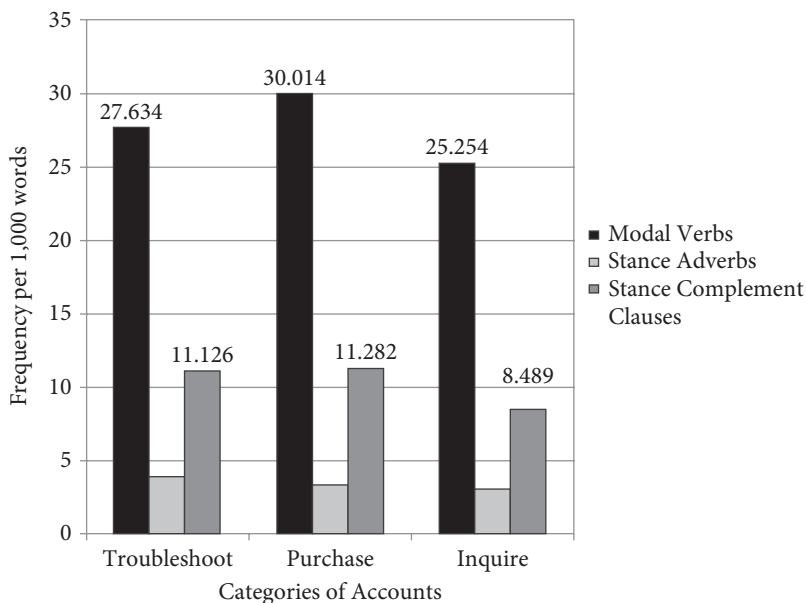


Figure 6.8. Major stance features by categories of accounts.

Modal verbs are common in purchase/order accounts because of the typical flow of question/request and response sequences in these transactions. For example, in processing an order, agents usually ask for credit card or payment information from the callers in their requests following a repeated use of *can I* (or *may I*) as shown in Text Sample 6.7 below. *Can*, *could*, and *may* are used interchangeably by agents as they ask for additional information from the callers.

Text Sample 6.7 Modal verbs in a purchase/order account transaction

Agent: Thank you, and **can** I have the name of the account holder please?

Caller: [gave card holder's name]

Agent: Thank you so much, Ms. [caller's name], and, **can** I have the, and you will be using your card number, I mean your, your Visa card number again?

Caller: Yes

Agent: **May** I have the Visa Card number please?

Caller: [gave card number]

Agent: **Can** I have the card security number at the back?

Caller: [xxx]

Agent: Thank you, and **can** I have your billing address please?

Caller: [gave billing address]

Agent: Ok thank you

6.5 Chapter summary

This chapter followed Biber's (2006) framework in the study of grammatical markings of stance in spoken registers. I looked at the distribution of the three major stance groups: (1) stance modal and semi-modal verbs, (2) stance adverbs, and (3) complement clauses controlled by nouns, verbs, and adjectives. The variation in the frequencies of these stance markers appeared to be largely defined by the types of interactions and especially the communicative tasks in the three registers compared in this study. Call center interactions had more stance features using modal and semi-modal verbs than the two other registers as these markers were extensively used in accomplishing specific goals such as requests or clarification of information, in addition to the typical functions of these markers (e.g., permission, ability, obligation, etc.). Stance adverbs showing attitudes and expressions of certainty, style, and likelihood were found to be more common in Switchboard and face-to-face American conversations. Based on the distribution and typical functional classifications of these features, I believed that the relationships between speakers and the topics discussed in both Switchboard and American Conversation corpora provided more opportunities for the expression of attitudes and personal opinions in reaction to an assertion or idea.

There were differences in the distribution of stance features used by agents and callers, male and female agents and callers, agents in experience and performance evaluation score groups, and categories of accounts. In these call center interactions, modal and semi-modal verbs were used extensively compared to stance

adverbs and stance complement clauses. Female agents generally used more stance features than male agents, and these stance features appeared to be indicators of quality of service as High-performing agents consistently used higher frequencies of stance markers than Mid and Low-performing agents.

Politeness and respect markers

7.1 Introduction

Politeness in conversation is generally perceived as a manifestation of proper social decorum, good manners, and respect. Politeness finds expression in a variety of ways through language, gestures and other non-verbal signals. All of these modes of expression are affected and defined to varying degrees by the contextual factors characterizing the interaction, as well as the particular culture within which the interactions are occurring (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Blum-Kulka, House-Edmondson, & Kasper, 1989). The main influence of politeness in conversation may come from the recognition of roles or power relationships between speakers. In addition, politeness is used to make sure that parties acknowledge good or appropriate behavior (Beeching, 2002; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003). In the business world, which is highly dependent upon building positive relationships between parties, politeness is used as an integral part of communication strategies that allow participants to gain trust and respect with the ultimate, if not entirely altruistic, goal of selling products and/or services. Common linguistic expressions of politeness are often utilized to make all the parties relaxed and comfortable with one another (Ide, 1989; Kasper, 1990). In selling products and services or requesting information in service encounters, politeness is an important part of the interaction and, ideally, often characterizes the prevailing tone of the interaction. The specific objectives of the participants generally require them to use polite language and paralanguage in order to successfully engage the other party in the conversation and achieve their respective goals.

The various expressions of politeness are highly culturally defined (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Speakers coming from different cultural backgrounds may not immediately share similar understanding and expectations of polite markers and gestures. It often happens that cultural standards in one society defining the expression of politeness are considered unusual, strange, or even rude in another. Hence, it takes some level of familiarity with the cultural norms and practices of people from different backgrounds in order to use appropriate polite markers and correctly interpret speakers' meaning or intentions during communication. For example, the mainstream society in the Philippines is extremely polite and

respectful; some people including those in the predominantly Tagalog-speaking regions make extensive use in communication of defined respect markers. Age, social status and education, and related social variables such as types of job (e.g., doctors, teachers, lawyers, and elected officials are highly respected) define the use of politeness formula and respect markers in conversation. Filipinos are very respectful of guests or visitors, including foreign tourists. This generally polite behavior of Filipinos in these situations may not be congruent with behavioral norms for these kinds of contexts in the U.S. Filipinos are proud of their hospitality and much of this accommodating behavior is expressed through language. There are various respect markers and polite words and phrases in Tagalog that do not translate readily into English; however, Filipinos do their best to compensate for these non-translating markers with the use of suprasegmental features of speech, many of which might seem puzzling or utterly incomprehensible to American listeners.

Politeness in spoken interaction, covering a range of contexts and speaker demographics, has been enthusiastically explored by linguists over the past several years. For example, some studies (e.g., Lakoff, 1976; Tannen, 1987; Beeching, 2002; Mills, 2003; Locher, 2004) have shown that women are more likely to use politeness markers and speech-act formulae than men. Demographic factors such as age and educational background of speakers are also found to influence the use of politeness markers in formal interactions such as job interviews (White, 1994). In addition, power relationships based upon factors such as nationality and race (e.g., Watts, 1991; Berger, 1994; Diamond, 1996) potentially determine the use of politeness markers in communications between and among multi-cultural speakers. The variations in the frequency of use of politeness and respect markers are also found to be influenced by social variables such as social distance and imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005).

Various studies also examine the use of politeness markers in professional, cross-cultural interaction. The analysis of polite discourse in the cross-cultural workplace (e.g., Bargiela-Chiappini & Harris, 1997; Drew & Sorjonen, 1997; Sarangi & Roberts, 1999) continues to illustrate how speakers make linguistic adjustments in using and understanding a range of politeness formulae. Hierarchies and asymmetries in the workplace, especially those involving different cultural backgrounds, are perceived to influence the extent and nature of polite language and behavior of interactants in these situations. Specific politeness techniques such as hedging and using euphemisms and tag questions add to the common lexical devices and specialized morphology (e.g., using verb forms for polite discourse) employed by speakers across cultures in showing deference, respect, and recognition of roles and social status (Beeching, 2002).

7.2 Politeness in service encounters and call center interactions

Politeness and respect markers are commonly used in service encounters by both the server and the servee. These markers are used together with appropriate suprasegmental features of speech (e.g., intonation, volume) to express appreciation for service or patronage. In face-to-face service encounters, for example in a coffee shop, it is very common for customers to order coffee using polite request markers and phrases such as *please* or *can I have...* and then give polite acknowledgment of service afterwards (e.g., *thanks* or *thank you*) as shown in Text Sample 7.1. The server also matches these markers with polite responses (e.g., *no problem, you're welcome*) during the short transaction. In these types of face-to-face service encounters, the roles of the server and the servee are clearly established, affecting the linguistic choices of these participants.

Text Sample 7.1 Politeness markers in a service encounter

Server: How can I help you today?

Servee: Yeah, **can I have** regular coffee **please**? Uh, room for cream

Server: Regular coffee, sure [talks to another server] make it, uh, did you say large, grande?

Servee: Oh, I'm **sorry**, grade, **please**. It's cold in here

Server: Yeah, we don't have, uhm it's really chilly today. That would be, uh, a dollar fifty

Servee: Dollar fifty

Server: [long pause] here you go, grande coffee

Servee: **Thanks**

Server: **Welcome, thank you**, have a good day

Servee: You too

As in face-to-face service encounters, politeness and respect markers are also expected in call center service transactions. The nature of business transactions in customer service defines the social roles of customers (callers) and the servers (agents) and, in turn, perceptions and impositions related to the use of polite terms in maintaining the transaction. Agents are constantly coached about the value of maintaining customer loyalty by providing efficient service and establishing rapport during service interactions. In the process, agents employ linguistic strategies that they perceive will satisfy the customers, especially during problematic calls. The communicative purpose of participants is also very clear in call centers: callers call to ask for information or request service, while the agents are expected to provide the necessary action or solution. However, another layer of power relationships between customers and agents is evident in these transactions because of general business practices in telephone-based customer service. Customers have higher service expectations and often demand instantaneous solutions to their

problems. Because most customer calls relate to a product or service that they have purchased, these customers have limited tolerance for failed support or service or any response other than an immediate solution to their problem. Aside from the specific complaint precipitating the call, customers also often have additional, general complaints about products and services during the course of the interaction, thereby adding to the tension and potentially adversely affecting the tenor of the interaction and the use of language by both participants. It is up to the agents to use linguistic strategies that refocus the purpose of the interaction and lead to successful resolution of the specific problem which was the primary purpose of the transaction in the first place. To accomplish this, a good call center agent is able to maintain an effective problem-solving focus throughout the transaction and provide not only clear information and an accurate solution, but as importantly, gain the callers' trust by using polite and respectful language matched with effective paralinguistic devices in discourse (D'Ausilio, 1998; Granerød, 2004).

As agents in outsourced call centers, Filipinos bring with them their cultural background, including the use of these polite and respect markers in communicating with their American callers. As mentioned earlier, Filipinos have traditionally maintained a warm and hospitable behavior in service encounters, especially those involving foreign customers or guests in hotels and restaurants and other tourist areas in the Philippines. Most Filipinos in the service industry are genuinely engaging and willing to help and serve. This Filipino trait has been regarded as one of the advantages of outsourced call centers in the Philippines over countries like India or China, but, ironically, as has been mentioned, it also has the potential for adverse effects in cross-cultural transactions. It is apparent, nevertheless, that Filipinos value respecting their customers and making the necessary accommodations to maintain customer loyalty.

The inherent power of American callers/customers in outsourced service transactions is apparent both to the Filipino agents and the American customers. American customers have maintained high service expectations over the years and are usually vocal about their ineffective call center support experiences. Filipino agents, on the other hand, know that a failed transaction and a consequent customer complaint for bad service could affect their employment with the call center. As a result, there is a more evident delineation of roles and expectations between the customers and agents in outsourced call centers in the Philippines. There are manifestations of the conscious effort of Filipino agents to be very friendly, polite, and respectful. At times, the frequency of polite and respect markers and apologies expressed by the agents seems "incongruent" with the extent of the problem raised by the caller and/or the caller's own apparent urgency or annoyance over the problem. The paralinguistic devices in the agents' turns for potentially troublesome transactions also tend to not match the American callers' expectations in tone and tenor of discourse, showing "disconnects" between the agent and the caller. Traces of cultural influence in tone, backchannels,

and sequence of pauses in agents' turns are evident, especially in handling irate callers. Likewise, for easy or low-pressure transactions, most Filipino agents still maintain a friendly, accommodating tone with the constant use of polite and respectful words and phrases. The nature of American callers' reactions to these communicative devices employed by Filipino agents is not clearly established yet in research. In the first 10 years of outsourced call centers in the Philippines (1997 to 2007), surveys about American customers' reaction to Filipino politeness are still limited.

7.3 Politeness and respect markers included in the present study

To investigate the linguistic expression of politeness and respect in outsourced call centers, the present chapter explores the distribution of lexical politeness and respect markers (e.g., *please*, *thank you*, *sir*) across speaker categories and registers. As expected, there is a very high frequency of these politeness and respect markers used by Filipino call center agents and American customers in service transactions. Initial survey of *please*, *thank you*, and the use of titles and respect markers *sir/ma'am* reported in Chapter 4 indicates that Filipinos prefer to structure their questions and requests with the constant use of these features. American callers also have relatively high frequencies of these markers compared to speakers in other registers of conversation. It is, therefore, relevant to study the distributional data of politeness and respect markers of Filipino agents and American callers in the corpus and identify variations across other speaker categories. It is not clear at the moment whether American customers do or do not prefer frequent use of politeness and respect markers in call center transactions. This chapter, however, examines the relationship between the frequencies of these polite and respect markers and the success or failure of the transactions based on agents' performance scores. By conducting this analysis, I intend to establish whether or not the use of explicit polite and respectful language common in outsourced call centers in the Philippines is an indicator of service quality. For this book, politeness and respect markers are grouped into four sub-categories:

1. Polite speech-act formulae (*thank you*, *thanks*, *appreciate*)
2. Polite requests (*please*)
3. Apologies (*sorry*, *apologize*, *pardon*)
4. Respect markers (*ma'am*, *sir*, *Mr.*, *Ms.*, titles)

7.3.1 Polite speech-act formulae

Polite speech-act formulae include the use of *thank you*, *thanks*, and *appreciate* (e.g., "I appreciate your help") by speakers in the internal and external text categories

of the study. Speakers use *thanks/thank you/appreciate* in interactions generally to show appreciation or express gratitude for service, favor, or another person's kindness or particular action. *Thanks* or *thank you* is common in code-switching in Tagalog conversation and is more and more used, especially by younger speakers, in casual conversation than the Tagalog equivalent, *salamat*. It appears that *thanks* and *salamat* are interchangeable in conversations between Filipino speakers and have very similar uses and applications.

In call centers, both agents and callers are positioned to show appreciation during the course of the transactions. Many agents use *thanks/thank you* in their opening scripts (e.g., "*Thank you for calling XX Company, can I have your name and phone number?*") to indicate that they are prepared to provide service to the callers and are appreciative of the customers' business. Agents also constantly use these markers in their turns to acknowledge a response or action from their customers. Customers, on the other hand, may or may not explicitly use *thanks* or *thank you*, as their felt need to show explicit appreciation of agents' support often depends on the success or failure of the transaction. In situations where customers are complaining about a product or service, polite speech-act formulae coming from the customers are infrequent.

7.3.2 Polite requests

Polite requests make use of *please* in speaker turns. All occurrences of *please* are counted in the analysis of requests coming from agents and callers or speakers in the two comparative registers. Polite requests expressed through modal verbs, in part discussed in Chapter 6 (*Stance*) (e.g., "*..may I get your phone number?*", "*..could you give me..*" or "*..can I have your..*") are not included in the analysis for this chapter but are very common in the speakers' phrasings for requests. *Please* as a marker of polite request is commonly used in spoken registers and frequently used in service encounters (Biber et al., 1999). Speakers use *please* in requests to lessen the impact of an imposition, recognize the value of another person's help, or maintain good relationships during interactions (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2005).

In both Tagalog and English, imposition is very evident without the use of *please* in requests. As in the U.S., Filipino children are taught to be polite when asking for help or requesting information from their parents or siblings at home. The Tagalog equivalent of *please*, *paki*, or its variations works very similarly as *please* and is also commonly used in casual conversations. However, because of frequent code-switching, *please* (in English) is also often used in Tagalog conversations. Polite requests could also be expressed through paralinguistic devices not using *please*. This, however, is more common in face-to-face interaction than in call center transactions. In the Call Center corpus, it is clear that even irate callers use *please* in requesting help during the call.

7.3.3 Apologies

The class of apologies in this book includes *sorry* (e.g., “*I’m sorry for the inconvenience, sir.*”), *apologize* (e.g., “*I apologize for the delay.*”), *pardon* (e.g., “*Pardon me, could you repeat that.*”), and *excuse* (e.g., “*Excuse me, I did not hear you.*”). These markers of apologies are commonly used for various purposes by both the agents and callers in transactions. Aside from actual apologies (e.g., “*I’m sorry, that was the wrong number*”), agents often apologize on behalf of the company for defective products or faulty service. These markers of apologies included in statements such as, “*I apologize for the problem, but don’t worry, I’m here to help you,*” are common in the agents’ turns in an attempt to appease the callers and show personalized customer support. In many instances, agents memorize these statements or have scripts to guide them as to the right structure of apologies expected by callers in their accounts. Callers typically use apologies to request a repeat of information (e.g., “*Sorry, say that again, please.*”).

Like the other politeness and respect markers above, *sorry* and *excuse* are used very frequently in code-switched Tagalog conversation. These two forms of apologies are actually used more regularly in casual conversation than their Tagalog equivalents and largely accepted as part of the Tagalog vocabulary. *Pardon* and *apologize* in code-switching are not as common in most conversations in Tagalog.

7.3.4 Respect markers

Respect markers include the use of *sir* or *ma’am* and titles such as *Mr.* or *Ms.* (or *Dr.* for doctor whenever the caller explicitly referred to him or herself as such during the transaction). As previously mentioned, these respect markers are used very frequently in customer service in the Philippines and by Filipino agents in call center transactions, as shown in previous chapters, especially Chapter 4. Different accounts have specific practices governing the use of respect markers; some require the agents to use the callers’ first names, thus eliminating the use of *ma’am* or *sir* or titles when referring to the caller. However, the distribution of these respect markers across categories of accounts discussed later in this chapter indicates that Filipino agents continue to use these respect markers even when account practices specify ways to address callers. Respect markers are found to be more frequent in high-pressure accounts or with agents handling angry callers.

American callers also use respect markers in the transactions, and there appear to be regional differences in their usage. Americans coming from the southeastern U.S. are known to use more *ma’ams* or *sirs* in spoken discourse than those from western states. However, the analysis in this study did not include the callers’ geographic location to show Americans’ use of respect markers based on geographic region. In typical service encounters in the U.S., respect markers are not

generally expected from both parties. In some instances, the use of respect markers indicates formality and social distance between parties. It would be interesting to compare the use of these respect markers by Filipino, Indian, or American call center agents to see if cultural backgrounds contribute to the frequency of respect markers in call center discourse.

Variants of a common Tagalog respect marker *po* or *opo* given to an older interlocutor or customers in face-to-face service encounters are often replaced by *ma'am* or *sir* in English by Filipinos. In English-based interaction with a tourist, for example, Filipinos may feel that they are being disrespectful of the guest or customer without *ma'am* or *sir* in their turns. This perception potentially influences many Filipino agents in outsourced call centers to use more respect markers in their requests or questions.

7.4 Politeness and respect markers across registers

Figure 7.1 illustrates the distribution of politeness and respect markers across registers. It is apparent that the interactions in outsourced call centers have extremely

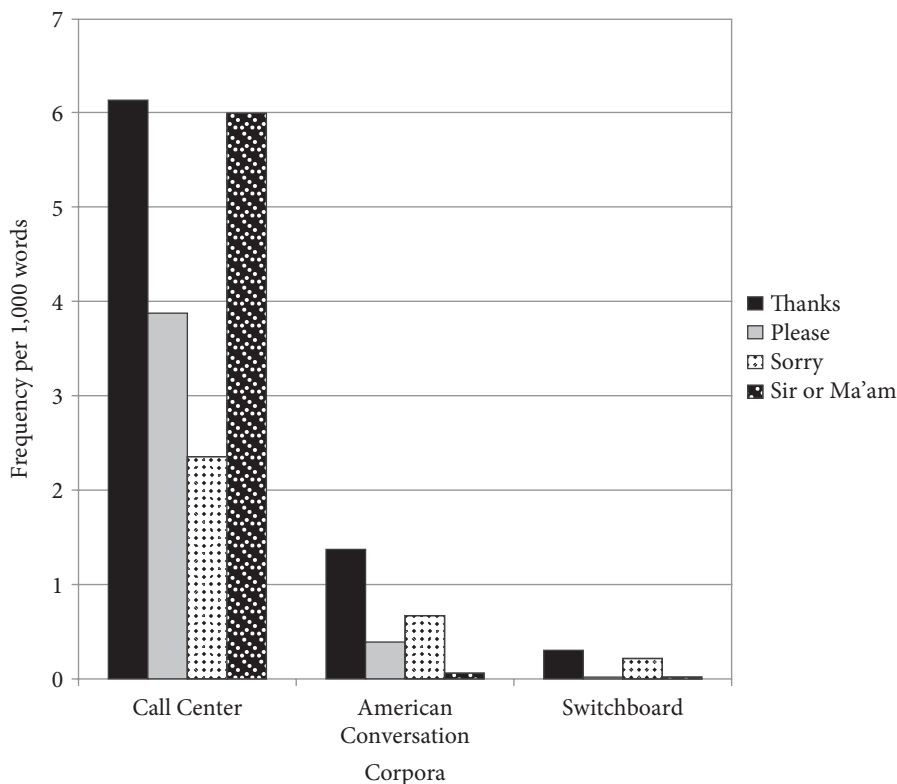


Figure 7.1. Politeness and respect markers across registers.

high frequencies of the four classes of politeness and respect markers compared to the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora. These markers obviously distinguish interactions in the register of outsourced customer service from other sub-registers of conversation. Polite speech-act formulae (*thanks*, *thank you*, and *appreciate*) are the most common polite or respect markers in the three registers. *Please* is also very common in call center interactions, used sporadically in face-to-face interaction, and rarely used in spontaneous telephone speech. Respect markers (*ma'am* and *sir*) are very common in the Call Center corpus but very rare in the other two corpora.

Speakers in the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora have used *thanks/thank you/appreciate* and *sorry/apologize* in their exchanges more than the other classes of politeness or respect markers. As expected, there is very limited use of *ma'am* or *sir* in the two corpora and these markers are not used to show explicit respect for the other interlocutor. For example, in American Conversation, *sir* was used as a short response to a friendly banter (“No *sir*, I’m not that fat dude.”) while in the Switchboard corpus, *ma'am* was used in reported speech during the conversation (“..and she said, ‘*ma'am* you should not take pictures,’ but I still did, you know that was my daughter and she’ll be leaving for Poland soon..”). Although *sorry* is used frequently in both the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora, most of its occurrences are not polite apologies for what is done in the conversation (e.g., “*actually I feel kind of sorry for them right now because the people are are are uh wanting*”). Text Samples 7.2 and 7.3 below show common uses of polite speech-act formulae, requests, and apologies in the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora.

Text Sample 7.2 Polite speech-act formulae in American face-to-face conversation

<1427> Jim, we have all these domestic beers [laughs]
 <1421> No, **thank you** <nv_laugh>
 <1427> Soda?
 <1421> That’s fine, that’s] fine, **thank you**. And she’s got um again, Jeanine’s got enough to drink.
 <1425> **Thank you**.

Text Sample 7.3 Apologies in Switchboard

<xces:u> 0033: it’s going to take uh it’s going to take all of us getting together I’m **sorry** I’m trying to, my kid is asking for a kiss and a hug so he can go to bed, it’s going to take all of us you know getting together and just saying we are not going to take it any more/<xces:u>
 <xces:U> oh **sorry**, this is taking too long

The frequency of these politeness and respect markers across registers is influenced by the participants' roles and relationships as well as the nature of tasks present in the interactions. In face-to-face conversation and discussion of topics in Switchboard, there are limited opportunities to request help or service. In Text Sample 7.2., the expression of thanks was an actual response to an offer ("*we have these domestic beers*") while *thanks* and *thank you* are common in Switchboard only in the closing sequences of the interaction as speakers acknowledge their participation. Familiarity between the speakers in the American Conversation corpus and the distance and somewhat academic tone in the discussion of topics in Switchboard may have also influenced the frequency of these polite and respect markers in the two corpora. In the Call Center corpus, requests and questions are exchanged constantly in all the calls. Because of the regular transfer of useful information in the register, the primary performance of tasks creates more opportunities for the speakers to use politeness and respect markers addressed to each other after a response or action.

7.5 Politeness and respect markers in the Call Center corpus

Agents and callers in call centers use more politeness markers than speakers in most spoken registers because of the combination of task-related factors mentioned above. As shown later in this chapter, agents use comparatively more of the classes of markers in this study than do the callers. Aside from satisfying the common purposes of these polite and respect markers, it appears that many agents in call center transactions have developed speech mannerisms that often almost automatically include the use of *thanks* or *thank you* whenever they receive a response from their callers. In addition, most of the calls in the corpus begin with "*Thank you for calling...*" as agents' greeting sequence in the calls. These instances of *thanks* or *thank you* have significantly increased the frequencies of politeness markers in the Call Center corpus. The repetitive use of *thanks* or *thank you* as agents' acknowledgement of callers' response to questions or requests is common in all accounts. Aside from a possible mannerism acquired through months or years of work in the industry, agents potentially use these repetitive speech-act formulae to ensure a continuous flow of response in the transactions to avoid pauses or dead air. In some instances, *thanks* or *thank you* appears to act as discourse markers to introduce the agents' next question or main response to the callers. Text Sample 7.4 below shows the constant use (perhaps *overuse*) of *thank you* by the agent as part of her response after the caller's turns.

Text Sample 7.4 Agent's use of *Thank You*

Agent: **Thank you** for calling [XX Company] my name is Melanie. Can I have your phone number starting with the area code please?

Caller: Yes it's 444-888-1111

Agent: **Thank you**, is there an extension number?

Caller: No

Agent: Let me bring up your account here, and can I have your first and last name please?

Caller: Yes, it's Kathy K-A-T-H-Y Doe D-O-E

Agent: **Thank you** Kathy

Caller: The name on the account should be Mark uhh Mark Caller

Agent: **Thank you**, and while I'm bringing up the account information, how can I help you today?

Caller: Uhm our, the uhh the print on our postage machine is uhh there's a lot of gaps and missing uhm characters on the when we print it out, and I've run the uhh the print function, the printer function key

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: The clean uhh maintenance key many times and it's still not clearing up

Agent: **Sorry** to hear that but don't worry I'll be glad to help you with your concern and [interruption]

Caller: **Thank you**

Agent: It will take a few minutes of your time. **You're welcome**

Caller: Ok

Agent: Unfortunately Kathy when I used the number that you gave me, I wasn't able to bring up an account is there any other [interruption]

Caller: Uhh maybe uhm

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: Try uhm, 444-888-5555

Agent: **Thank you**, one moment [short pause] still nothing comes up uhh do you have the serial number of your machine handy?

Caller: Uhm yes I do, it's 0009487436

Agent: Alright **thank you**, let me bring this up here

Caller: Ok

Agent: And by the way are you close to the machine?

Caller: Yes

Agent: Ok **thank you**, and how long has this been happening?

Caller: Uhm quite a while now.

Agent: And when was the last time that you replaced the ink?

Caller: Uhm a few weeks ago, it's uhh I've replaced the ink and that didn't change, that didn't help.

Agent: **Thank you.** Do you also have a weighing scale?

Caller: **I'm sorry?**

Agent: Do you have a weighing scale?

Caller: Yes

Agent: Alright so [inter]

Caller: Uhh not uhh not attached to the machine just a manual one.

Agent: Alright **thank you**, uhm can you lift up the cover of your machine **please?**

Caller: Yes

Agent: And take the ink out

Caller: Ok

Most of the uses of *thank you* in the excerpt above clearly indicate a polite recognition of response from the caller. The agent maintained a respectful tone/intonation throughout the transaction with clear pronunciation and good command of English. This agent received high performance evaluation score (5.25 out of 6) recognizing a good mastery of the steps involved in troubleshooting the caller's printing problem. There was no indication in the transaction that the caller did not like the agent's use of politeness markers or was not satisfied with the agent's overall level of engagement and service. However, it is obvious that the agent overused some of the instances of *thank you* in the excerpt with no specific communicative purpose aside from the recognition of the caller's response, and that many such usages could probably have been eliminated with no significant adverse effect on the transaction. For example, the use of *thank you* in the sequence below was more like a filler or a mere reflexive insertion than a genuine functional expression of politeness:

Agent: And by the way are you close to the machine?

Caller: Yes

Agent: Ok **thank you**, and how long has this been happening?

However, because the agent maintained controlled speech throughout this excerpt, these instances of *thank you* do not appear to be a distraction to the caller.

Apologies from the agents through the use of *I'm sorry*, *I apologize*, *pardon me*, or *excuse me* are also very common in the Call Center corpus. Agents, at times, are overly apologetic whenever they miss information coming from the caller or when they have to repeat a request. The agents' repeated instances of apologies in a single turn increase the frequency of these markers in the corpus. The agent in the text sample (Text Sample 7.5) below used "*I'm sorry*" repeatedly when he failed to get the right telephone number and had to ask the caller again.

Text Sample 7.5 Agent's use of *I'm Sorry*

Agent: **Thank you** for calling [XX Company Technical Support], this is Raymond, my agent ID is [xxx], may I have your telephone number please?

Caller: 555-557 [agent overlaps] 5557

Agent: **I'm sorry, ma'am, I'm sorry** can I have the fourth number? **I'm sorry**, that's 555
[caller interrupts]

Caller: 557 [!]

Agent: **I'm sorry** that's 5557?

Caller: 5-7 yes

Agent: 5-7?

Caller: 5-7

Agent: Ok let me just repeat that for you, that's 555-555-5555?

Caller: No, 557

Agent: Yeah, I meant 557, Ok **thank you, I'm sorry**

Caller: 555-5557 [angry]

Agent: Ok **thank you**, and would this be a good callback number for future references?

Caller: Yes

In addition to these apologies for mistakes in the transactions, agents in most accounts are trained to say "*I'm sorry for the inconvenience*" or other similar phrasings of this apology whenever callers call to complain about a malfunctioning machine or service that is not available. I mentioned earlier that these structures are often used as conciliatory gestures learned by agents during their core skills training. In some accounts, agents follow a fixed script to apologize to the caller once the caller has established the issue in the transaction. Text Sample 7.6 shows two examples of these occurrences.

Text Sample 7.6 Agent's use structured apologies

Caller: We have been working on fixing this meter because it won't print but nothing's going on, we [interruption]

Agent: Oh I, **I'm sorry to hear that** but don't worry I'd be more than happy to assist you. Just for security [interruption]

Caller: Thank you

Agent: Can you give me your account number and complete address?

Caller: Ok, it's [gave address]

Or, from the same account:

Caller: I need to change the amount in my meter and I've done this before but I'm getting all sorts of error messages when I print [laughs]

Agent: **I apologize for the inconvenience ma'am**, but don't you worry, you called the right place and I'll be more than happy to assist you today

Caller: Thank you

Accounts vary in how they prescribe the use of vocatives in transactions. Some accounts encourage agents to use the callers' first names during the calls by politely asking if they could do that (e.g., "*Can I call you Linda?*") or use titles (e.g., *Mr. Johnson, Ms. Lewis*). Although there are also accounts in the corpus that have

training exercises suggesting avoidance of too many respect markers *ma'am* or *sir* directed to the callers, it is clear that Filipino agents across accounts use *ma'am* or *sir* very frequently in transactions. Text Sample 7.7 illustrates the constant use of the respect marker *sir* in the male agent's turns as he serves an older male caller. While part of the common practice in this account involves the use of the caller's last name, the agent still used *sir* constantly in his turns.

Text Sample 7.7 Agent's use of respect marker *Sir*

Agent: [XX Company] Helpdesk, this is uh Christian

Caller: Hello?

Agent: Yes, uh, yes **sir**?

Caller: I had a question, I was using my old cell phone to put minutes on my new cell phone [unclear] on my old cell phone, coz it's not around

Agent: Ok, so uh **sir**, what I understand is, you're asking about your minutes on your account, is that correct?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: Ok, I'll be more than happy to assist you with that **sir**, may I **please** have your phone number area code first?

Caller: 555-555-5555

Agent: 5555. Let me just pull out your account **sir**, and may I **please** have your first and last name?

Caller: It's Johnson, last name

Agent: Ok, uh let me just check your account. Ok, **Mr. Johnson** [unclear], **sir** could you **please** verify your complete address? [all names were changed]

Caller: It's uhm, 11143 [pause]

Agent: Ok?

Caller: [unclear]

Agent: Alright, **Mr. Johnson**, is that your new address, **sir**?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: Ok, what is your previous address **Mr. Johnson**?

Caller: Oh, it's the same address.

Agent: Same address? And your first name **sir**? Ed?

Caller: Nathan

Agent: Nathan. Alright, let me just verify your phone number again, 555-555-5555, correct?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: Ok I do **apologize Mr. Johnson** but the address that you're giving me **sir** is incorrect. Could you **please** verify again your address **sir**?

Caller: What do you mean?

Agent: Uh **sir** the address is not correct **sir** uh [interruption]

Caller: Oh

The agent in the text sample above combined Mr. Johnson and the respect marker *sir* in some turns (e.g., “*Alright, Mr. Johnson, is that your new address, sir?*”). The caller, Mr. Johnson, sounded older and formal in his turns and this probably influenced the agent’s use of repeated respect markers. Agents are affected by and respond to the caller’s tone and the urgency of the request, so that, although they may have been coached to use either the caller’s first or last name, they still use respect markers in their questions.

7.5.1 Politeness and respect markers across role and gender

For the most part, there is a consistent pattern in the frequencies of politeness and respect markers across roles and gender in the Call Center corpus as shown in Figure 7.2. Agents have comparatively more of the four classes of markers than the callers, while female agents and callers have more frequencies of these markers than male agents and callers. In general, female agents and callers are more polite, appreciative, and use more markers of apologies than their male counterparts. The single exception in this overall pattern is observed in the use of *sir* or *ma’am*

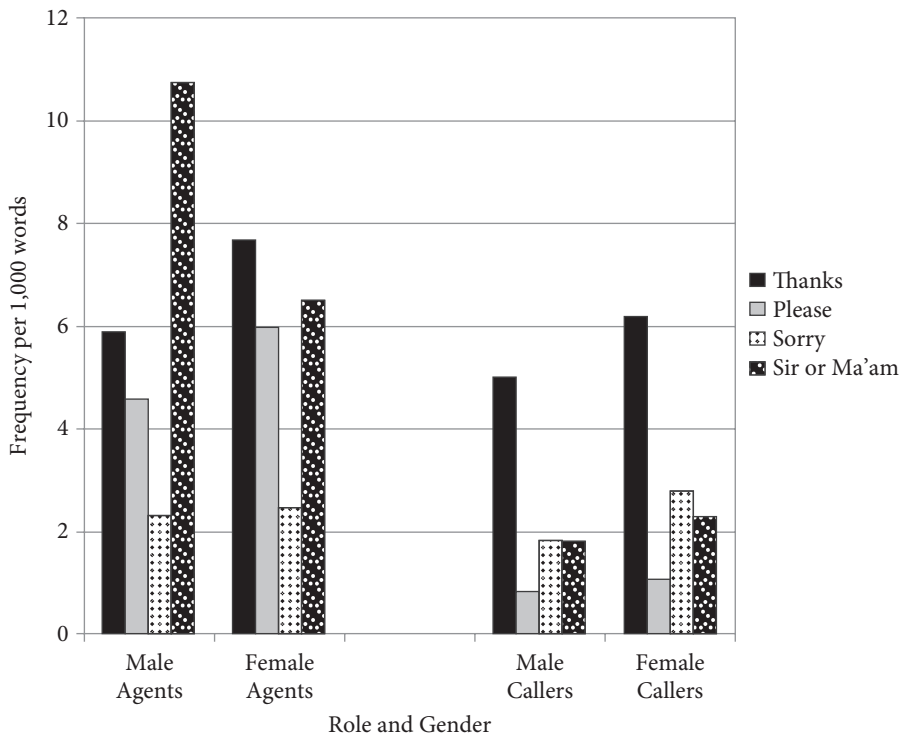


Figure 7.2. Politeness and respect markers across role and gender.

by male and female agents. Filipino male agents have more frequencies of *sir* or *ma'am* than female agents.

There are different factors that could potentially explain this distribution of respect markers between male and female Filipino agents. It is possible that the *military* style use of respect markers by Filipino males as shown in Text Sample 7.7 comes from their perceptions of power relationships showing high respect for women and higher, more explicit respect for males in professional settings. This observation is true especially in transactions between male agents and older-sounding male American callers in high-pressure or difficult transactions. In these situations, male agents noticeably use very high frequencies of *sir* in their turns. Another possible factor affecting the use of respect markers by Filipino male and female agents is the use of vocatives similar to the Mr. Johnson example above. It seems that female agents are able to use the callers' first or last name more consistently without using additional respect markers in their turns. In contrast, male agents often use the callers' first or last names together with *ma'am* or *sir*.

Politeness and respect markers coming from the customers are used across accounts. It is clear, however, that the frequency of these markers is influenced by the major type of issue the customers have in making the call. Customers ordering or inquiring about a product have higher frequencies of these polite markers than those complaining about service or asking assistance to troubleshoot a machine. American callers use a relatively high frequency of *thanks/thank you/appreciate* compared to the three other classes of markers in this chapter. These are used to show appreciation for service or recognition of agents' assistance. Most of the occurrences of *thanks/thank you/appreciate* appear at the end of the call. *Please*, *sorry*, and respect markers *ma'am* or *sir* are sparingly used by callers in the transactions. These markers typically achieve their specific communicative purposes in callers' turns. There is a great difference between the use of *please* by callers and agents in the transactions. Considering that the callers are asking for service or information whenever they initiate the calls, polite requests as in face-to-face service encounters are usually expected from them. The frequency of *please* shows, however, that polite markers are not frequently used by callers in framing their requests. This particular finding illustrates an important characteristic of the nature of power relationships between the caller and agent in call centers. Clearly, the callers do not feel "obliged" to use politeness and respect markers, especially if they are calling due to faulty products or services.

Gender variation in the use of polite and respect markers exists in the discourse of American male and female callers. Figure 7.2 shows that female callers have a consistently greater frequency of *thanks*, *please*, *sorry*, and *sir/ma'am* across accounts than male callers. The distribution of these markers in the discourse of American male and female callers supports generalizations from previous research

in gender and politeness (e.g., Lakoff, 1976; Coates, 1993, 1998; Holmes, 1993, 1995; Beeching, 2002; Mills, 2003). In communicating with the agents, American female callers have relatively more polite speech-act formulae and apologies than males. The use of more apologies by females perhaps implies that these callers are more respectful of the agents and shows more explicit recognition of agents' efforts during the transactions. These apologies in callers' turns also suggest that female callers are more overt in acknowledging their mistakes in following instructions and limitations in understanding the agents.

7.5.2 Politeness and respect markers by agents' performance evaluation scores

Table 7.1 shows that the agents' performance evaluation scores affect the distribution of polite and respect markers in the Call Center corpus. It appears that politeness and respect markers are indicators of quality of service in Philippine-based call centers. Agents with high performance evaluation scores have more *thanks*, *please*, and *sir/ma'am* than agents in the two other performance evaluation groups. In addition, agents in the high-performance group have lower frequency of apologies (*sorry/apologize*) than the agents in the Mid and Low-performance groups. The limited occurrences of apologies for agents in the High-performance group suggest that these agents have better understanding of the procedural aspects of the transactions and higher-level mastery of information given to the customers. Because apologies are often used to repeat information from the caller (e.g., "*I'm sorry, ma'am, I'm sorry can I have the fourth number? I'm sorry, that's 555..*"), this result also shows that agents in the High-performance group have better comprehension skills and understanding of callers' speech patterns.

To summarize data from Table 7.1, the quality of agents' task and linguistic performance involves more polite speech-act formulae, more polite requests, fewer apologies, and more respect markers. These politeness and respect markers as quality indicators are consistent across agents' groups, except for the slight difference between the Mid and High groups in their use of respect markers *sir/ma'am*.

Table 7.1. Politeness and respect markers by agents' performance evaluation scores.

Agents' Performance Evaluation Score	Thanks	Please	Sorry	Sir or Ma'am
Low	6.432	4.479	3.457	7.557
Mid	7.281	5.361	2.371	8.771
High	7.540	5.435	1.889	8.555

Agents in the Mid group have slightly more of these markers than the agents in the High group. The (over)use of these respect markers and the frequent combination of vocatives and *ma'am* or *sir* as illustrated by the agent in Text Sample 7.7 suggest that these markers actually contribute in a positive way to the quality of the interaction when delivered effectively by agents in the transactions. It seems that the frequency of these markers, even those that have been repeated too much in a single turn, does not distract the callers. Language ability appears to correlate with more respect markers achieving two distinct purposes: (1) as direct expression of good customer service behavior by the agents, and (2) as discourse markers or fillers that help in sustaining a good flow of speech especially by High-performing agents during the calls.

7.5.3 Politeness and respect markers by agents' experience with current account

The data in Table 7.2 summarize the agents' use of politeness and respect markers based on their length of service with their current accounts. This speaker grouping indicates familiarity with account protocols and common service practices but not necessarily the agents' level of task and linguistic performance. It is also possible that agents with more experience have attended more language training with the company and some of these training classes may have included topics related to the use of politeness and respect markers. Results show that agents with experience of less than one year use more *thanks*, *please*, and *sorry* than the two other groups. Conversely, agents with more than two years of service with their current accounts have fewer polite and respect markers across the four classes than the two other experience groups. Agents with one to two years of service use more respect markers in their transactions.

It is surprising to see that the high frequency of polite speech-act formulae, polite requests, and respect markers is an indicator of service quality but not of the agents' length of service with their current account. In this case, there is a negative correlation between experience and service quality in the use of these markers.

Table 7.2. Politeness and respect markers by agents' experience with their accounts.

Agents' Experience with Current Account	Thanks	Please	Sorry	Sir or Ma'am
Less than 1 year	7.833	5.882	2.842	8.607
1 year to 2 years	6.995	5.379	2.091	9.755
Over 2 years	5.925	3.992	2.090	6.234

However, the agents' frequency of apologies agrees with the data on quality in Table 7.1. As is the case with High-performing agents, experienced agents also have fewer apologies, indicating that they have fewer mistakes in the transactions and have a higher-level mastery of account procedures. Why, then, do experienced agents use fewer *thanks*, *pleases*, and *sirs/ma'ams*? The answer to this question potentially suggests a combination of factors related to the repetitive nature of this job once the agents have attained certain level of familiarity with transactions. It is possible that experienced agents have achieved confidence in their ability to serve the callers and are no longer as inclined to focus upon showing good, "polite" behavior as newer, less confident, agents might. Because of their familiarity with account procedures and the behavior of their callers, experienced agents may also prioritize quicker and more satisfactory, from the customers' standpoint, completion of support than the mere use of polite language. In my observation of experienced agents, it was evident that they are able to "level" with their callers and use more straightforward language. However, it was also noticeable that many of these experienced agents sounded tired and more detached during the transactions than newer agents. These behavioral patterns are possibly related to the frequency distribution of *thanks*, *please*, and *sir/ma'am* across speaker groups, based on agents' length of service.

7.5.4 Politeness and respect markers across categories of accounts

The communicative tasks involved in the various accounts in the Call Center corpus generally influence the distribution of politeness and respect markers. Accounts primarily engaged with selling products, for example, typically require good customer service expressed through language and paralinguistic in discourse as part of the "sales strategy." Agents in these accounts are more polite and respectful of the caller. This type of personalized service by the agent potentially results in more sales for the agent and maintains customer loyalty – factors that are often discussed from the start of the agents' core skills training. Figure 7.3 shows the distribution of the four classes of politeness and respect markers across categories of accounts in the Call Center corpus.

Transactions in Purchase accounts have relatively more polite speech-act formulae, polite apologies, and respect markers than the other two account categories. The use of more *sirs/ma'ams* in Purchase accounts appears to be strategic on the part of the agents used in order to build positive relationship with the caller and make a sale (in some accounts, successful sales also lead to commissions which become another form of motivation to use politeness and respect markers for the agents). More *thanks* or *appreciate* (e.g., "*thank you for your call, we appreciate your business.*") and *please* (e.g., "*please visit our website for additional information on this*

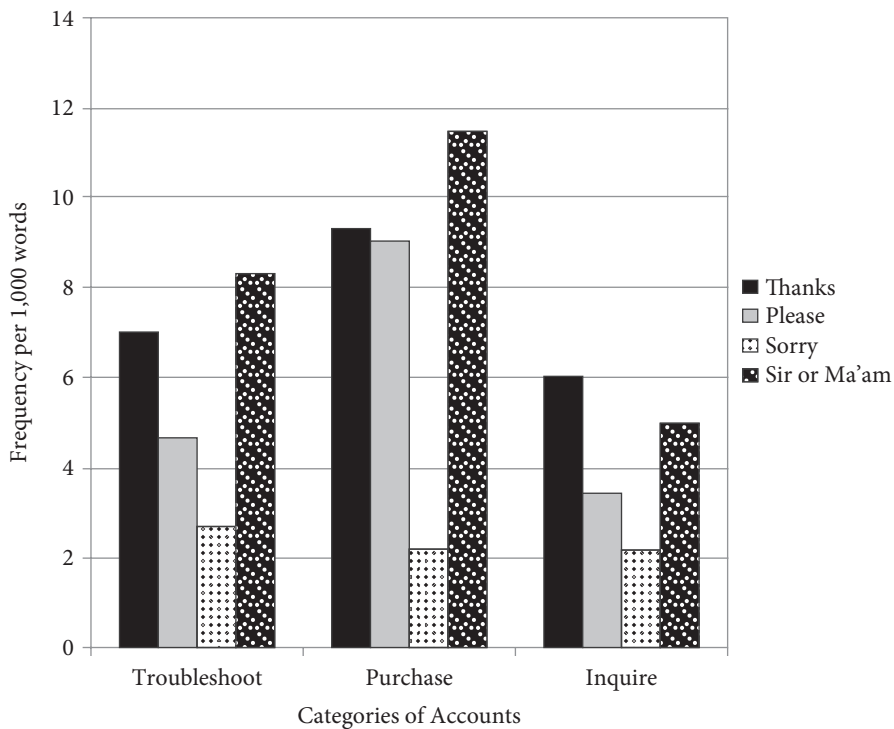


Figure 7.3. Politeness and respect markers across categories of accounts.

item”) in the agents’ turns for Purchase accounts also show effective completion of the transaction which may involve actual sales or potential call back from the customers. Inquiry accounts have the fewest politeness and respect markers among the three account categories. These accounts typically follow question-answer sequences often with limited engagement between the speakers compared to purchase or troubleshooting interactions. Agents and callers in Inquiry accounts have almost similar frequencies of *thanks* and *please* in their calls. The use of more apologies in Troubleshooting accounts indicates that speakers often have mistakes in giving and following instructions or directions. Repeated clarifications or requests from the callers are common in Troubleshooting accounts because of the presence of newer vocabulary as well as potentially ambiguous or unclear instructions from the agents.

7.6 Chapter summary

The frequency of politeness and respect markers in call center interactions was found to be one of the main distinguishing characteristics of the Call Center corpus

in comparison with American Conversation and Switchboard. In this chapter, I presented the collective frequencies of polite speech-act formulae, polite requests, apologies, and respect markers such as *sir* or *ma'am* and titles across registers and speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. Clearly, call center turns had very high frequencies of all of these markers, used in all account categories and other situational contexts in the discourse. In comparison with the interactants in the two other registers, call center agents and callers had a much higher frequency of these markers.

Interestingly, the high frequency of politeness markers, except for the frequency of apologies, was consistently used more by High-performing agents than by Mid and Low-performing agents in the Call Center corpus. This distribution somewhat contradicted some perceptions in Philippine-based call centers that too many polite expressions distracted American callers who were typically not used to hearing overly repeated features of polite and respectful language. It appeared that the Filipino norms in service encounters influenced the agents to make use of many of these polite markers in their turns. For example, even agents belonging to accounts that specified vocatives still preferred to use *ma'am* or *sir* in their transactions.

For future related studies, it would be relevant to examine more extensively the distribution and specific functional categories of these politeness features across role and gender groups in the Call Center corpus. Data in this chapter showed some marked differences between male and female agents in the use of respect markers and also a pattern of usage that confirmed results of previous studies of gender-based politeness characteristics of American men and women.

CHAPTER 8

Inserts

8.1 Introduction

Selected groups of inserts including interjections, response forms, discourse markers, and discourse particles are analyzed in this chapter to explore how speakers in the interactions across registers indicate participation, react to an utterance, and manage the flow of talk. The LGSWE defines inserts as “stand-alone words or phrases which are generally characterized by their inability to enter into syntactic relations with other structures although they have a tendency to attach themselves prosodically to a larger structure” (p. 1082). In other words, inserts comprise a class of words or phrases that is peripheral, both in grammar and in the lexicon of a language. Semantically, inserts have no denotative meaning but their use is defined mostly by their pragmatic function in the discourse.

The LGSWE describes the multiple functional classes of inserts used across registers of spoken discourse. The different functions of these inserts often shade into one another. In addition, individual inserts can be flexible in taking various conversational roles. For example, *ok* as a discourse marker is regularly used in conversations and purposeful interactions to mark information management (Schiffrin, 1987). At the same time, *ok* can also be used as a backchannel or a minimal response indicating the speaker’s engagement in speech while being passive in the conversation (Condon, 2001). Schiffrin describes the range and specific functions of discourse markers (e.g., *next* and *then* are markers of transition; *because* and *so* are markers of cause and result) following their clear conversational meanings. However, speakers may still use these discourse markers in unique situations that are not described by their typical conversational roles. For example, one common discourse marker that has various other functions is *you know* which is considered by Schiffrin as a marker of participation and involvement. Aside from this main function, *you know* is also sometimes employed as an utterance-final generalizer, allowing the speaker to extend his/her specific examples to a more general observation. Finally, in casual speech, *you know* has also been used as a filler which is very similar in usage to filled-pauses (e.g., *uhm*, *uh*) and other markers of dysfluencies.

The list of inserts, discourse markers, discourse particles, and backchannels analyzed in this chapter includes:

1. *I mean* and *You know* as markers of participation (Schiffrin, 1987)
2. *Because* and *so* as markers of cause and result (Schiffrin, 1987)
3. *Next* and *then* as markers of transition (Schiffrin, 1987)
4. Discourse particles: *oh*, *well*, *anyway* (Biber et al., 1999), *ok*, *alright*
5. *Uh-huh* as a backchannel or minimal response (White, 1989)

Instead of grouping the analysis in this chapter following functional classes of inserts as in LGSWE, I present mainly the distribution of the selected items above individually and separately across registers and speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. I provide limited analysis of the functional classes of inserts except for *uh-huh*, *ok* and *alright*. *Ok* and *alright* are given separate sub-sections because these two inserts are frequently used and are clearly important in call center interactions based on my initial analysis.

The main goal of this chapter is to survey the common inserts in spoken discourse identified in the LGSWE and Quaglio (2004), and compare their distribution across the three registers as well as the speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. The distributional patterns of these inserts are specifically interesting in outsourced call center discourse because they show how speakers use additional features of speech in their attempt to successfully achieve the goals of the transactions. Non-native speakers of English working as call center agents may use discourse particles and backchannels differently than the typical functional usage of native speakers. Because call center transactions involve forms of negotiations, multiple question-answer sequences, and the transfer of technical and specialized information, speakers, especially the agents, need to use related linguistic devices that will aid comprehension and common understanding.

8.1.1 Discourse markers

A discourse marker may be a word or phrase (e.g., *basically*, *you know*) that functions primarily as a structuring unit of spoken language. To the listener in a conversation, a discourse marker signals the speaker's intention to mark a boundary in discourse. Over the years, there have been numerous studies involving the analysis of discourse markers in conversation (e.g., Chafe, 1985; Schiffrin, 1987; Biber, 1988; Biber et al., 1999; Taguchi, 2002; Muller, 2005). These markers are considered as active contributions to the discourse and signal such activities as change in speaker, taking or holding control of the floor, relinquishing control of the floor, or the beginning of a new topic (Schiffrin, 1987; Muller, 2005). Discourse markers are regarded as necessary for conversational coherence (Schiffrin, 1994) and for speakers to successfully monitor the exchange of information (Chafe, 1985; Biber, 1988). In addition,

discourse markers are also used in the spontaneous production of speech to primarily achieve a smooth and efficient flow of talk (Crystal, 1988; Taguchi, 2002). A discourse marker sequence that commonly acts as fillers in speaker turns is identified as an active contribution to the organization of the discourse. Such sequence of fillers may be interpreted as an attempt by a speaker to continue with the topic of talk or to move the interaction into a different direction (“Metadata-Fillers,” 2004).

Discourse markers can be used regardless of the number of speakers in varying contexts of conversation and can occur almost anywhere in a turn. These markers may be used by a newscaster, a lecturer, or interviewee primarily to mark parts of discourse (“Metadata-Fillers,” 2004; Muller, 2005). In addition to context, prosody (especially the presence of pauses as in dysfluencies in Chapter 9) can help to distinguish cases of discourse markers from non-discourse markers. Removing discourse markers in transcriptions of conversations does not make the transcripts incomplete, nor does it change the speakers’ intended meaning. It is difficult to establish an exhaustive list of discourse markers in English due to their wide range of functions and the complexity of defining them precisely; moreover, discourse markers are subject to much dialectal and individual variation, and novel formations can serve as discourse markers which means that any list quickly becomes out-of-date (“Metadata-Fillers,” 2004). This chapter considers only those discourse markers that function to structure the discourse but do not carry separate meanings. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish when a word or phrase is functioning as a discourse marker and when it is acting as a content word (e.g., *first*, *second* or *next* as temporal adverbs or as an adjective).

For this chapter, I provide an analysis of the distribution of selected discourse markers identified by Schiffrin (1987): *I mean/You know* as markers of participation, *because/so* as markers of cause and result, and *next/then* as markers of transition. These markers are found to be common in the Call Center corpus as part of procedural/instructional discourse based on my MD analysis discussed in Chapter 4. I manually counted the functions of *because/so* and *next/then* in speakers’ turns, based upon the definitions by Schiffrin. My KWIC program identifying these markers required additional manual checks to ensure correct counts of these features used strictly as transition words and not as modifiers (in the case of *next*). For example, I made sure that *next* indicated transition (e.g., “..*next*, you need to replace the cartridge.”) rather than used as a modifier (e.g., “The *next* group of visitors will come on Tuesday”) in speakers’ turns.

8.1.2 Discourse particles

In the context of this chapter, discourse particles are single-word interjections or fillers used by speakers primarily to express emotions (*oh*), provide minimal response

(*alright, ok*), or organize turns (*well, anyway*). There are five common discourse particles included in the analysis for the present study: *oh, well, anyway, ok*, and *alright*. These discourse particles are found to be very commonly used in conversations (Biber et al., 1999; Muller, 2005). Because *ok* and *alright* are frequently used by speakers in call center transactions, I provide a detailed analysis of their distributions across registers and speaker categories. It is clear that the meanings and intended functions of these discourse particles often overlap and there is no attempt in this chapter to differentiate these semantic categories of discourse particles. However, for *ok* and *alright*, I provide additional descriptions of how these two discourse particles are used by speakers across registers and speaker groups in the Call Center corpus.

8.1.3 Backchannels

Backchannels are words or phrases that provide feedback to the dominant speaker by indicating that the non-dominant speaker is still engaged in the conversation (though not actively participating at the moment) (Tottie, 1991; White, 1994). Some words that function as discourse markers can also act as backchannels in other contexts (e.g., *ok, alright*). As mentioned in Chapter 4, backchannels are believed to be important in customer service interactions for speakers, especially the agents in the Philippines, to show attentiveness and focus.

Peltzman and Fishburn (2006) claim that there is a need to explicitly teach Filipino agents to backchannel or provide verbal feedback to constantly remind the caller that someone is on the other end of the line, listening, and ready to provide service. Filipinos have traditionally observed turns in conversations scrupulously avoiding interruptions, latching, and overlaps. Children are taught that politeness in conversations involves respecting turns and speaking only when recognized. Peltzman and Fishburn suggest that in the context of outsourced call centers, limited backchanneling and echoing of customer concerns, i.e., “reflective listening”, could imply that the agents are not enthusiastic in serving the caller, or not interested in personalizing the call. They also mention that American callers are accustomed to hearing short responses and confirmatory utterances in conversations. Because of this emphasis in language training in Philippine call centers, it is likely that the agents consciously use features such as discourse markers to provide verbal feedback during the calls. The analysis of backchannels in this chapter focuses on the use of *uh-huh, ok*, and *alright* as minimal responses.

8.2 Distribution of inserts across registers

The following sections provide the distributional data of inserts (discourse markers, discourse particles, and backchannels) in call center interaction, face-to-face

conversation, and Switchboard telephone exchanges. Separate sub-sections focusing on a more detailed classification of *ok* and *alright* across registers are also included in this chapter. As earlier mentioned, there was an extremely high frequency of *ok* in call center transactions following results from my initial exploration of call center transcripts. Both agents and callers make use of *ok* in their turns to signal transitions and manage the delivery of information. Sections 8.2.2 and 8.2.3 show the distribution of *ok* across registers and also provide data on the functional classes of *ok* in spoken interaction. Section 8.2.4 extends the same type of analysis to the distribution and functional classification of *alright* across the three registers.

8.2.1 Distribution of selected inserts: *I mean, you know, oh, well, anyway, because, so, next, and then* across registers

Figures 8.1 and 8.2 show the distribution of selected discourse markers and discourse particles: *I mean, you know, oh, well, anyway, because, so, next, and then* across registers. Both American Conversation and Switchboard have generally greater

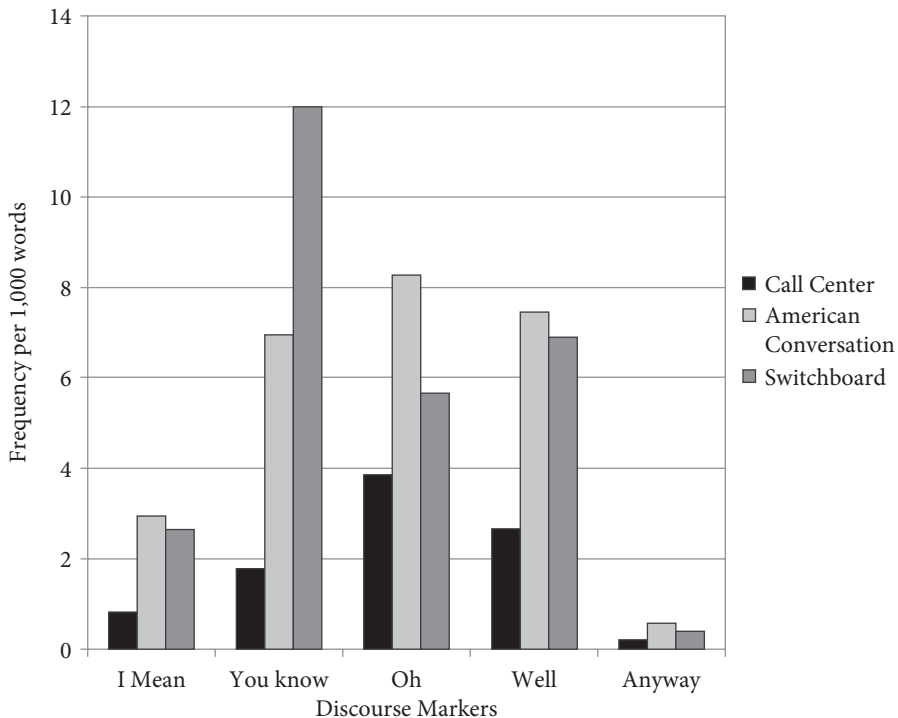


Figure 8.1. Commonly used discourse markers and discourse particles across registers.

frequencies of these inserts than the Call Center corpus except for *so* (as marker of cause and result) and *next*, and *then* (as markers of transition). Casual interactions from the American Conversation corpus and discussion of topics in Switchboard potentially require more explicit signals to control the floor and take turns. In face-to-face, casual conversation between friends, for example, there is often no specific beginning and ending of topics, and at the same time, speakers are free to have more topic shifts whenever they wish. In contrast, there is limited signaling of turn-taking in call center interactions because speaker roles are more established as are the expectations as to the types of questions or responses from agents and callers. The expected topics or specific questions in customer service calls are clearly defined, as agents will not be able to respond to “topic shifts” (e.g., additional questions or requests) when they do not fall within their range of support.

Discourse markers and discourse particles *you know*, *oh* and *well* are used more frequently in the three corpora while *anyway* and *I mean* are the least frequently used discourse markers or discourse particles, as shown in Figure 8.1. Specifically, *you know* is very common in Switchboard while *oh*, *well*, and *I mean* are more frequently used in face-to-face American conversation than the two other corpora. There is a great disparity in the frequency of *you know* per 1,000 words in Switchboard (12.122) and in the Call Center corpus (1.798). This difference is potentially influenced by the speakers’ need to further explain their ideas or opinions as they discuss a range of topics. In Switchboard, there is clear need to indicate participation and involvement or attempt to convince the listener about the logic of an idea as speakers show their feelings/opinions towards an issue. In call center discourse, however, there is limited need to indicate involvement through markers of participation because speakers are primarily not talking about general issues that need mutual agreement to maintain the flow of the transaction. Text Sample 8.1 illustrates the use of *you know* in Switchboard and call center interactions. The caller in the excerpt has multiple *you knows* as she attempts to explain the situation with her connection problems. Similarly, the speakers in Switchboard use multiple *you knows* perhaps to show engagement and participation as they discuss the prompts.

Text Sample 8.1 Use of *you know* in call center interactions and spontaneous telephone discussion in Switchboard

CALL CENTER:

Caller: **You know**, well it comes into my yard instead of across the neighbor’s garage

Agent: Oh

Caller: But it, it actually worked until uh **you know**, I don’t know whether it’s gotten hit by a ball or what but it did work prior to this

Agent: I see here that the tech came there to [interruption]

Caller: Well, that very well could be coz if, he told me, they told me it would be 6 to 10 days, well **you know** how you, I don't keep track of when he was here. I think he was here **you know**, Monday before last, I know he, and he might have been here last Monday, **you know**, 7 days ago so it very well could have taken that couple of days

Agent: And ma'am, you say there's no connection, now, right now, right?

Caller: **You know** it's just, it's like a bad connection with a cell phone, **you know**?

Agent: Oh, ok

Caller: **You know**, it's like that

Agent: Ok, thanks, let me try the [unclear]

SWITCHBOARD:

<xces:u>0004: I guess that's true but **you know** you've got to figure uh you've got to look at it like Carrollton is in Denton County

<xces:u>0005: **You know, you know** and it gets kind of scary **you know** when you're looking at Lewisville you're looking at Denton you're looking at **you know** some of the larger cities and and Lewisville had more crime this last year than any of them

<xcess:>0004: Uh-huh

<xcess:>0005: And that is an issue because people move to a new place of course they want to check safety and peace, **you know**, there and it's very important

<xcess:>0005: Yeah

<xcess:>0004: and that's the thing, **you know**?

Well and *I mean* are more common in face-to-face American conversation and Switchboard than in call center interactions. Native speakers of English typically use these markers following their conversational roles – either as markers of speaker orientation toward the meaning of one's own talk or as organizer of discourse. The short excerpts from American Conversation and Switchboard corpora in Text Sample 8.2 illustrate the typical usage of *I mean* and *well* in conversation. Although these features are also used in the Call Center corpus, especially by the callers, note that they are not as frequent (Figure 8.1).

Text Sample 8.2 Use of *I mean* and *well* in face-to-face American conversation and spontaneous telephone discussion in Switchboard

AMERICAN CONVERSATION:

<1> Yeah, **I mean** they had to go find a Korean

<2> And it's so funny because it's just, it, it, **I mean** of, **I mean** arguing that simply means disagreements and the stating treasure or something, **I mean**, why, why do they, **I mean**, it's not conformists, but you know the, **I mean**, I'll play devil's advocate, maybe

⟨1⟩ Yeah, **I mean** that's how it goes

⟨2⟩ ⟨laughs⟩

⟨1⟩ Because there is just no way that people would allow that to happen, **I mean** man, that's too much of an issue nowadays, **I mean** the computer age or whatever

⟨2⟩ That's why we're going like crazy, right?

⟨1⟩ **I mean** yeah ⟨laughs⟩

SWITCHBOARD:

⟨xces:u⟩002: **Well** good afternoon to you Mary, first let me ask you what's what's the weather like up there to begin with

⟨xces:u⟩003: **Well well** today uh when I got up it was twenty nine degrees

⟨xces:u⟩004: **Well** you know I bet that's what we that storm we had last night

⟨xces:u⟩005: **Well** it's probably on its way up there it was heading north

⟨xces:u⟩006: What about there?

⟨xces:u⟩007: **Well** it was nice today

⟨xces:u⟩008: Yes, uh-huh?

⟨xces:u⟩009: Nice

⟨xces:u⟩0010: **Well**, it's about time, you know?

⟨xces:u⟩0011: ⟨laughs⟩

⟨xces:u⟩0012: We've been getting all the bad ones lately

⟨xces:u⟩0013: **Well** good that you got a break ⟨laughs⟩

Figure 8.2 shows the distribution of discourse markers *because*, *so*, *next*, and *then* across registers. In general, *because* and *then* are frequently used by speakers across registers more than *so* and *next*. Speakers in the Call Center corpus, on the other hand, have more transition markers (*next/then*) and the cause/result marker *so* than speakers in the two other corpora. Speakers in face-to-face American conversation and Switchboard have higher frequency of *because* in their turns than speakers in call center interactions.

Variation in the use of these markers is evidently influenced by the predominant type of task in the three registers. Call center interactions have more transition markers than the two other registers because of the need to give directions or sequential procedures in technical support as participants troubleshoot or fix a problem during the call. Transition markers in face-to-face conversation and Switchboard talk are also relatively common as speakers make use of temporal references to the current topic or activity. The more frequent use of transition markers in call center interactions reflects the way procedures are often included in troubleshooting accounts. For example, these transition markers are commonly used to provide step-by-step directions that callers are asked to follow in fixing a problem. Text Sample 8.3 illustrates the agent's repetitive use of *then* in giving instructions to the caller. In this text sample, the caller mirrors what the agent says in giving directions in order to clarify the specific action ("*Then* hit OK?").

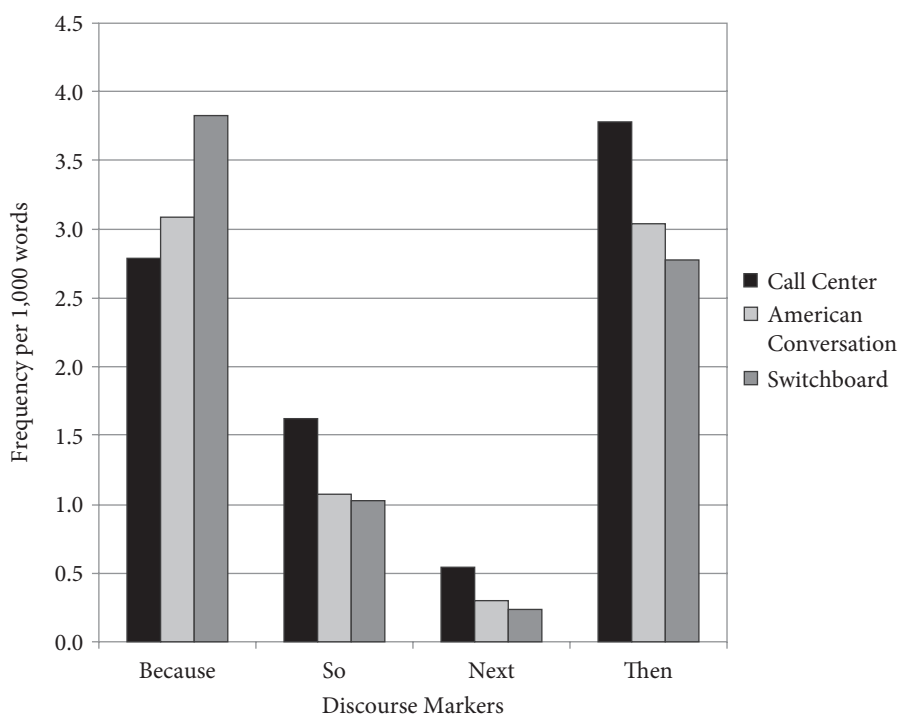


Figure 8.2. Commonly used discourse markers across registers.

Text Sample 8.3 Use of *then* in a troubleshooting transaction

Agent: Ok [short pause] alright now that you have that, uh, uh, type in the uh, just get enter or go and **then** once you get to the website, kinda looks like a black and white screen, with some options on it right?

Caller: Uhm, ok?

Agent: and **then** after that, click on uh, begin basic set up, and **then** click on next

Caller: Ok

Agent: And **then** uhm, uh you will see there a screen that says broadband connection, right?

Caller: Yes

Agent: And **then** after that [unclear] uh if you see a P-P-T-O auto connect, make sure that you have a check on that one

Caller: Check on that one, P-P-T-O, ok, there's a number

Agent: 8084? ok [short pause] alright, uh, **then**, I see uh, ok your username goes like this, it's your name is reverse, uh last name first and so forth, uh all lower case letters and no spaces

Caller: Ok name in reverse

Agent: Let me know if you're finished

Caller: **Then** OK?

Agent: Excuse me?

Caller: **Then** hit OK?

Agent: Uhm, uh, can you tell me what you see right now?

Caller: The uh, there's a box, text box asking for my password and username and some buttons like OK or cancel or back

Agent: Ok, **then** hit OK

Caller: Hit OK, ok

Agent: You should now get the startup page [unclear] site license

Caller: Yes

Agent: Ok, **then** we're, can you check if we have active connection? I want you [interruption]

8.2.2 Distribution of *ok* across registers

Figure 8.3 illustrates the distribution of *ok* as an insert in the three registers of spoken discourse. *Ok* is highly common in service encounters with explicit functions and associated grammatical structures (Merritt, 1978) and very important in call center interactions to serve various functional classes described in Section 8.2.3. Agents and callers both use *ok* in their turns to manage the exchange of information or provide short responses. The much greater frequency of *ok* in the Call Center corpus (29.224 per 1,000 words) than in the two other corpora (American Conversation = 5.945; Switchboard = 1.938) suggests that this insert could be one of the linguistic features that clearly distinguishes the discourse of outsourced customer service from other spoken registers. It is interesting to note that the other telephone-based interaction (Switchboard) has very limited use of *ok* by speakers in the corpus. This result also suggests that the medium of interaction between speakers is not the determining factor affecting the frequency of *ok* used in spoken discourse.

Text Sample 8.4 demonstrates the repetitive use of *ok* by the agent and the caller in a typical troubleshooting transaction. Specifically, the agent uses *ok* as a short response to the caller's turn, as a question or confirmation of comprehension (*ok?*), and as a marker of information management (e.g., "*ok, now Manny, how can I help you today?*"). It is clear based on Figure 8.3 that *ok* has become a very common insert preferred by speakers to mark transition and take control of the interaction. In most instances, *ok* as a response signifies understanding of information and implies permission to go ahead with the next turn. This implicit confirmation leads to speakers' further utilization of *ok* to transition to the next segment of the interaction and complete the transaction.

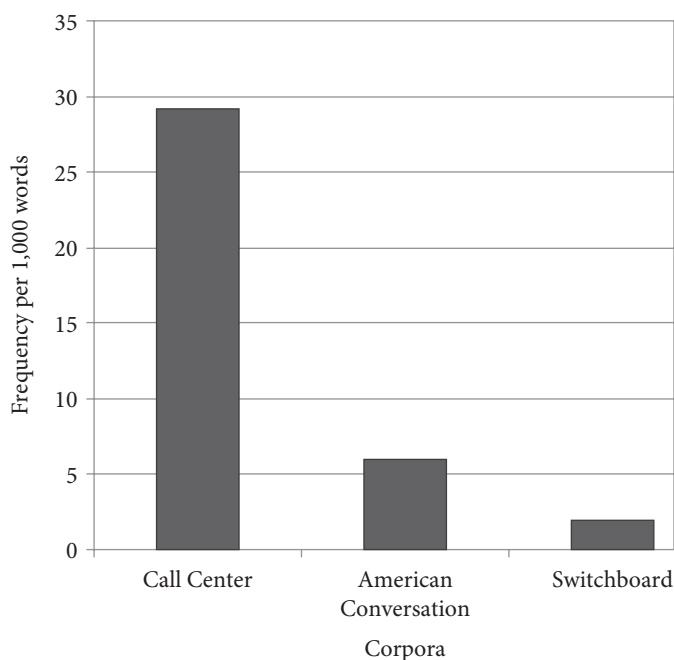


Figure 8.3. Distribution of *ok* across registers.

Text Sample 8.4 Use of *ok* in call center interactions

Agent: The number that you gave me a while ago is that your direct line or does it have an extension number?

Caller: Uhm it's a direct line but it's not the one I have hooked up to the to the stamp meter, no

Agent: Oh **ok**, thank you so much for that

Caller: I have that hooked up to my I have that hooked up to another line

Agent: **Ok**

Caller: But that's my main line, that's my home line

Agent: Oh, **ok**

Caller: 333 area code 999 333 6666

Agent: **Ok** thank you so much for that, and finally your email address is xx-xx@comcast.net [interruption]

Caller: x-x-x@comcast.net

Agent: **Ok**, now Manny, how can I help you today?

Caller: I'm having problems with my uh stamp machine

Agent: **Ok**, now I'm really sorry for that and let me help you out **ok**?

Caller: **Ok**

Agent: **Ok**, now when you're saying you're having problems with the machine

Caller: Uh-huh

Agent: Could you uhm give me some specifics?

Caller: Well it came unplugged coz I was moving it

Agent: **Ok**?

Caller: I, I plugged it back in and it won't do nothing, so I read the trouble shooting chart here and it tells me, it's got a bunch of bars across the top

Agent: Oh, **ok**

Caller: And it tells me to unplug it

Agent: **Ok**?

Caller: And let it sit for about uhm 15 seconds or whatever and plug it back in, I left it unplugged for half an hour or 45 minutes and it still don't work

Agent: Oh **ok** and again I'm really sorry for this inconvenience on your part, **ok**? Now uh let me just ask, are you in front of the machine?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: **Ok** that's great thank you, now uh what you were actually doing a while ago was correct, you were go uh you were going for a reboot but you missed out on taking out the battery from inside the machine

Caller: There's no batteries in there

Agent: **Ok**, uh I uh let me guide you through on how to get the batteries out, **ok**?

Caller: Yeah well I know how to get them out but coz it said batteries and I looked in there, there there's no batteries in there at all

Agent: Oh, **ok** now uhm could you take the power cord uh off first?

Caller: **Ok**

Agent: First from the wall outlet and then from the back of the meter

Caller: Oh

Agent: **Ok**?

8.2.3 Classification of *ok* across registers

Text Sample 8.4 shows the frequent use of *ok* to help organize the speakers' turns in call center interactions. In this excerpt, the agent uses *ok* as part of most of his initial turns. In many instances in the Call Center corpus, the use of *ok* also resembles filled-pauses that help the speakers to maintain the flow of talk and prepare for the delivery of content. *Ok* in these situations is imbedded between filled-pauses or markers of dysfluencies (e.g., "*uh, ok, uh, we'll uh have to check your receipt for this.*"). I provide a classification of the functional classes of *ok* across registers in Figure 8.4. The most common function of *ok* is to help manage how information is delivered or exchanged in the interactions following the typical conversational roles of most discourse markers. This class appears in the beginning of turns

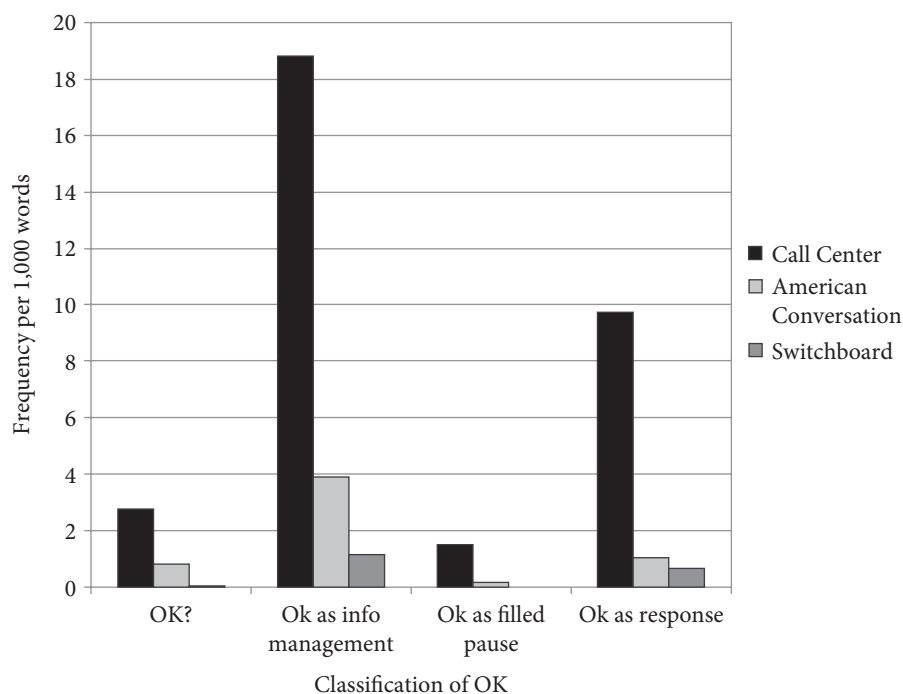


Figure 8.4. Classification of *ok* across registers.

before the content or message is given to the interlocutor. *Ok* as a short or minimal response is the next most common functional class. This classification includes the use of *ok* as a backchannel. Finally, *ok* as a question (*ok?*) or as a confirmation of comprehension is also relatively common in the Call Center corpus but rare in the two other corpora.

Call center interactions clearly have more of these functional classes of *ok* used to varying degrees by agents and callers. Agents make use of more comprehension checks (*ok?*) while callers respond to these checks by also using *ok* as a minimal response. I provide examples of these functional classes of *ok* in the following excerpts from the Call Center corpus (Text Sample 8.5).

Text Sample 8.5 Classification of *ok* in call center interactions

OK (OK?) as a question or comprehension check:

Agent: Alright. Well of course that's, certainly must be uh, quite a time for you there Adam, but don't you worry about that, I'll see what I can do to help, what we'll do is to recheck this data, *ok?*

Caller: *Ok*, thanks

OK as information management:

Agent: **Ok**, so that'd be 333-666-1111; did I get that right, sir?

Caller: Yes

Agent: **Ok**, thank you and would this be a good call back number?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: **Ok**, so now sir, I will ask that you unplug your machine first

OK as filled-pause:

Agent: Just press the key below select [short pause] just right below it

Caller: I can't find it, uh where is it?

Agent: Uh, **ok, ok**, uh just uh, the **ok**, topmost press key sir

OK as response:

Agent: Now I'm really sorry for that and let me help you out, **ok**?

Caller: **Ok**

Agent: **Ok**

The samples above show that in general, it was easy to categorize the functional classes of *ok* used in conversations. It was also fairly easy to create a concordance/KWIC program that counts the occurrences of these functional classes in transcribed texts. The Call Center corpus has the greatest number of these classes while the Switchboard corpus has a very low frequency across the identified classes in Figure 8.4. Face-to-face American conversation has relatively greater usage of *ok* to manage the flow of information. Speakers managing their turns in casual conversation use *ok* to signal the coming of their main message or to clearly indicate a transition/topic shift.

8.2.4 Distribution of *alright* across registers

As with *ok*, *alright* is also frequently used in call center interactions comparatively more than in the two other registers (Figure 8.5). In the Call Center corpus, *alright* appears mostly at the beginnings of the speakers' turns to mark a clear transition and manage the flow of information by signaling the speaker's intent to move ahead to the next step in the transaction. As in the functional classes of *ok*, *alright* can also be used as a question posed to the listener to confirm comprehension and, at times, also as part of a filled-pause sequence as an agent formulates a response (e.g., "*uh, uh, alright, uh could you repeat that please?*").

The use of moderately high frequencies of *alright* across functional classes by participants in customer service transactions suggests the heightened awareness of these participants to cover important issues by controlling the flow of information, signaling intent to move ahead to the next point in the transaction, and confirming speakers' understanding during the call. Because time is of the essence in

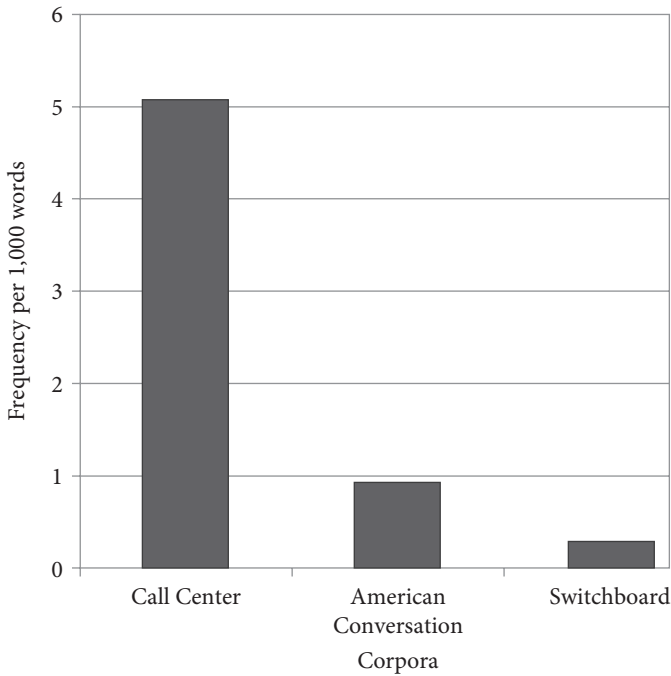


Figure 8.5. Distribution of *alright* across registers.

calls for both speakers, it is evident that they attempt to monitor their speech and signal clear transitions to the next important question or request. *Ok* and *alright* may be used interchangeably in many turns. In Text Sample 8.6, the agent uses *alright* immediately after the caller's turns mainly to signal the start of his turn. The repetitive use of *alright* in the agent's turns in this excerpt serves to recognize the caller's response and also to mark the delivery of information and the intent to move forward.

Text Sample 8.6 Use of *alright* in call center interactions

Agent: **Alright**, thank you I'd be more than glad to assist you in activating the phone of our customer, may I please have the customer's first and last name?

Caller: [unclear customer's first name] Thomas

Agent: Thomas, **alright**, thank you, and, by the way, your last, first name again is Sebastian?

Caller: Yes

Agent: **Alright** thank you, and let me check this from our system **alright** please turn the phone on so that it will be ready for programming, **alright**, I'll be making an account for Mr. Thomas, may I please have his home address?

- Caller: I have to ask him first, hold on [HOLD] sorry about that, his address is xx-xx Orange St., Tallahassee, Florida
- Agent: No problem **alright**, how about the home phone number please?
- Caller: 999-333-2222
- Agent: **Alright** and how about the [unclear] access number, does he have one?
- Caller: 66-88-99
- Agent: **Alright** so let me check this information I'll be submitting this in our system now **alright** please get a pen and paper so that you could write the number for Mr. Thomas I have here a number that is a local from Tallahassee, Florida
- Caller: Ok
- Agent: **Alright**, it's 999-5555 [not the exact numbers]
- Caller: 5555?
- Agent: Yes, 5555, **alright**?
- Caller: Ok
- Agent: And you will have to try these numbers and just call us back if you have any problems or if there is no [unclear] Florida
- Caller: Thanks
- Agent: **Alright**, thanks, thank you
- Caller: Thanks

Figure 8.6 shows the common functional classes of *alright* in the Call Center corpus. I decided not to include data from American Conversation and Switchboard in this section since the occurrence of *alright* in these two corpora is very infrequent and similarly distributed. *Alright* has generally fewer functional classes than *ok*. For the most part, it is used to manage the flow of information, as a short response, and to confirm comprehension of turns. Speakers may also use *alrighty* (*alrighty?*) in their speech indicating informality, and possibly, rapport, especially in the Call Center corpus. There is a similar pattern between *alright* and *ok* in the distribution of the functional classes used in the Call Center corpus (see Figure 8.4). *Alright* is also commonly used to manage the delivery of information like *ok* more than as a short response or a confirmation of comprehension (*alright?*). Other interesting patterns of use between *ok* and *alright* are discussed in the sections comparing the frequency of these markers based on agents' performance evaluation scores and experience.

8.2.5 Distribution of *uh-huh* across registers

Figure 8.7 shows the use of *uh-huh* as a backchannel or as a short confirmatory response by speakers in the three registers. As mentioned briefly earlier in this chapter, *uh-huh* as a backchannel allows the passive speaker to indicate active participation in the conversation while allowing the current speaker to continue

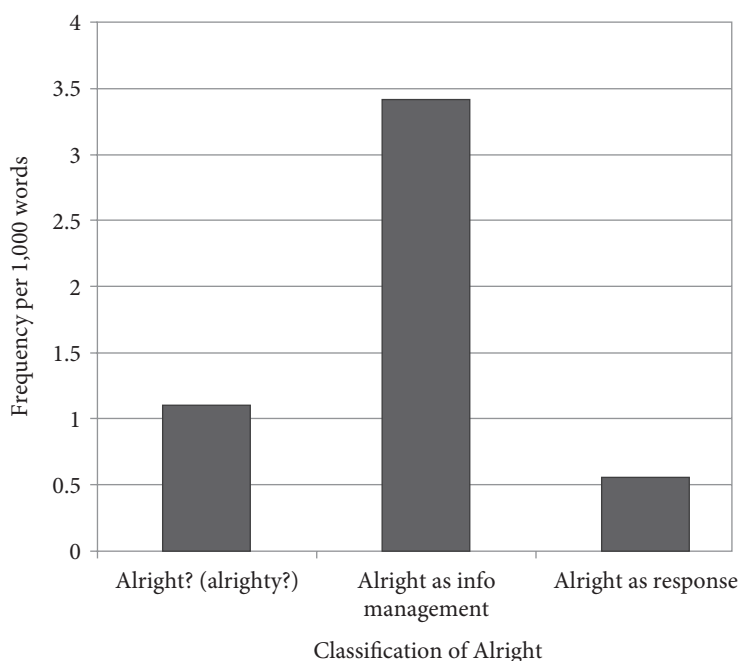


Figure 8.6. Classification of *alright* in the Call Center corpus.

with his/her turn (White, 1994). This conversational device also helps sustain the regular flow of the interaction. *Uh-huh* from the passive speaker may overlap or latch into the current speaker's turns and this typically does not affect the flow of turn-taking in the conversation. *Uh-huh* as a short response usually has a rising intonation which signals that the passive speaker/listener still needs additional information before he/she takes the floor. A question mark is added in the transcript after *uh-huh* to indicate rising intonation in the speakers' turns.

It is clear from Figure 8.7 that the telephone as a medium of communication affects the distribution of *uh-huh* used by speakers. Both the Call Center and Switchboard corpora have more frequency of this insert/backchannel than face-to-face conversation. Switchboard discussions (5.232) have the greatest frequency of *uh-huh* as backchannels and as short responses per 1,000 words compared to the Call Center (2.912) and American Conversation corpora (1.614). In these telephone-based registers, listeners often need to indicate to their interlocutors that they are still actively listening especially during longer turns. Because participants do not see each other in these conversations, frequent backchannels are necessary to sustain the flow of talk and indicate that the other participant is still involved in the interaction. It is common for speakers to check if the other person

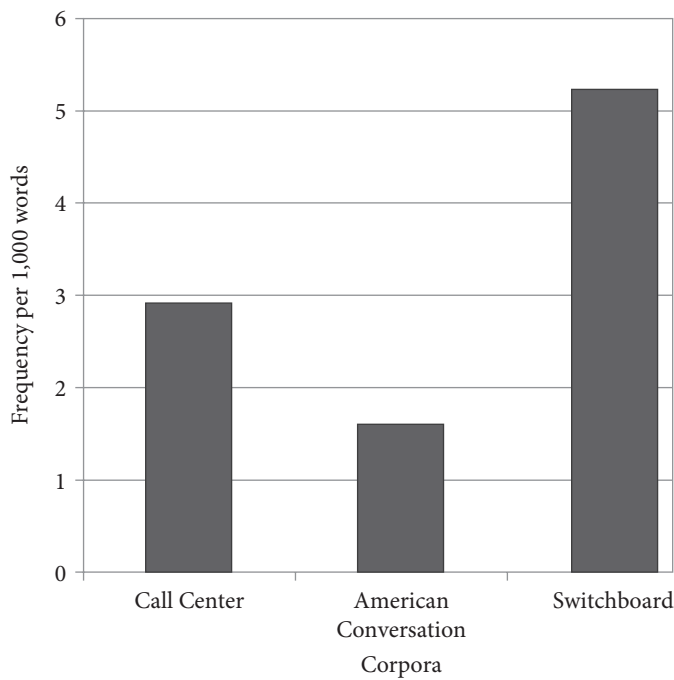


Figure 8.7. Distribution of *uh-huh* across registers.

is still on the line whenever there is long silence or gaps between backchannels (e.g., from Switchboard: “*uh, I guess that took too long, uh, pardon me, are you still there?*” [laughs]).

The difference between the Switchboard and Call Center corpora in the use of backchannels and confirmatory responses is perhaps due primarily to the types of topics discussed in these interactions. In Switchboard, the somewhat academic and slightly formal discussions of issues may allow longer explanations from speakers than the more defined question-answer sequences in call center interactions. In addition, because of the unique, equal relationships generally existing between the participants in Switchboard, it is possible that these participants want to establish mutual courtesy by “recognizing” the ideas and opinions expressed during the interaction. Text Sample 8.7 illustrates the use of backchannels in a typical Switchboard exchange. The passive speaker in this excerpt uses *uh-huh* as a backchannel to allow the current speaker to further develop her turns. These backchannels may also indicate the passive speaker’s agreement with the argument or recognition of the active speaker’s ideas. The passive speaker also provides additional content to

her backchannel (e.g., “*uh-huh that takes a lot of room*”) which has the effect of agreeing or confirming the main message of the active speaker.

Text Sample 8.7 Use of *uh-huh* as backchannels in Switchboard

<xces:u>: sometimes i i said i sometimes i wish i had more space you know i grow a lot of things a lot of food and,
 <xces:u>: **Uh-huh, uh-huh**
 <xces:u>: sometimes i i want to plant something there's not enough room to plant it some of those things like uh you know the things that vine like uh cucumbers or uh
 <xces:u>: **uh-huh**, that's right that's right
 <xces:u>: **uh-huh**
 <xces:u>: squash or something like that plant one of those and it takes up your whole space
 <xces:u>: **uh-huh** takes a lot of room
 <xces:u>: it sure does **uh-huh**, i made mistake one year and planted some cantaloupe my goodness what a mistake that was
 <xces:u>: oh yeah that yeah they they just run all over the place don't they
 <xces:u>: **uh-huh** they do well it was very good it just takes up you know like you say a lot of your garden area
 <xces:u>: right right see I, **uh-huh**
 <xces:u>: it's the first and only time i've done that we don't do anything exotic we just do oh tomatoes bell peppers radishes and turnips i mean not turnips carrots beets and things like that
 <xces:u>: **uh-huh** the basics uh right?
 <xces:u>: **uh-huh** yeah that's what we do'
 <xces:u>: yeah
 <xces:u>: **uh-huh?**

8.2.6 Classification of *uh-huh* across registers

Figure 8.8 shows the distribution of the two functional classes of *uh-huh* (as backchannel or short response) across registers. *Uh-huh* as a backchannel and as a short response is used more in Switchboard than in the two other corpora. Interactions from the three corpora have more occurrences of *uh-huh* as backchannels than as short response.

It may be desirable to train agents to use more backchannels in call center interactions, to more closely approximate the frequency of usage in Switchboard and, consequently, the resultant perception of their more active involvement in the interaction. Telephone interactions between native speakers potentially require more signals of active involvement such as backchannels which are important in maintaining an effective flow of communication. As shown in the sections below, the frequency of *uh-huh* in agents' turns appears to evidence both experience and quality of service in the Call Center corpus.

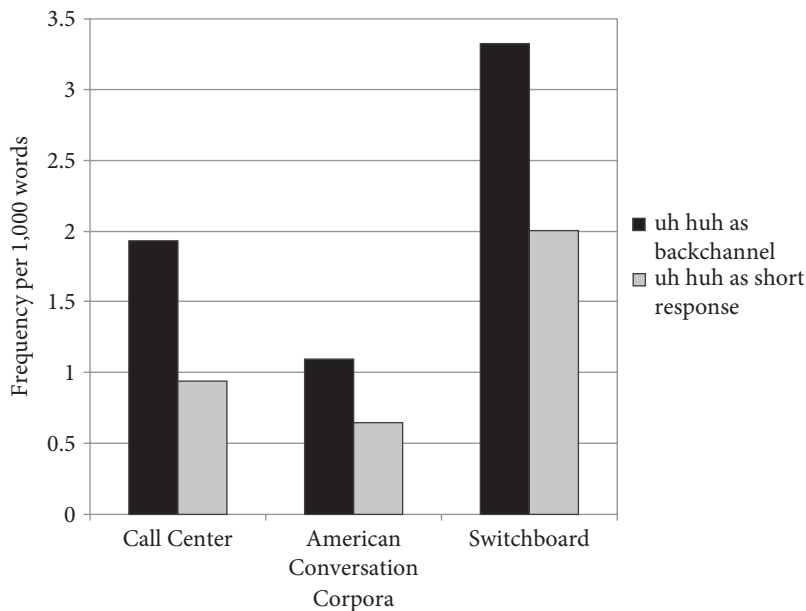


Figure 8.8. Classification of *uh-huh* (as backchannel and short response) across registers.

8.3 Distribution of inserts across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus

The following sections present the distribution of inserts across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. In the tables and figures below, I include only data that show clear differences or interesting similarities between the speaker groups in the corpus and I do not provide those that are distributed relatively evenly.

8.3.1 Selected inserts by role and gender

Oh, *well*, and *you know* are the most common inserts used by agents and callers in the Call Center corpus. In general, callers make use of more discourse markers and discourse particles than agents. Figure 8.9 shows that callers use relatively more *well*, *you know*, and *I mean* inserts in their turns than the agents. Agents and callers have very similar frequencies of *oh* and *anyway*.

The more frequent use of inserts by callers than agents in call center transactions suggests their conscious attempt to engage the agents and to organize their turns. The explicit markers of participation identified by Schiffrin (1987) (*I mean*, *you know*) are common in callers' speech across categories of accounts. Agents perhaps indicate participation by using related paralinguistic devices which reduce the need for frequent organizing and involvement markers in their turns.

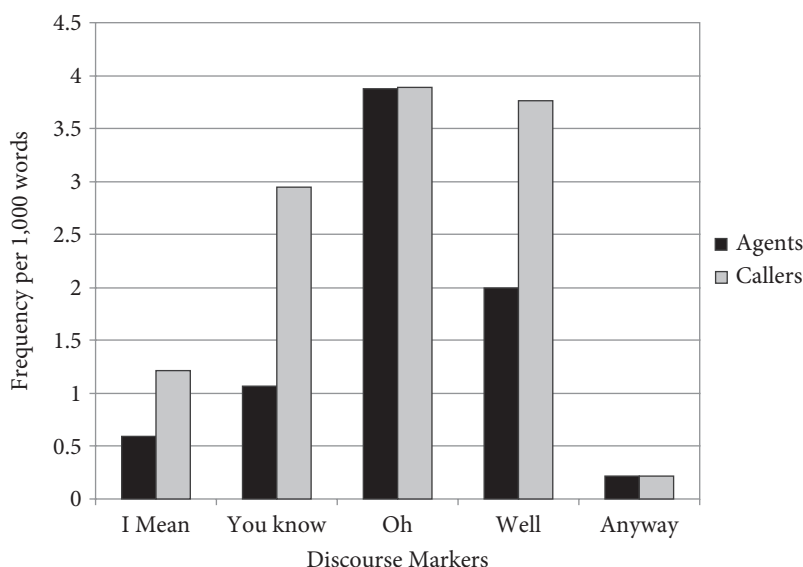


Figure 8.9. Commonly used discourse markers and discourse particles by agents and callers.

Text Sample 8.8 illustrates the common occurrences of *well* and *oh* used by agents and callers in the Call Center corpus. *Well* is used as a common marker of information management (e.g., “*Well she connected me now, is this the same number, that’s 777-7777?*”) and as an initial part of a turn. *Oh* is mostly used as an interjection (e.g., “*Oh I see, oh wait a minute, hang on a second, I clicked it too much, ok.*”).

Text Sample 8.8 Use of *well* and *oh* in the Call Center corpus

Agent: Alright, **well** when did the uhm [interruption]

Caller: I don’t know if they’re gonna send it, yeah **well** they’re ending their working today. They’re open seven days a week on repair right?

Agent: Yeah **well** that’s what I have here. It’s **well** [interruption]

Caller: Ok **well** let’s wait and and if it doesn’t then I’ll call and just you know, we’ll do something else

Agent: **Well** yeah

Caller: [unclear] yeah, well, she had to double check her information anyways, and I can’t wait, well, I have all these [interruption]

Agent: Oh yes, I do understand that you may be busy now

Caller: **Well** she connected me now, is this the same number, that’s 777-7777?

Agent: **Well** here, let me give you a number, alright?

-

Agent: **Oh** yeah [interruption]

Caller: I don't know what that is. Well, actually I don't know, I didn't have a lot of choices to press. I don't have a connection issue, but I have uhm problems with my Outlook Express and I'm just really, ignoring it without out- I mean I don't really know anything about computers it just says that I have here like a Quickcare code, that uhm, they gave me, I don't know if that would help you?

Agent: **Oh** yeah [interruption]

Caller: The numbers?

Agent: Ok go ahead, **oh**, ok let me check here, let me get that number

Caller: 888-888-888 action tech

Agent: **Oh** action tech, with a small antenna at the back or no antenna?

Caller: [short pause] **oh**, no antenna

Agent: **Oh**, ok, **oh**, just so, why don't you click it? And then, choose remove. Click it and then [inter]

Caller: **Oh** I see, **oh** wait a minute, hang on a second, I clicked it too much, ok

Agent: **Oh**, I'm sorry, let me see here, I'm sorry I forgot, this is uh on MSN?

Figure 8.10 shows the use of selected inserts (*I mean*, *you know*, and *well*) by male and female agents and callers in the Call Center corpus. Callers consistently use more of these markers than agents; *you know* is the most common discourse marker as illustrated below.

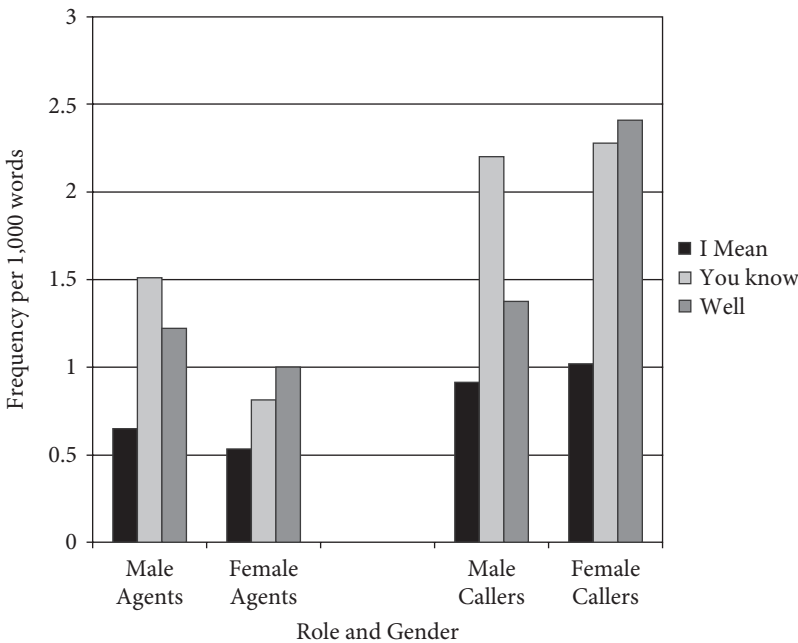


Figure 8.10. Selected inserts by role and gender.

Male agents use relatively more of these three inserts than female agents. On the other hand, female callers have slightly greater frequencies of these same inserts than male callers. Female callers have slightly more *you knows* in their turns than do male callers, again indicating increased involvement and participation from American females in conversation. The interpretation of this cross-cultural gender-based data requires some consideration of the common functional uses of these inserts in the transactions. It appears that, by using these inserts more frequently, Filipino males attempt to frame a more-organized and involved discourse than do Filipino female agents. Another possible interpretation relates to fluency and the possible use of these selected features by males as fillers instead of as discourse markers. Clearly, future research is required to accomplish a more complete analysis and interpretation of the distribution and function of inserts used by male and female agents and callers in call center interactions.

8.3.2 Selected inserts by agents' performance evaluation scores

Table 8.1 illustrates the distribution of selected discourse markers or discourse particles by agents' performance evaluation scores. It appears that the frequency of these markers in agents' turns signify quality of service in the transactions. There is linear increase in the frequency of *you know*, *oh*, and *well*, in the collective turns of Low, Mid, and High agents, respectively. Mid-performing agents have a slightly higher frequency of *I mean* than High agents. The greater use of interjections (*oh*), discourse organizers (*well*), and participation/involvement markers (*I mean/you know*) by High-performing agents suggests that there is a need to explicitly indicate participation and organization of agents' speech in call center discourse to approximate the level of usage by callers and, possibly, agents who are native speakers of English. Additionally, the use of these markers perhaps establishes greater personalization of support through, for example, interjections that immediately respond to and are "congruent" with or responsive to the callers throughout the course of the transactions.

Table 8.1. Selected inserts by agents' performance evaluation scores.

Agents' Performance Evaluation Scores	I Mean	You Know	Oh	Well
Low	0.441	0.237	3.081	0.948
Mid	0.628	1.045	3.129	1.664
High	0.599	1.453	3.362	2.818

The distribution of *I mean*, *you know*, and *well* used by male and female agents (Figure 8.10) surprisingly does not agree with the data that show a strong relationship between agents' gender and quality scores. For the most part, female agents consistently outperformed male agents in using linguistic features that are quality indicators in outsourced call centers. However, for *I mean*, *you know*, and *well*, male agents consistently have higher frequencies of these markers than female agents matching the quality results shown in Table 8.1.

8.3.3 Selected inserts by agents' experience with their current accounts

Data showing the distribution of selected inserts based on agents' length of service with their current accounts are shown in Table 8.2. In general, experience in customer service also influences the frequency of these inserts in agents' turns. Experienced agents have relatively more *you know*, *oh*, and *well* inserts in their discourse than less-experienced agents. However, agents having 1 to 2 years of service with their current accounts use slightly more *I mean* inserts than agents with over 2 years of service. The combination of experience with account protocols and additional fluency training obtained by experienced agents may have provided them with important strategies related to the use of inserts to show consistent involvement and participation in their turns. Less experienced agents are perhaps still focusing on their Filipino-English background in using these selected discourse markers or discourse particles. As noted earlier, many of these agents may phrase their turns with limited explicit organization and direct participation markers, opting instead for stress and intonation patterns to compensate for the absence of more personalized service conveyed by the use of these inserts in their communication with callers.

8.3.4 Use of *ok* by role and gender in the Call Center corpus

The distribution of *ok* across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus provides interesting and surprising results. Unlike the discourse markers or discourse particles shown above, the overall increased use of *ok* by Filipino agents negatively correlates with both experience and quality of service. *Ok* in this case not only

Table 8.2. Selected inserts by agents' experience with their current accounts.

Agents' Experience with Current Account	I Mean	You Know	Oh	Well
Less than 1 year	0.539	0.556	3.591	1.472
1 to 2 years	0.649	1.241	3.356	2.298
Over 2 years	0.586	1.901	4.348	1.759

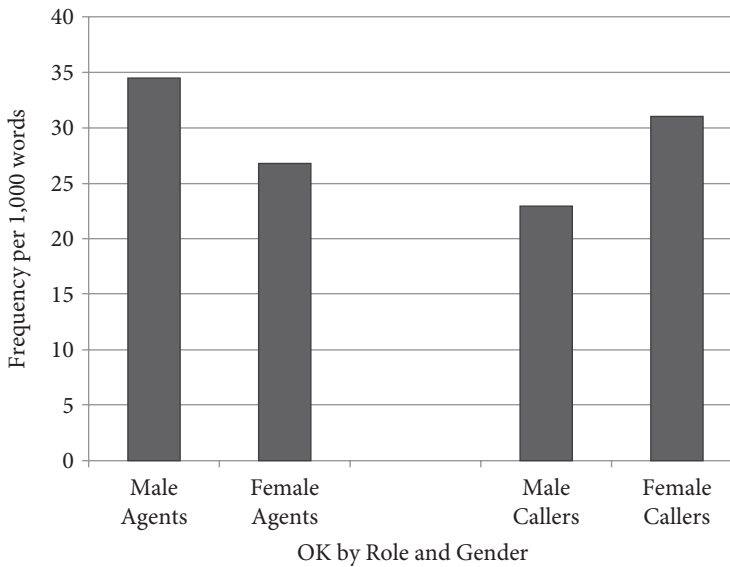


Figure 8.11. Use of *ok* by role and gender in the Call Center corpus.

indicates active involvement and participation but also denotes relevant language-based limitations (e.g., evidenced by the use of *ok* as part of a filled-pause sequence or the high frequency of two to four-word repeats of *ok* discussed in the next chapter) with groups of agents in providing quality service to the callers.

The overall cross-cultural, gender-based distribution of *ok* in call center interactions shown in Figure 8.11 is very similar to the distribution of selected discourse markers (*I mean, you know, oh, and well*) briefly discussed in Section 8.3.1. Again, male Filipino agents use more *oks* per 1,000 words than female agents, while female American callers have more of this insert than male callers. Male agents appear to use the greatest number of *oks* across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus; male callers use the fewest.

8.3.5 Use of *ok* by agents' performance evaluation scores

Figure 8.12 shows the distribution of *oks* by agents' performance evaluation scores. In agents' discourse, it is clear that the increased frequency of *ok* suggests low-level service. Mid and High-performing agents have relatively fewer frequency of *oks* in their turns than Low-performing agents. There is a linear decrease in the frequency of *oks* per 1,000 words across Low (38.776), Mid (28.335), and High (20.219) groups of agents respectively.

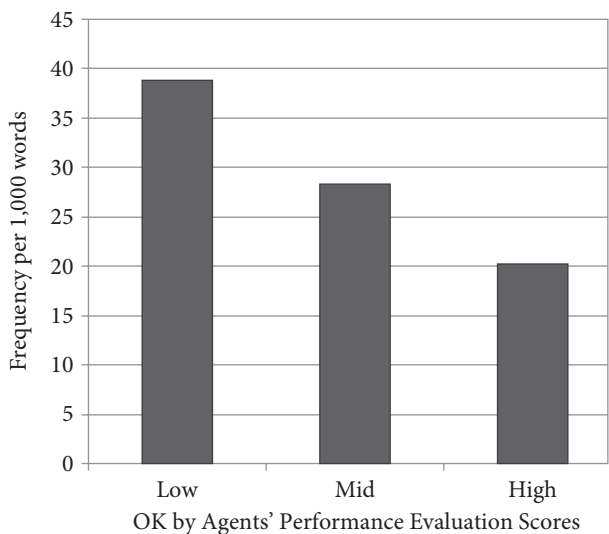


Figure 8.12. Use of *ok* by agents' performance evaluation scores.

Although it appears that collectively, more inserts suggest more involvement and participation in the interactions, the general use of *ok* by Low-performing agents specifically shows that they are less familiar with their account procedures and/or are having language-related difficulties in the transactions. The increase in the frequency of *ok* is evident across the different functional classes identified earlier in this chapter (Section 8.2.3) but is especially evident in the use of *ok* as filled-pauses by these Low-performing agents.

To address gender-based differences in the use of *ok* mentioned above, it is apparent that the increased frequency of *ok* by Filipino male agents relates to their overall task performance and language evaluation scores. Because Filipino male agents have generally lower performance evaluation scores than females, it follows that they have higher frequency of *oks* in their turns partly because of their level of fluency in English. In many instances, the repeated (over)use of *ok* by male agents resembles repeats and filled-pauses as dysfluencies in speech as mentioned earlier.

8.3.6 Use of *ok* by agents' experience with their current accounts

The agents' experience with their current accounts also appears to predict the frequency of *ok* in agents' discourse. Figure 8.13 shows that less experienced agents (less than 1 year = 32.523; 1 to 2 years = 30.341) have more *oks* per 1,000 words

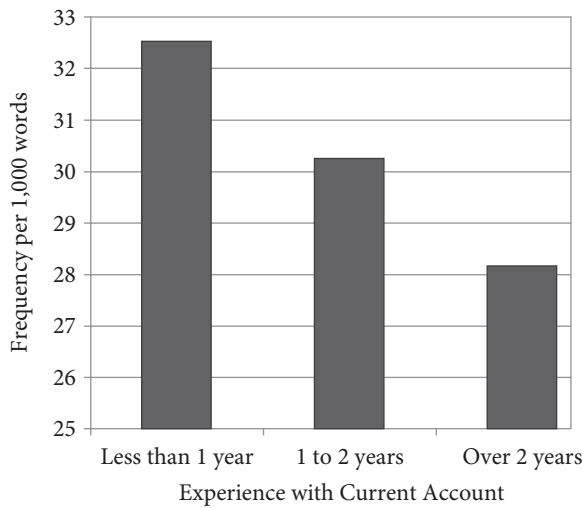


Figure 8.13. Use of *ok* by agents' experience with current account.

than those with over two years of service to their current accounts (28.155). Consistent with the data illustrating reduced use of *ok* by higher-performing agents, length of experience also helps the agents reduce their need to use *ok* as filled-pause, which, in turn, produces clearer turns and fluency of speech.

8.3.7 Use of *ok* across categories of accounts

Figure 8.14 shows the distribution of *ok* across categories of accounts in the Call Center corpus. Inquire accounts have the most number of *oks* (39.864) per 1,000 words followed by Troubleshoot (31.917) and Purchase (29.267). The difference in this distribution is brought about by the inherent level of difficulty and unique differences in packaging of information in these three account categories. Inquire and Troubleshoot accounts require the agents to organize their discourse appropriately to match the different needs of the callers in each category. The need for specific information that may not readily be available may also prompt the agents in these accounts to use *ok* not only as a discourse organizer but also as filled-pause.

8.3.8 Use of *alright* across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus

Unlike the use of *ok* in the Call Center corpus, *alright* appears to match the general distribution of common discourse-organizing inserts presented earlier in this chapter. In other words, an increase in the normalized counts of this insert correlates positively with the quality of service and length of experience agents have

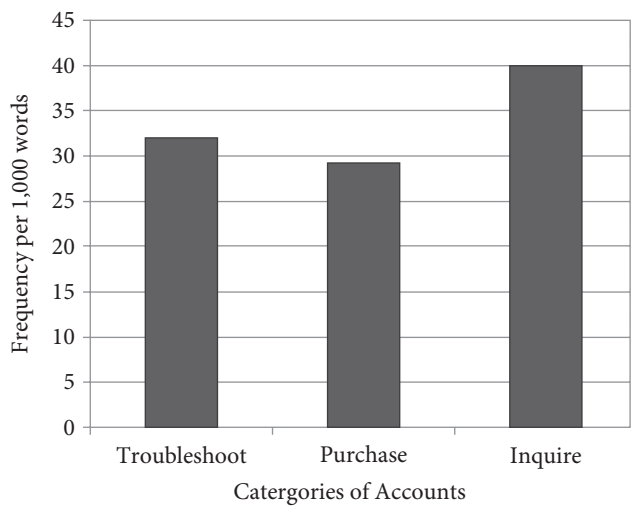


Figure 8.14. Use of *ok* across categories of accounts.

with their current accounts (discussed below). The frequency of *alright* indicates the speakers’ attempt at organizing their discourse and in actively participating in the interaction. *Alright* does not typically function as a filler but is, instead, used frequently as a discourse organizer in the initial portion of a turn or as an utterance final-generalizer (*alright?*).

Figure 8.15 shows that agents use relatively more *alrights* than callers. Female agents have 7.661 *alrights* per 1,000 words while male agents have 5.452 (callers: male callers = 2.812; female callers = 3.672). Both Filipino female agents and American female callers use more *alrights* than their male counterparts in the corpus. This result supports earlier generalizations about gender-based variation in the use of inserts in interactions. Females, through discourse-organizing inserts, show more active participation and involvement in the interaction than males and this appears to translate across cultures.

8.3.9 Use of *alright* by agents’ performance evaluation scores

The linear increase in the frequency of *alright* across agents’ performance evaluation scores is illustrated in Figure 8.16. Low-performing agents (4.773) have the fewest occurrences of this insert per 1,000 words compared to Mid (4.929) and High-performing agents (5.872). *Alright*, therefore, could be included in the list of features that signify service quality in outsourced call center interactions. The agents’ ability to actively organize their turns in part through the use of *alright* suggests that they have the correct awareness of the proper linguistic composition of

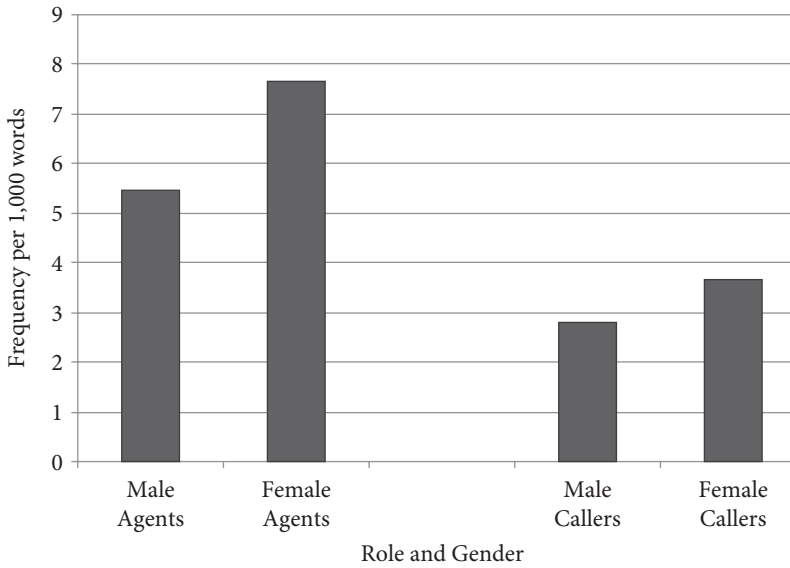


Figure 8.15. Use of *alright* by role and gender.

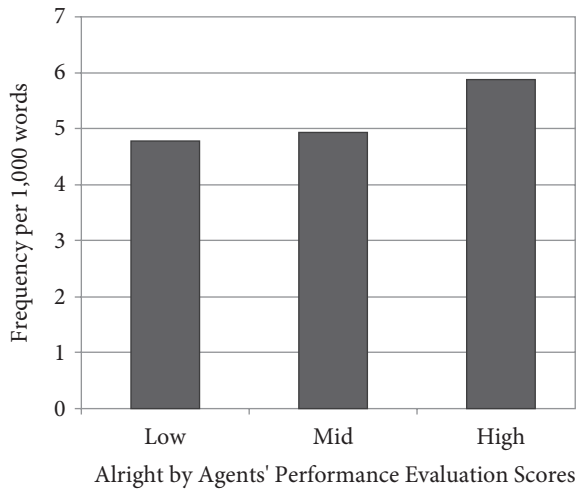


Figure 8.16. Use of *alright* by agents' performance evaluation scores.

turns. The overall frequency of discourse-organizing inserts including *alright* suggests the agents' level of fluency in English and preparedness in handling customer issues during the transactions.

8.3.10 Use of *alright* by agents' experience with their current accounts

Figure 8.17 shows the distribution of *alright* based on the agents' experience with their current accounts. Agents with less than one year of service (7.703) use the fewest number of *alrights* per 1,000 words, while agents with one to two years of service (9.028) have the highest number of *alrights* in the corpus (agents with over two years of service = 8.818). It is not clear what influences the greater use of *alright* by the 1 to 2 Years group than those with the most experience. However, it is obvious that agents with less than one year of service would benefit from additional training in the use of *alright* and other inserts that help organize the discourse and demonstrate active involvement during the transactions.

8.3.11 Use of *uh-huh* across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus

Figure 8.18 shows the use of *uh-huh* as backchannels and short responses across role and gender groups in the Call Center corpus. Female agents use a considerably greater number of backchannels and short response among these speaker groups. Male and female callers have very similar frequencies of backchannels/confirmatory responses in their turns. Because backchannels and giving confirmatory short feedback might reasonably be considered as universal agent-related tasks, regardless of agents' gender, the difference between the frequency of this insert by Filipino male and female agents needs to be further analyzed. In the following figures, *uh-huh* is shown to be an indicator of both quality of service and

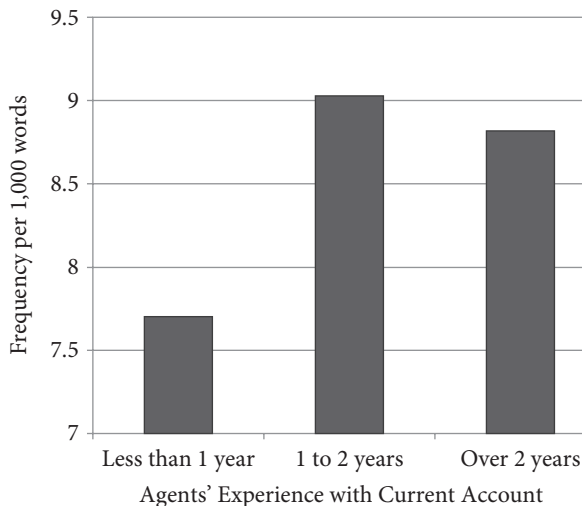


Figure 8.17. Use of *alright* by agents' experience with current account.

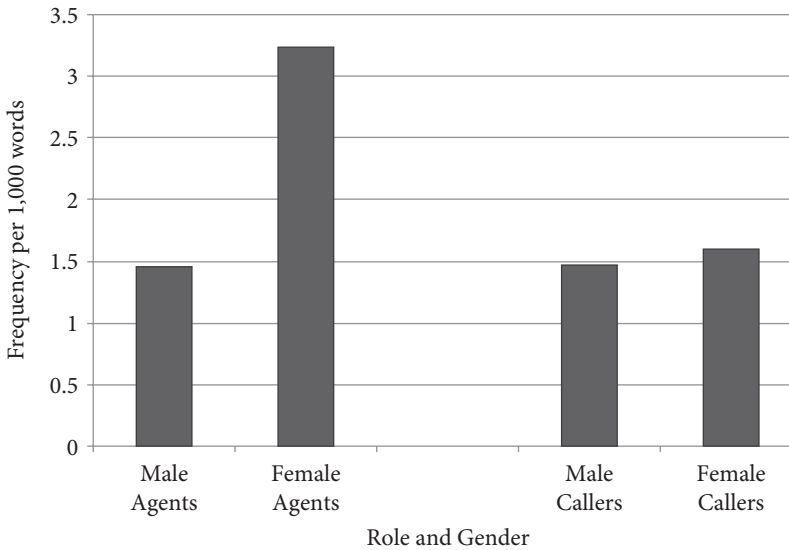


Figure 8.18. Use of *uh-huh* across role and gender in the Call Center corpus.

length of experience. In this case, it appears, therefore, that male agents might need to further increase the frequency of backchannels and confirmatory responses (or checks) in their turns.

As previously mentioned, Filipinos generally exhibit limited backchanneling in their turns compared to native speakers of English (Peltzman & Fishburn, 2006). In fact, in Tagalog-based telephone conversations, the silence of a passive speaker during the active speaker's turn is more often the norm. Frequent interruptions and overlap which may cause breaks in the flow of speech are highly avoided in Tagalog conversation, especially that which is formal and task-oriented. There is, in fact, no clear Tagalog equivalent of *uh-huh* the way it is used in English. *Uh-huh* in Tagalog interactions is usually substituted by interjections and short reactions (equivalent to inserts or fillers such as *oh*, *uhm*, or *ok*). However, the need to use *uh-huh* in English or code-switched interactions in the Philippines is also evident for Filipino English speakers, and it appears that most of them are aware of this need to show active participation when speaking in English.

Call center training practices in the Philippines have recently included topics in backchanneling and the explicit use linguistic markers that indicate reflective listening during the transactions. As reported by Peltzman and Fishburn (2006), American callers anticipate backchannels in the calls and many call centers have provided coaching to their agents related to the use of these backchannels. It is possible that female agents are currently adjusting more readily to

these training designs than male agents. Clearly, female agents are more active in monitoring their discourse and in using linguistic markers that demonstrate their personalized service.

8.3.12 Use of *uh-huh* by agents' performance evaluation scores

Figure 8.19 shows the linear increase in the frequency of *uh-huh* used both as backchannels and confirmatory short responses across agents' performance evaluation scores. Low-performing agents have the fewest backchannels or confirmatory responses (0.712) per 1,000 words compared to Mid (1.714) and High-performing (2.311) agents. It is obvious that more backchannels and short feedback to the callers have become part of the linguistic repertoire of High-performing agents. An increase in the frequency of *uh-huh* for low-performing agents over a period of time may indicate improvement both in language proficiency and task performance.

8.3.13 Use of *uh-huh* by agents' experience with their current accounts

Backchannels and short confirmatory responses are also indicators of agents' length of experience with their current accounts. Figure 8.20 shows that the most experienced agents (with over two years of service) have the highest number of *uh-huh* in the corpus (2.433). Agents with one to two years of service have 1.645, while those with less than one year of actual service to their current accounts have 1.11 *uh-huh* per 1,000 words. This linear increase in the frequency of *uh-huh* in

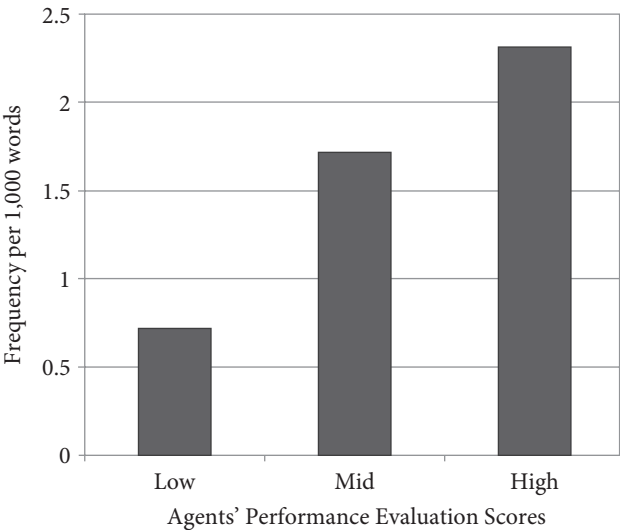


Figure 8.19. Use of *uh-huh* by agents' performance evaluation scores.

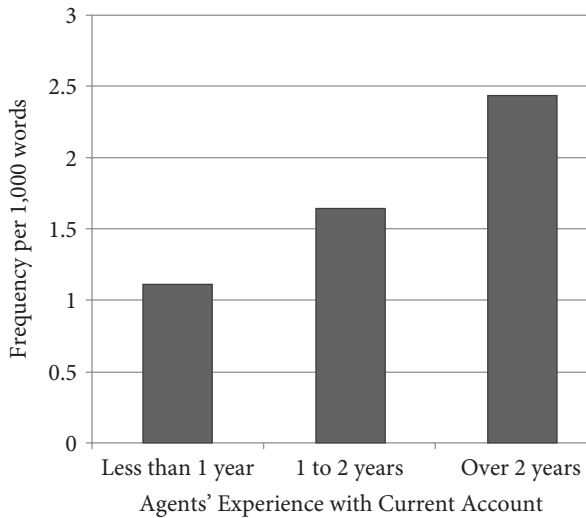


Figure 8.20. Use of *uh-huh* by agents' experience with their current accounts.

the Call Center corpus as agents' service experience also increases indicates that the training practices of this call center in the Philippines are working and that the agents are potentially acquiring this additional skill of backchanneling through their interactions with American callers.

8.3.14 Use of *uh-huh* across categories of accounts

Finally, the distribution of *uh-huh* across categories of accounts is shown in Figure 8.21. Purchase accounts have the highest number of backchannels/short confirmatory responses per 1,000 words (1.332) followed by Troubleshoot (1.002) and Inquire (0.678). The increased number of backchannels and short confirmatory responses (*uh-huh*?) in Purchase accounts is possibly influenced by the constant need in these accounts to double-check specific aspects of orders placed by callers as well as to signal the caller to continue with his/her turns as the agents log-in specific data or information during the call.

8.4 Chapter summary

In Chapter 8, I followed the LGSWE's general classification of inserts for comparison across registers and speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. These inserts

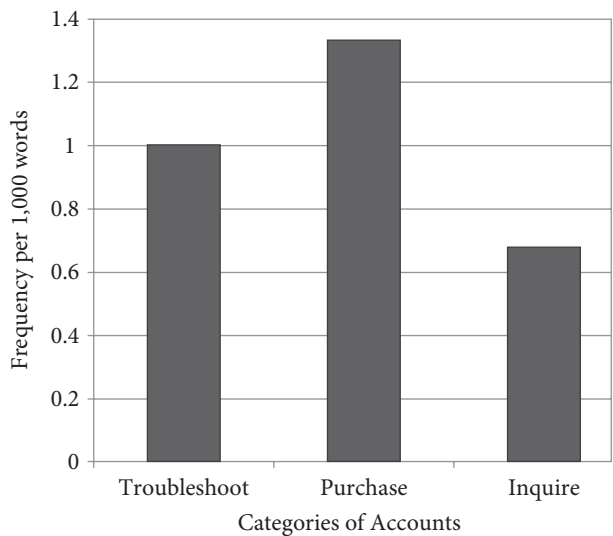


Figure 8.21. Use of *uh-huh* across categories of accounts.

included discourse markers, discourse particles, and backchannels. I also provided specific sections for *ok*, *alright*, and *uh-huh* because of their high frequencies in the turns of speakers in call center interactions. I attempted to classify the functions of *ok* and *alright* as well as *uh-huh* (as either a backchannel or a short response). I found that it was fairly easy to provide a classification of the functions of these inserts and such analysis could be utilized for a future, more detailed study of the distribution of inserts in spoken corpora.

The data in this chapter illustrated the typical preferences of speakers in marking their turns, providing short reactions, or signaling intentions to interrupt. In Switchboard and call center interactions, turns were much more defined following a clearer exchange of question-response-question or response-response sequences than casual or face-to-face conversation. Because of the slightly formal exchanges in these two telephone-based registers, participants appeared to “tune in” to each other more to carefully manage their turns and the way they deliver the information. The telephone as a medium also potentially affected the distribution of inserts in these interactions.

Inserts in call center transactions could also be used as descriptors of role and gender and agents’ experience and performance evaluation scores. Backchannels, for example, were used more by female agents and those with high performance evaluation scores. Both *ok* and *alright* appeared very frequently in the Call Center

corpus, but while the high frequency of *alright* seemed to indicate quality of service, the high frequency of *ok* indicated the opposite. The functional differences and interpretations of this result for these two inserts could be explored further in future research.

Dysfluencies

9.1 Introduction

The LGSWE defines a dysfluency as “a normal accompaniment of spontaneous speech resulting from minor performance problems that are triggered mainly by online pressures” (p. 1052). Dysfluencies include a hold-up in delivery (i.e., a hesitation pause), filled pauses, repeats, retrace-and-repair sequences (i.e., reformulations), utterances left grammatically incomplete, and syntactic blends (or anacoluthon). These performance errors simply indicate a minor break in the flow of conversation and may not necessarily affect comprehension. However, major dysfluencies could certainly cause misunderstanding or a breakdown in communication.

Online pressure varies from conversation to conversation and is highly influenced by the nature of the task and the relationship existing between participants. For example, in casual, face-to-face conversation between speakers who are familiar with each other, there is limited pressure to maintain well-delivered turns, especially when they do not affect general comprehension. Longer pauses and gaps are common and most speakers do not make a conscious effort to maintain fluid delivery of speech. Because the participants have many opportunities for topic shifts or even avoidance of a response, there is less pressure to produce well-structured utterances. However, for many formal and task-oriented interactions, participants are often reminded of turn-taking principles and the typical sequences expected between questions and responses. In job interviews, for instance, the speakers need to be attentive to various speech variables including length of turns, types of politeness and respect markers used, overt reactions such as laughter, and the use of appropriate jokes or stories to banter with the interlocutor (White, 1994). To some extent, this awareness of formal structures in the interaction consequently affects the use or avoidance of dysfluencies. Speakers may have to use filled pauses to ensure the normal flow of speech or avoid repeats, reformulations, and long pauses to signal fluency, expertise, and preparation.

Again, for most types of conversations, these performance problems do not affect how meaning is exchanged and interpreted by interactants. Oral performance in spontaneous speech is often not “judged” by listeners outside of performance-oriented speech settings like debates or television/radio broadcast. However, for job interviews and similarly for telephone-based customer service,

the interviewers and callers expect a more fluid delivery of information from the interviewees and agents. Oral performance in these two examples is evaluated, to a certain degree, and the interviewees and agents are required to show sufficient knowledge of content and ability to effectively respond to a question. Long pauses, constant filled-pauses, and repeats may suggest these speakers' limitations in fluency and content knowledge, and these may affect their goals or status and outcomes after the interaction (e.g., the interviewee might not get hired). It is, therefore, important that interviewees and agents demonstrate topic familiarity or mastery in these speech encounters and avoid repetitive performance problems in their utterances.

Online production pressures are also brought about by constant challenges from speakers' memory lapses and difficulties recalling details during the interaction. Speakers need adequate preparation time in their turns to compensate for these common memory lapses. As part of this necessary preparation for the next utterance, filled-pauses are used to limit the amount of dead air in spontaneous speech. In outsourced call center discourse, pauses and filled-pauses are often used by participants to process the information and buy thinking time before a response. The frequent pauses by agents during transactions also result from the need to multi-task as they attempt to support the caller and respond to the identified needs. Agents usually log in the details of the calls in their database while they talk to the callers. However, the repetitive forms of dysfluencies of some Filipino agents clearly indicate their inexperience with various account protocols, or possibly, unfamiliarity with, or failure to comprehend the callers' questions. Because the agents in this book are non-native speakers of English, these forms of dysfluencies are also accounted for by varying levels of speaking ability or general level of fluency in the L2. In addition, since many agents rely on set scripts and memorized chunks of questioning sequences, a sudden break in these moves from an unusual question or request could result in the occurrence of pauses, fillers, and repeats. Whenever they are confronted by irate or very impatient callers, several Filipino agents also lose their scripts and are unable to sustain a normal flow of speech.

For this book, the forms of dysfluencies included in the analyses are:

1. Filled-pauses
2. Short and long pauses
3. Repeats
4. Holds

9.1.1 Filled-pauses

I considered the occurrences of *uh*, *erm*, *hmm*, *um*, and *ahh* appearing in the transcriptions in the three corpora as filled-pauses. I did not specify the differences

between these transcriptions nor group them based on phonetic properties (e.g., *uh* and *erm* are both considered as a filled-pause and I counted all occurrences of these features). Different transcription conventions in the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora required me to scan sample transcripts and make sure that I was able to capture these using my set of computational programs. I also ensured that the transcriptions of filled-pauses completed by the transcriptionists in the Call Center corpus were accurate and consistent.

9.1.2 Short and long pauses

Short and long pauses are included as comments in the transcripts of the Call Center corpus following the T2KSWAL convention. A short pause is a pause of three seconds or less while a long pause is a pause of more than three seconds. These pauses in the transactions often occur because of the need to process various types of information in a highly interactive setting. Speakers may find it difficult recalling data or accurately and completely comprehending an issue while doing other concurrent activities such as validating personal information or checking receipts or account numbers. It is clear that the frequent occurrence of short and long pauses adds significantly to the handling time of a transaction. Because agents in most accounts need to meet a certain average handling time, it is necessary that they do their best to limit or avoid these short and long pauses.

These pauses indicate actual dead air in the speakers' turns. Some long pauses reach between six or seven seconds in duration before a speaker makes another utterance. However, these are not very common in the transactions. I ensured that the transcriptionists checked the time meter in the sound files during transcriptions so that they were following the distinction between these pause categories. In listening to the transactions, it was easy to notice and check the lengths of the pauses in speakers' turns because of the defined turn-taking involved in telephone interactions. The occurrence of dead air was generally conspicuous, and speakers, after some time waiting for an utterance, always made the necessary follow ups or checks (e.g., "*excuse me, ma'am are you there?*").

The analysis of short and long pauses in this section does not include a comparison across registers. Both the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora followed different transcriptions of pauses (e.g., pauses in the American Conversation corpus are indicated by ... while comments are inserted in Switchboard) and neither specify short or long pauses as the categories denote in my call center transcripts.

9.1.3 Repeats

Repeats are clear manifestations of performance phenomena unique to spoken language and also, to some extent, to written representations of speech. Repeats,

as a form of dysfluency, are presumed to be “unplanned or involuntary” (LGSWE, p. 1056). However, speakers may repeat words or phrases also to buy thinking time and re-begin the same piece of speech to enable them to process and provide the necessary information. Like filled-pauses, repeats may be caused by the pressure involved in the quick production of language (Quaglio, 2004). The LGSWE reports that the overwhelming majority of repeats are single repeats and the likelihood of the repetition decreases sharply with the number of words repeated. *I, the, and, it,* and *you* are the most commonly repeated words in conversation.

In order to show data for repeats in this section, I developed a computer program that counts the frequency of 2, 3, and 4-word repeats. These counts do not include repeats of filled-pauses (e.g., “*.uh, uh, I don’t think it’s working.*”) which is also relatively common in speech. Two-word repeats (e.g., *I, I think that we’ll buy a different model next time*) or up to 4-word repeats (e.g., “*I,I,I,I can’t uh, unplug the.*”) are captured when these repeated words go together in a turn. The program does not count repeated reformulations or repeats with an insert (for example, in “*I,I ok, I...*” is counted as a 2-word and not a 3-word repeat). Text Sample 9.1 shows common 2 or 3-word repeats (*you, ok, the, I,* and *to*) in the Call Center corpus.

Text Sample 9.1 Common repeats occurring in the Call Center corpus

Agent: Yeah it was uh explained to me a while ago sir uh briefly that you have a hot water dispenser, unfortunately, you know, **you you** tried running the water out of it but still produces uh uh bad taste or odor coming out of it?

Caller: Yes, yes, that’s right, yes

Agent: Yeah, **you you you**’ve got to install, install, the [interruption]

Caller: I wanted to know if we can still you know replace this thing

—

Agent: Ok [long pause] **ok ok** is it prompting you to take a tour? **ok ok** we’ll just try if we can browse the internet now you can go to **the, the** main address bar and you can type any website that **you you** normally uhm you visit is that www dot yahoo dot com or cnn dot com and try to see if you can use the website using Microsoft internet explorer

Caller: I, I don’t know what you mean

Agent: Ok, you can go **to to**, the address **the, the** address bar

Caller: Ok, uhm

9.1.4 Holds

In this book, holds are indicated not by long pauses (four seconds or longer) but by the expression “*can I put you on hold?*” or variants of this question by the agents. After getting the callers’ permission, the agents then use the hold function in their

machine to temporarily interrupt the transaction. The shortest hold in the corpus lasted for only 10 seconds while the longest lasted for four minutes and 38 seconds. Thirty nine percent (or 195 out of 500) of the transactions have holds. The average hold time in the corpus is one minute and nine seconds.

Holds are not dysfluencies, *per se*. However, these instances of holds disclose that the agents need extra time to work on the issue raised by the caller, suggesting, somewhat, the agent's level of mastery of information and support procedures. Many times, the agents need to conduct research using their set of tools or to call a manager or another agent for assistance. In the recorded transactions, it's noteworthy that the Filipino agents often speak in Tagalog when talking to a Filipino manager or another agent in asking for information or solutions – the clear implication being that they find Tagalog of greater ease and utility for rapid and essential communication than the English they must use with the caller. It is also common that the agent transfers the call to a manager in the event that the issue is too complicated for him/her to solve.

Holds are to be avoided in transactions as much as possible, because they add considerable handling time, clearly increasing the agents' average length of support for their specific accounts. Frequent holds by agents of a particular account also do not reflect good training and/or account protocols. The agents know that these long holds must be used only for difficult, yet important, issues encountered during transactions. In order to avoid prolonged holds, agents may offer to discontinue the call and call the customer later after conducting their research.

9.2 Distribution of filled-pauses and repeats across registers

As earlier noted, register comparison of selected dysfluencies in this chapter only focuses on filled-pauses and repeats. Both the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora do not have holds or short and long pauses in their transcripts the same way I transcribed them in the Call Center corpus.

9.2.1 Filled-pauses across registers

Because of the pressure to maintain a continuous flow of speech in conversation, speakers often use filled-pauses to avoid dead air while preparing their next word or thought unit. In telephone conversations, the need to use filled-pauses is heightened by the fact that the speakers do not see each other and have very few paralinguistic devices to sustain the normal flow of talk. Figure 9.1 illustrates that the two registers using the telephone as the medium of conversation have more filled-pauses than face-to-face conversation (Call Center = 37.801; Switchboard = 29.452; American Conversation 20.824 per 1,000 words). The similarity between

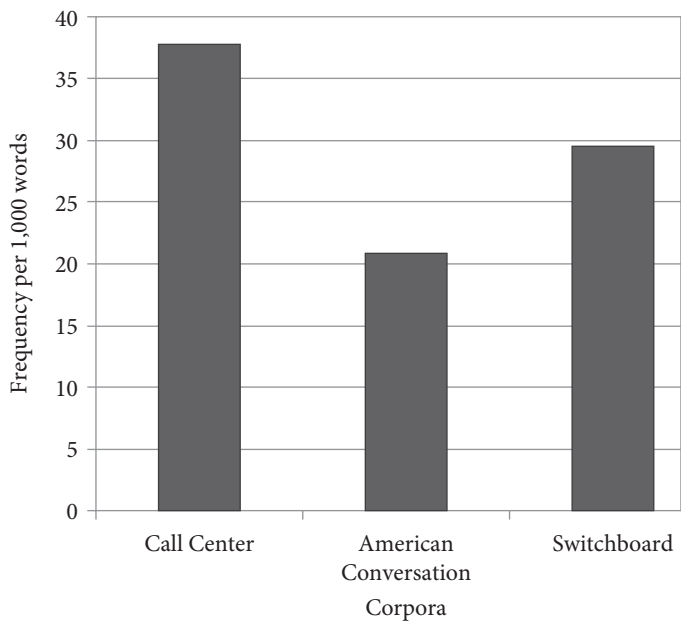


Figure 9.1. Filled-pauses across registers.

the Switchboard and Call Center corpora also extends to the nature of talk in these interactions in which speakers are prompted to engage in a more interactive, question-and-answer type exchanges. Another factor potentially contributing to the presence of more filled-pauses in these corpora is the relationship existing between the speakers. Speakers in both telephone-based corpora are not personally familiar with each other and are talking about topics that are mostly formal or somewhat academic and task-oriented.

However, there are differences between the speakers in these two telephone-based interactions that also potentially influence the speakers' use of filled-pauses. In outsourced call center interactions, the Filipino speakers appear to have more pressure to produce naturally-flowing speech during the interaction than do the native speakers in Switchboard. The agents are very aware that they are constantly recorded and monitored by QA staff and team leaders and have been coached about the importance of effective L2 phonology and intonation. Language ability also clearly differentiates the Filipino agents from the other speakers across registers and their use of filled-pauses may likewise be related to language processing and range of vocabulary that are not typically experienced by native speakers of English.

Speakers in the American Conversation sub-corpus have the fewest filled-pauses per 1,000 words (20.823). Most participants in these face-to-face interactions

know each other personally and are talking about casual topics. There is no pressure in these conversations to sustain flowing speech patterns and the speakers shift topics occasionally and have several long pauses (indicated by ... in the transcripts). Text Sample 9.2 shows various filled-pauses by two speakers from the American Conversation sub-corpus. This excerpt shows several pauses used together with filled-pauses as the speakers freely and casually discussed languages and dialects in their conversation.

Text Sample 9.2 Filled-pauses in face-to-face conversation

- <1471> Yeah, yeah ... just spread these and **uh** ... and the idea **uh** ... (13) ... <unclear> it's still going. **Uh** ... so it **uh** ... you know records various speech patterns and **uh** ... dialects and so forth. I should have had it yesterday with **uh** ... Spanish
- <1471> **Uh** ... this friend of mine ... were they here ... no seen this **uh** ... friend of mine for twenty years ... we ... I
- <1471> We studied together ... and **uh** ... she came in with her **uh** ... her husband is Argentinian and his brother and their kid the **uh** ... Argentinians ... speak quite different ... well maybe we will have some **uh** ... Spanish
- <1472> Uh-huh ... that's what I had to keep telling people when speak American rather than **uh** ... rather than the English they learn up there which is **uh** ...
- <1471> Yeah?
- <1472> Yes, that's how we should do it <laughs>
- <1471> <unclear> no way, <laughs>

Agents and callers in outsourced call center interactions clearly have the highest number of filled-pauses greater than speakers in the two other registers. These occurrences of filled-pauses could perhaps be attributed to the level of difficulty and even pressure involved in asking specific questions and providing accurate answers or solutions in service transactions, especially to callers who may be agitated or annoyed. Other factors also affecting the use of filled-pauses by Filipino agents include their level of mastery of account procedures and overall language ability. Text Sample 9.3 illustrates the use of filled-pauses (transcribed in the Call Center corpus often as **uh** or **uhm**) by both the caller and agent.

Text Sample 9.3 Filled-pauses by the agent and caller in the Call Center corpus

- Caller: And **uh** what I have here is **uh** an old employee of ours has **uh** an outstanding service request and **uh** [interruption]
- Agent: Ok **uh** may I have the [short pause] ok and **uh uh** may I have your name again please?
- Caller: **Uh** Milton M-I-L-T-O-N [not the caller's real name but sounds like Milton]

Agent: Ok, ok so **uh**, **uh** what seems to be the issue of this Mr. Milton?

Caller: Alrighty I am, oh we got **uh** got a **uh** we're here just sending to **uhm**, **uh** the drain-amino over to Kale

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: **Uh** which his old employee said **uh** check our system and found out that nothing is received by Marshalltown yet so I'm I'm just guessing here, I guess this is some kind of a warranty claim **uh** that this person was supposed to send the DVC up to your guys

Agent: **Uh**, that **uh**, let me check [interruption]

Caller: Is that about **uh** did that sound right? Or **uh**

Agent: Yeah ok so, so the issue here is **uh** is a DVC **uh** unit that should be sent to **uh** to Marshalltown, is that correct?

Caller: I believe so, I'm just trying to **uh** I'm just trying to figure out what's going on

Agent: Uh-huh yeah right **uh**, **uhm** but have you received **uh** the RGA form already? Uh-huh?

Caller: **Uh** well you see this, this thing [interruption]

Agent: **Uh uh**, **uh** well I can check just wait awhile Mr. Milton

Caller: Well, **uh** you see **uh** this thing is not on the list, **uh** what do you call **uh** the list [interruption]

Agent: Is is, **uh** it is not on your list?

Caller: Are you able to check Marshall Marshalltown?

Agent: I **uh**, **uh**, I am checking, let me check

Caller: Huh?

Agent: For a while, sir, **uh** let me check

Caller: OK

Agent: Thanks

Some filled-pauses may have already become part of many speakers' idiosyncratic speech mannerisms and used in preparation to give a particular item of information or ask a question. The agent in Text Sample 9.3, for example, seems to use **uh** before a request or before asking a question ("**..uh** may I have the.." or "**..uh** what seems to be the.."). The caller also has the same pattern in his question or response ("**..uh** did that sound right?"). It is common in the transcripts that filled-pauses appear before a noun phrase in many instances of agent-caller turns (e.g., "**..uh** an outstanding service.."; "**..uh** the drain-amino.."; "**..uh** the RGA form.."). These filled-pauses before a question or a noun phrase suggest that speakers are using them as part of their preparation for delivering the main information or communicative purpose in their turns in highly-interactive exchanges.

9.2.2 Repeats across registers

Figure 9.2 shows the distribution of repeats across registers. Speakers in the Call Center corpus have more 2, 3, and 4-word repeats than speakers in the other two corpora. Two-word repeats are generally common in speech across the three registers of conversation while 3 and 4-word repeats are rare, especially in American Conversation and Switchboard. The use of 2-word repeats per 1,000 words by callers and agents in the Call Center corpus (18.455) is more than twice that of speakers in American face-to-face conversation (7.111) and Switchboard (6.493). The great difference in the average number of 2-word repeats between agents and callers and speakers from the two comparison corpora is possibly partially due to the level of task difficulty involved in quick production of speech in the call center setting. As is the case with the use of pauses and filled-pauses, speakers in call center interactions may have more complicated questions that are not easily answered by participants without sufficient thinking and preparation time before a response is possible.

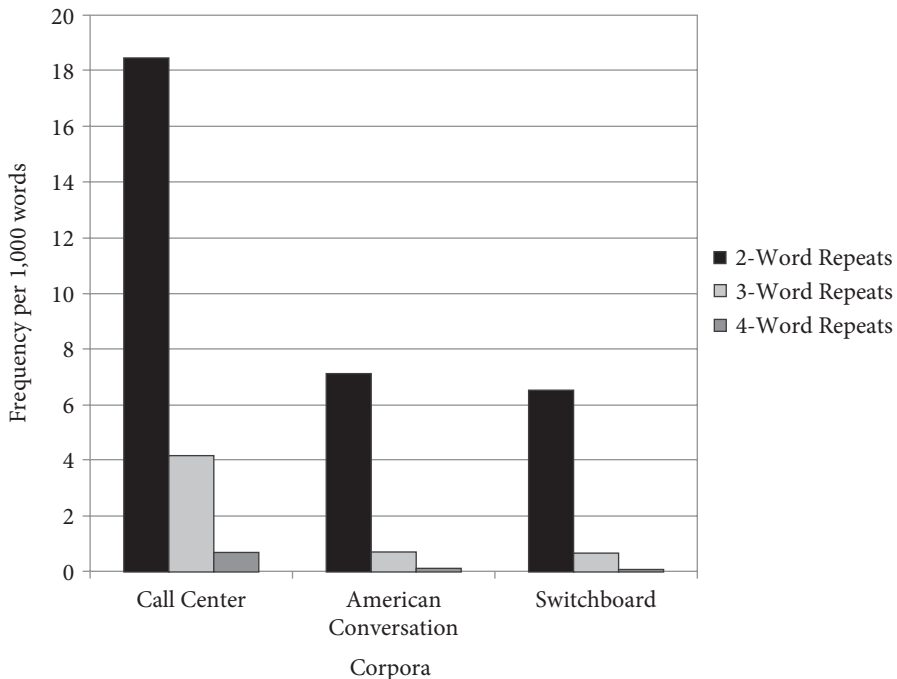


Figure 9.2. Repeats across registers.

9.2.3 Distribution of the most common 2-word repeats across registers

Figure 9.3 shows the frequency of the most common 2-word repeats across registers. These commonly repeated words in conversation are taken from earlier analysis of repeats from Quaglio (2004) and the LGSWE. In conducting the analysis for this section, I also added 2-word repeats of *ok* and *you* because these two words are used very frequently in the Call Center corpus. In general, the Call Center corpus has more of these frequently-repeated words than the two other corpora. It is clear that repeats of *ok* help distinguish call center interactions from other types of conversation. Both agents and callers use repeated *ok* in their turns as either minimal response or backchannel. Repeats of *ok* in American conversation and Switchboard are extremely rare.

Two-word repeats of *I* is very common in the three registers. Repeats of *the* and *it* are also common in these interactions. These results support the data from Quaglio and the LGSWE. *Yes* and *no* responses repeated in the exchanges are more common in the two telephone-based corpora than in face-to-face conversation. These short responses are common in the Call Center and Switchboard corpora

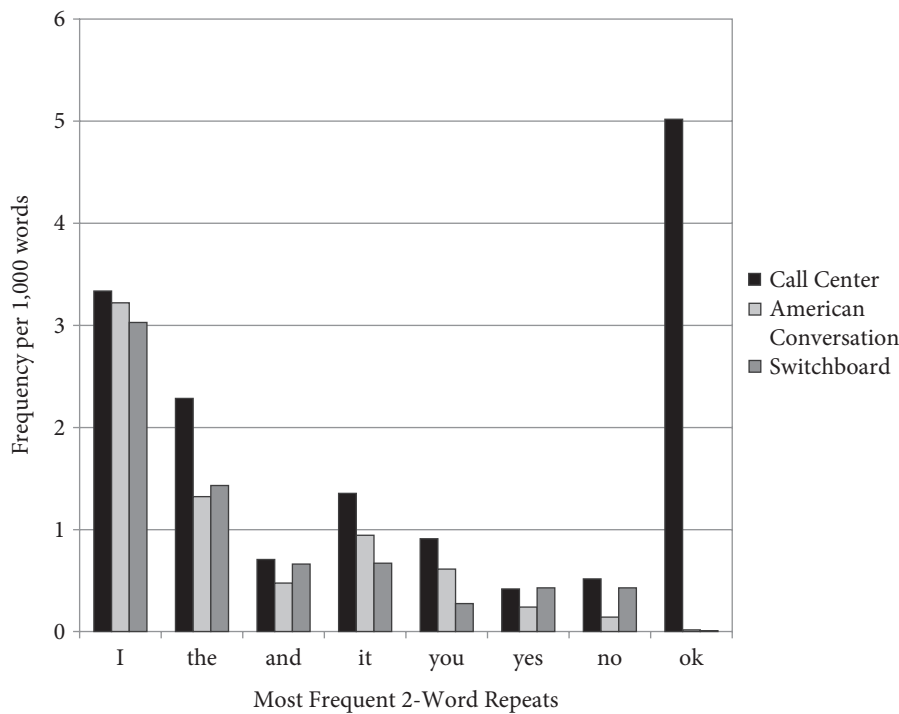


Figure 9.3. Most frequent 2-word repeats across registers.

because of the increased frequency of question-answer sequences in these two types of conversation compared to casual, face-to-face talk.

9.3 Distribution of selected dysfluencies across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus

This section presents the distribution of filled-pauses, short and long pauses, repeats, and holds across the various speaker groups in the Call Center corpus.

9.3.1 Filled-pauses by role and gender

Agents generally use more filled-pauses (39.619) than callers (33.483) in these call center transactions. However, a closer look at the data in Figure 9.4 shows that the filled-pauses used by male agents (47.833) largely account for this difference. Filipino male agents use considerably more filled-pauses than female agents (31.406), while female agents and female callers (31.323) have very similar frequencies of filled-pauses in their turns. Both male agents and callers (35.643) use more filled-pauses than their female counterparts. It is possible that overall language ability and especially fluency in speech affect the distribution of filled-pauses across these speaker groups.

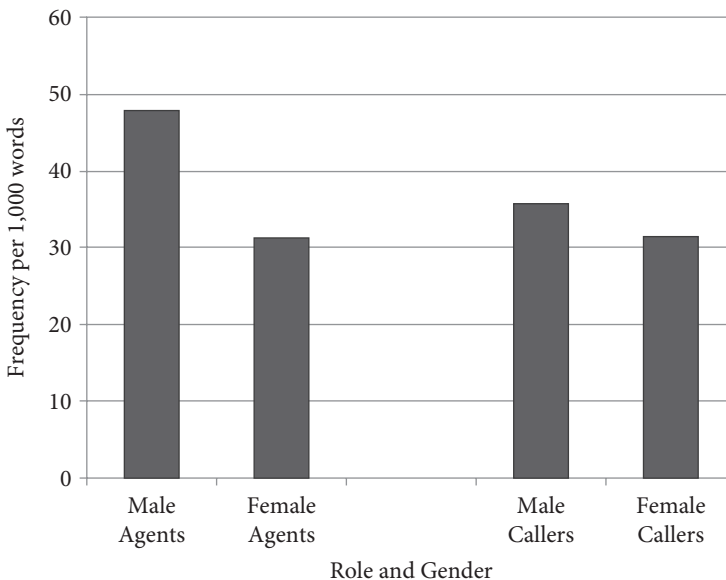


Figure 9.4. Filled-pauses by role and gender.

Because female agents and callers use fewer filled-pauses than male agents and callers, the use of filled-pauses across gender groups suggests that general language ability and language awareness may influence the frequency of these filled-pauses used by males and females in task-based conversation. In general, females have been traditionally considered as better speakers and have higher linguistic aptitude than males. Results from the Filipino agents' evaluation of linguistic performance also indicate that female agents speak better L2 English than male agents. The fact that female agents have considerably fewer filled-pauses than male agents may, therefore, be indicating that the agents' language ability determines, in part, the frequency of filled-pauses in their turns.

9.3.2 Filled-pauses by agents' performance evaluation scores

The data in Figure 9.5 also demonstrate a relationship between filled-pauses, possibly related to language ability, and the agents' performance evaluation scores. There is a linear pattern in the frequency of filled-pauses in the three speaker groups identified by the agents' performance evaluation scores. Low-performing agents (41.122) have more filled-pauses per 1,000 words than Mid (40.952) and High agents (31.818). The great differential between Low and High agents in the use of filled-pauses again suggests that language ability and product knowledge combine to affect the distribution of filled-pauses used by the agents in the Call Center corpus.

The frequency of filled-pauses in agents' turns appears to be a quality indicator based on Figure 9.5. Although there is only a slight difference between the

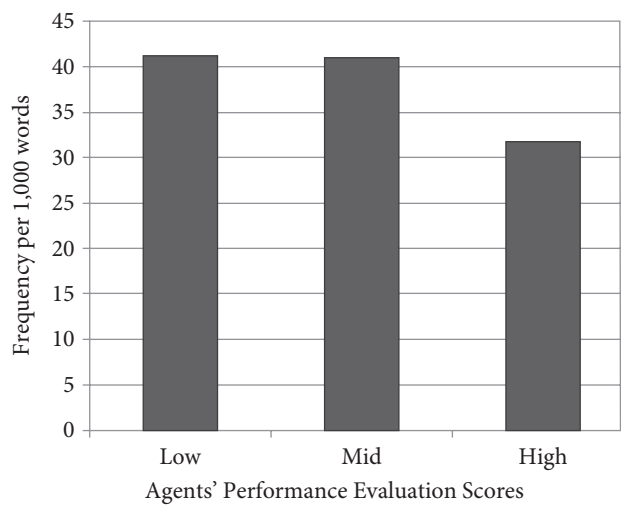


Figure 9.5. Filled-pauses by agents' performance evaluation scores.

average number of filled-pauses used by Low and Mid agents per 1,000 words, agents with high performance scores clearly used fewer filled-pauses in their turns than the two other groups with lower linguistic and task performance scores. It follows that the higher level of fluency in English and familiarity with account procedures help decrease the use of filled-pauses in agents' speech. Some turns by High-performing agents sound highly-memorized or, at least, frequently-rehearsed at times because of effective flow of speech patterns and well-organized series of questions and responses. However, most agents, even those with high performance scores, use more filled-pauses when handling difficult questions or irate callers. Text Sample 9.4 shows the frequency of filled-pauses by an agent who received a low performance evaluation score.

Text Sample 9.4 Filled-pauses by an agent in the Low-performance group

Agent: Yeah because **uh**, **uh** yeah because **uh** the alarm is **uh** based on the lights ok, **uh** basically that alarm is just for a defective battery, **uh** it could be **uh** defective batteries aren't properly connected but I doubt it's **uh** about that **uh** for the last time **uh** for the last one because there's been an operation, right, **uh uh** you just had a power outage right, just like you said?

Caller: Yes

Agent: Ok **uh** because right now what the UPS does is it's on **uh** bypass **uh** because of the defective battery, it means the UPS can't support the load **uh** from the battery anymore **uh** but you can, ok you can try to clear and see if it can clear **uh** clear the alarm ok, **uh** just press the on button, that's the one with just the line, the vertical line of of the **uh** UPS, so there you have two buttons, right? **uh** [interruption]

Caller: Hold on, slow down, I don't understand you [unclear] **uh** what buttons am I going to look for? I don't actually see [unclear] **uh**, wait [short pause] **uh**, well nothing here

Agent: Ok I's sorry, **uh**, there is **uh** a red **uh** that UPS that you have should see a the **uh** on button there to the one **uh** with just the line **uh, uh**, vertical line

Caller: Ok I see it, like the power thing

Agent: Yes, like **uh uh** the power button

Caller: Ok

Agent: You got it?

Caller: [long pause] [unclear] not stopping

Agent: Ok **uh**, ok then we have to unplug [interruption]

Caller: Say that again?

Agent: Ok, **uh** we have to unplug the UPS

The agent in Text Sample 9.4 used both *uh* and *ok* as filler as he tried to explain to the caller the issue (alarm from the UPS) during the call. The agent clearly had a difficult time explaining the problem and did not provide an easily-comprehended explanation in this excerpt. It is evident, based on the call transcript, that the

questions from the caller are part of the usual inquiries received by agents in this account. However, the agent was rather obviously not prepared, as evidenced not only by the frequent filled-pauses but also by his reformulations (e.g., “*yeah because uh, uh yeah because uh the alarm is uh based on the lights ok, uh basically that alarm is just for a defective battery, uh it could be uh defective batteries aren’t properly connected.*”). The agent received low task and linguistic performance scores for this specific transaction, and it was apparent that the caller was distracted by the repeated filled-pauses, gaps, and reformulations in the agent’s delivery.

9.3.3 Filled-pauses by agents’ experience with current account

Unlike the results from the agents’ quality of performance in Section 9.3.2, there is no clear linear pattern in the distribution of filled-pauses among agent groups based on experience with their current accounts. Figure 9.6 shows that the most experienced agents (Over 2 Years with the account) used the fewest filled-pauses (43.371). The Less than 1 Year group has slightly more filled-pauses (49.176) than that of the Over 2 Years group, while the agents belonging to the 1 to 2 Years group have the most filled-pauses per 1,000 words (53.433) in the Call Center corpus.

Considering the difference between the first two experience groups (Less than 1 Year and 1 to 2 Years), it appears that experience with account procedures and familiarity with the types of questions typically posed by callers do not necessarily influence the distribution of filled-pauses in agents’ speech. It is possible that other variables, especially linguistic performance and also the categories of accounts (discussed in the next section), are more accurate predictors of the

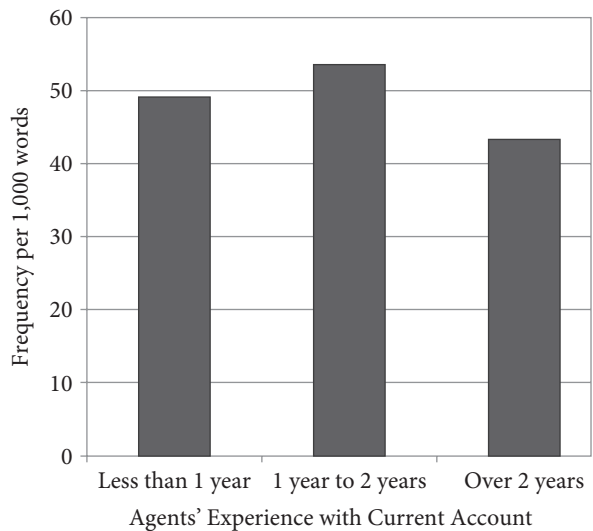


Figure 9.6. Filled-pauses by agents’ experience with their current accounts.

distribution of filled-pauses in agents' turns than specific agent experience with an account. Nonetheless, because the frequency of filled-pauses appears to be a quality indicator, data from this section also show that experience eventually contributes in reducing the agents' use of filled-pauses. Figure 9.6 suggests that as agents gain more experience of at least two years with their current account, they seem to slowly decrease the frequency of filled-pauses in their turns and produce more fluid speech.

9.3.4 Filled-pauses across categories of accounts

As illustrated in Figure 9.7, Inquire (54.461) and Troubleshoot (37.615), the two accounts that have more question-and-answer sequences and potentially more difficult requests or issues coming from the callers, have a greater number of filled-pauses per 1,000 words than Purchase accounts. Purchase accounts have the fewest filled-pauses (23.508), as these accounts are easier to handle with more routine, repetitive, and procedural moves that the agents are able to memorize effortlessly. Callers in purchase accounts also have fewer questions and almost no major complaints posed to the agents.

One main difference between Inquire and Purchase accounts is the type of tasks involved in most transactions. Filled-pauses are frequently used in Inquire accounts because both agents and callers are multi-tasking during the conversation. Many agents need to conduct additional research such as looking at a catalogue or a list of product numbers and obtaining pricing information from websites. In

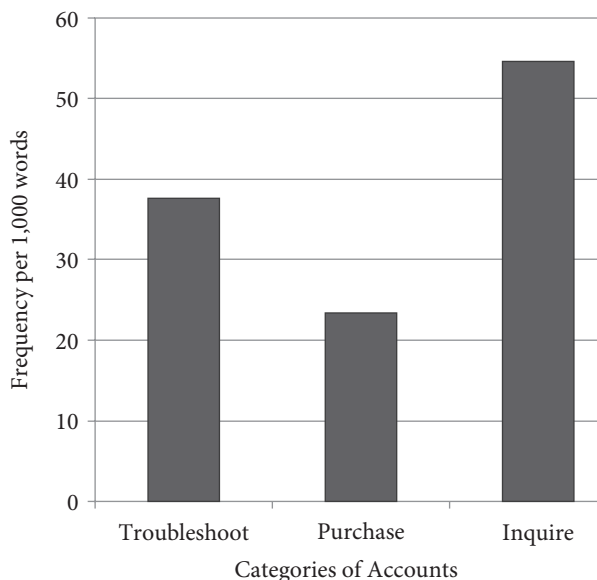


Figure 9.7. Filled-pauses across categories of accounts.

most instances, callers are also busy checking their own lists, paperwork, or the company’s website while making the call. These various tasks while communicating on the telephone often cause a break in the flow of speech that the speakers try to avoid by using filled-pauses. Conversely, the agents in Purchase accounts have simpler account procedures in selling their products or placing customers’ orders. There are fewer filled-pauses in agents’ turns because they have a clearer guide in following steps to complete the transactions. Most of these calls are also emotionally “neutral” in that most callers are not angry or are not calling to complain about products or service.

In many troubleshooting accounts, filled-pauses are frequently used by inexperienced agents still not completely familiar with their account procedures or the particular product in question. In contrast, experienced and High-performing agents in troubleshooting machine malfunctions are able to maintain effective sequences of procedures and instructions given to the callers with limited breaks or pauses. However, because agents in troubleshooting accounts also get more angry/impatient callers due to their frustration with service and the failure of the device, many agents use more filled-pauses as they try to manage and control these difficult transactions.

9.3.5 Short and long pauses by role and gender

Figure 9.8 illustrates the participants’ use of short and long pauses in call center interactions. Agents have a higher frequency of these pauses than callers. There

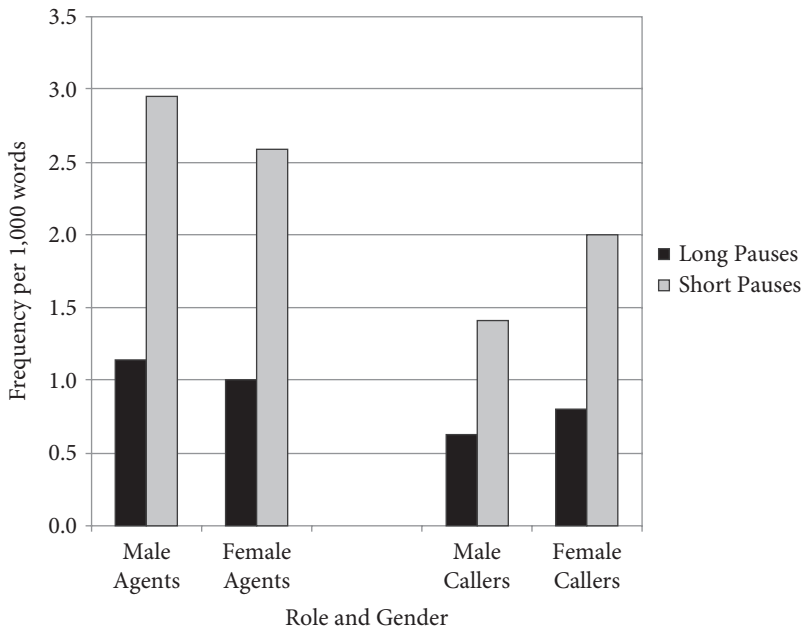


Figure 9.8. Short and long pauses by role and gender.

are more short pauses than long pauses in the speakers' turns. Agents on average have 2.682 short pauses per 1,000 words while callers have 1.767. For long pauses, agents have 1.015 while callers have 0.642. Agents and callers significantly use very few short and long pauses compared to their use of filled-pauses.

Although male callers use more filled-pauses, female callers have slightly more short and long pauses than male callers. This result might appear to contradict my interpretation related to language ability and filled-pauses across gender groups in the earlier sections of this chapter. However, in contrast to filled-pauses, short and long pauses may not relate directly to the maintenance of the flow of speech, and therefore, to language ability, but more to content knowledge and general comprehension. Female callers possibly require more time and are perhaps more patient and careful to process information than are male callers. This combination of patience and the need for more processing time results in female callers pausing more frequently. For example, in technical troubleshooting transactions, female callers are more likely than male callers to tell their agents that they have "limited background in computers." The need to process this technical information may require more pauses by female callers before they continue with their turns. In contrast, male callers may be better able to simply proceed with a question or a response and, consequently, avoid pauses caused by the need to process technical information.

Most short or long pauses from agents are clearly brought about by the need to multi-task during the transactions. Aside from logging the calls, agents often research an issue by looking at their tools as they assist the callers. As agents process different information all together while talking to the caller, they may use short and long pauses in their turns. Many times, agents refer to this specific task in their turns (e.g., *"I'm sorry ma'am but my system is quite slow today [short pause] uh, by the way, can you also give me your daughter's phone number?"*). The agent in Text Sample 9.5 has various short pauses in his turns, possibly due to his level of familiarity with the account procedures and his concurrent researching as he seeks solutions to the caller's problem.

Text Sample 9.5 Short pauses from the agent in a troubleshooting account

Agent: Ok and I'm sorry if you're having that kind of uh issues in the modem, but I'd be more than happy to assist you with that issue right now [short pause] ok but [interruption]

Caller: I have a g701WG

Agent: Ok [short pause] that would be the G701WG uh, alright, what we need to do now sir, uh Bill would be to uh access your modem's interface and get your correct user-name and password, right?

Caller: Ok

Agent: Alright [short pause] right now, here's what we need to do sir, uh, [short pause] could you pull up an internet explorer browser for me?

Caller: [long pause] ok

Agent: Alright, so [short pause] could you just uh, verify for me the last four digits of your numeric password so I can [interruption]

Caller: I don't have it, you can see it there, right? I'm the right person [laughs]

Agent: Ok, yeah, yeah, it, it won't show it. [long pause] Here's the thing, I need to give you the password for this one [short pause] uh but first I would need to uhm, check it here on my end so that I may know if it's still ah accepted by the system, alright?

The agent combines pauses and filled-pauses with discourse markers *ok* and *alright* in his turns. These features indicate the level of difficulty that the agent is having in resolving the caller's problem as he buys time for further research and problem-solving. However, the short pauses from the agent in this excerpt appear to not affect the overall flow of transaction or the caller's comprehension of information. It is clear that the caller understands what the agent is doing as he tries to search for solutions to the problem during the interaction. For quality of service, the agent received a performance score in the Mid-level—more because of transaction handling rather than language use. Although the level of difficulty of the task in this excerpt is high, the agent could still improve on his handling time by being more up to speed with account procedures and specific technical processes. Doing so will perhaps decrease the number of short and long pauses in this agent's turns.

9.3.6 Short and long pauses by agents' performance evaluation scores

Inasmuch as the frequency of both short and long pauses by Filipino agents indicates their knowledge of account protocols and procedures, it is, consequently, also indicative of the quality of the service they are able to provide. Therefore, not surprisingly, Figure 9.9 shows that the High-performing agents have the fewest short and long pauses (short pauses = 0.712; long pauses = 0.311) while the Low-performing agents have the most (short pauses = 1.321; long pauses = 0.521). Mid-agents have 0.921 short pauses and 0.344 long pauses. This linear pattern in the use of pauses across performance groups indicates that agents with high linguistic and task performance scores are able to limit their pauses in the transactions and decrease their average call-handling time.

9.3.7 Short and long pauses by agents' experience with their current account

Figure 9.10 illustrates a decrease in short and long pauses as the agents gain more experience with their current accounts. Agents with over two years of service in their current accounts have 0.784 short pauses and 0.291 long pauses per 1,000 words. In contrast, the least experienced agents have 0.931 short pauses and 0.404 long pauses. The middle group (1 to 2 Years) has 0.901 short pauses and 0.307 long pauses.

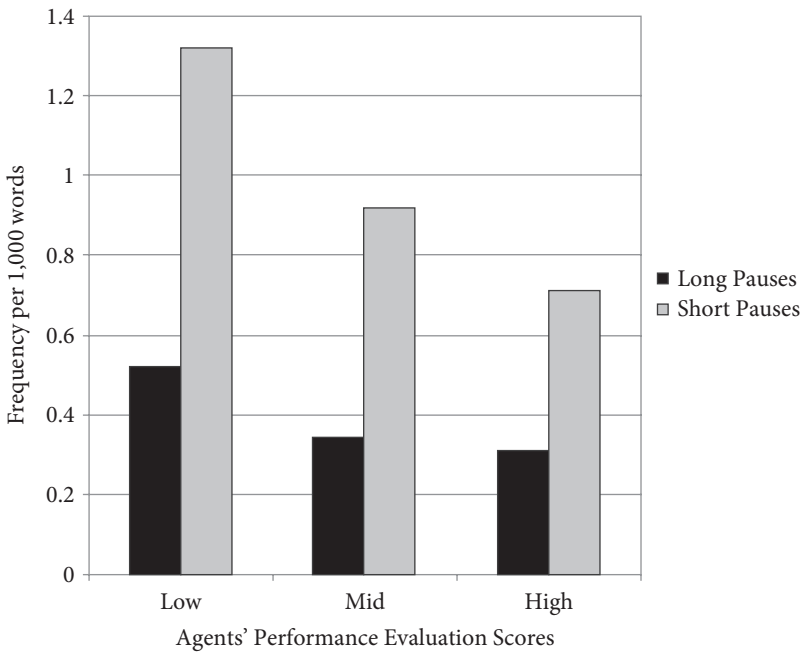


Figure 9.9. Short and long pauses by agents' performance evaluation scores.

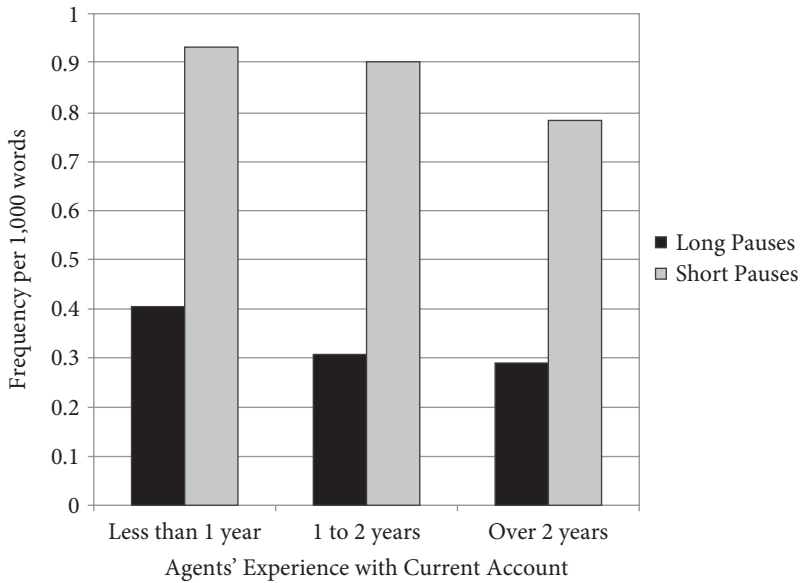


Figure 9.10. Short and long pauses by agents' experience with their current accounts.

The results showing the distribution of short and long pauses based on the agents' performance and experience indicate that these pauses could measure the agents' language ability and knowledge of account procedures. There is a strong relationship between the frequency of these pauses and the agents' performance scores corresponding, respectively, also with their length of service with current accounts. Experienced and High-performing agents have the fewest pauses among the agent groups in the corpus.

Agents are aware of the need to limit or avoid these pauses in their turns, but, because of performance variables including memory and recall of specific information, these pauses appear to be inevitable most of the time. However, as agents gain more experience, their recall of relevant procedures also improves. This enables them to reduce the frequency of pauses considerably. Experience also provides the agents mastery of the various tools needed to conduct research or log information in the most efficient way.

9.3.8 Short and long pauses across categories of accounts

The distribution of short and long pauses across categories of accounts is shown in Figure 9.11. Inquire accounts have relatively more short pauses (1.268) than

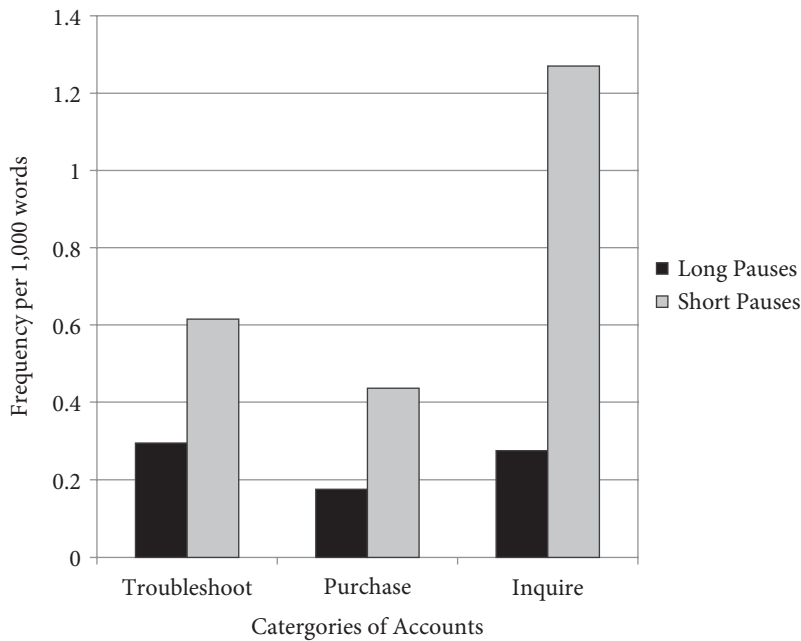


Figure 9.11. Short and long pauses across categories of accounts.

Troubleshoot (0.614) and Purchase (0.432) accounts per 1,000 words in the corpus. Troubleshoot accounts have slightly more long pauses (0.296) than Inquire (0.277) and Purchase (0.177).

The main difference in these three account categories relative to the frequency of short pauses again points to the type of issues raised by callers in these transactions. Inquire accounts have many “unique” questions that the agents need to respond to by conducting quick research using their tools. Most callers in Inquire accounts also have many short pauses in their turns as they also think about related concerns and questions during the call. Other factors such as callers’ background and familiarity with account procedures (e.g., in Inquire accounts, many callers are specialist/technical callers who have previous contacts with the agents) also influence the use of these short pauses. The familiarity with speakers, as in face-to-face interaction, potentially limits the pressure for speakers to use filled-pauses and ensure fluid delivery of speech.

Troubleshoot accounts have slightly more long pauses than the two other accounts possibly because there are more difficult problems to solve and the callers may not have the necessary skill or understanding to respond to the agents’ questions or instructions immediately. Also, the agents often ask the callers to do something on their end in order to fix the problem (e.g., unplug a power cord, replace specific equipment parts, or restart a computer). These concurrent actions and steps on the callers’ side of the interaction often result in long pauses or dead air.

9.3.9 Repeats by role and gender

The distribution of the classes of repeats by role and gender in the Call Center corpus is shown in Figure 9.12. Filipino agents have a higher frequency of these repeats than their American callers. Male agents consistently have more repeats across the three classes than female agents. Data for callers show that males have slightly more 3-word repeats but fewer 2-word repeats than female callers. Four-word repeats are generally rare in both the agents’ and callers’ turns.

Results in the analysis of repeats disclose that female agents are able to maintain a generally more fluid speech performance than male agents. This is consistent relative to other types of dysfluencies discussed in this chapter as well. For agents, the frequency of repeats clearly correlates with performance scores and general language ability measured by the assessment instrument used in the study. However, it is hard to interpret the difference between the distribution of 2 and 3-word repeats in the callers’ turns. More detailed analysis of factors influencing the use of repeats by male and female native speakers is necessary to explain the distribution of callers’ repeats shown in Figure 9.12.

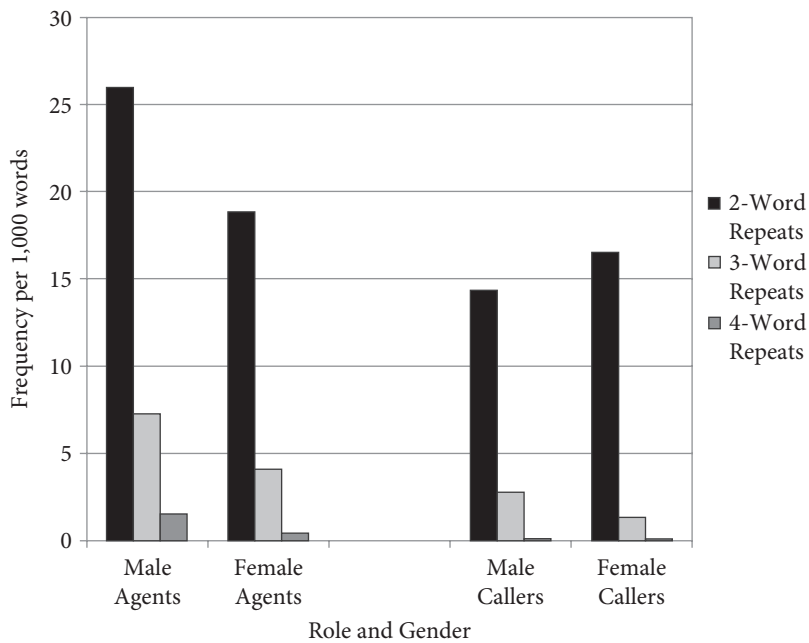


Figure 9.12. Repeats by role and gender.

9.3.10 Distribution of the most common 2-word repeats by agents and callers

The 2-word repeats by agents and callers generally do not affect the flow of conversation or the exchange of information in the speakers’ turns. In listening to these transactions, it’s apparent that these 2-word repeats tend to meld well and smoothly with the turns. In effect, these short repeats do not explicitly evidence or create performance problems by speakers when not used excessively in utterances. Text Sample 9.6 illustrates the occurrences of common repeats by agents and callers in typical call center interactions. *Ok, you, I*, and *the* are repeated by the agents in the samples as well as *yes* as part of a short response by callers.

Text Sample 9.6 Common 2-word repeats in call center interaction

Agent: **Ok, ok** thank you ma’am and uh just a moment here while I pull up the account and **Ms. Bashford, Ms. Bashford you, you** would like to check your balance now right?
[not the caller’s real name]

Caller: Yes please, **yes, yes**

Agent: And ma’am let me have the address on the account please

Caller: That **I, I** would like to change as well currently it’s 4444 North Street in [xxx] Kansas 5555. I’ve moved to another house in the same town

Agent: **Ok, ok**
 Caller: Still the same town
 Agent: **Ok, ok**, [repeated the address] is that right ma'am?
 Caller: Yes, that's right yes
 Agent: **Ok, ok**, and ma'am did you say that **you you** you're calling about our your current account [unclear] balance?
 Caller: Yes
 Agent: **Ok, ok**, let me please, I'll check here, uh
 —
 Caller: David McConnel, 11111 West Emerson Drive 88888 [names/address changed]
 Agent: **Ok, ok** thank you very much, uh is it ok if I call you by your first name?
 Caller: **Yes, yes** that's fine, Dave is fine.
 Agent: Ok Dave, hello Dave uh before we proceed, **I, I** just wanna ask your approval to let me access your service record here at [XX Company] would that be alright?
 Caller: What?
 Agent: Uh if you will let me or give me **the, the** approval to let me access your service records here at [XX Company], would that be alright with you?
 Caller: Uhm do you need to?
 Agent: Yes so that **I, I** can help you and I can assist you [interruption]
 Caller: **Yes, yes** that's fine
 Agent: Ok, thanks
 Caller: **I, I** have a question, uh
 Agent: Yes?

Figure 9.13 shows the distribution of the most common 2-word repeats used by agents and callers in call center interactions. In general, agents have more of the common 2-word repeats than the callers, especially for *ok* and *you*. Two-word repeats of *ok* are used extensively by agents, especially as a minimal response and backchannel during the callers' turns. Callers, on the other hand have more repeats of responses *yes* and *no* than the agents.

9.3.11 Average hold time by male and female agents

Figure 9.14 shows the average hold time (in minutes) by male and female agents. Male agents (1:04) have shorter average hold times in minutes than female agents (1:14). This difference of 10 seconds in average hold time between male and female agents in the corpus suggests that male agents are able to research their issues faster than female agents, allowing them to get back to the caller quicker. This result is in surprising contrast to the pattern of task and linguistic performance discussed in the above sections. In the use of dysfluencies, for example, female agents have generally out-performed male agents across performance

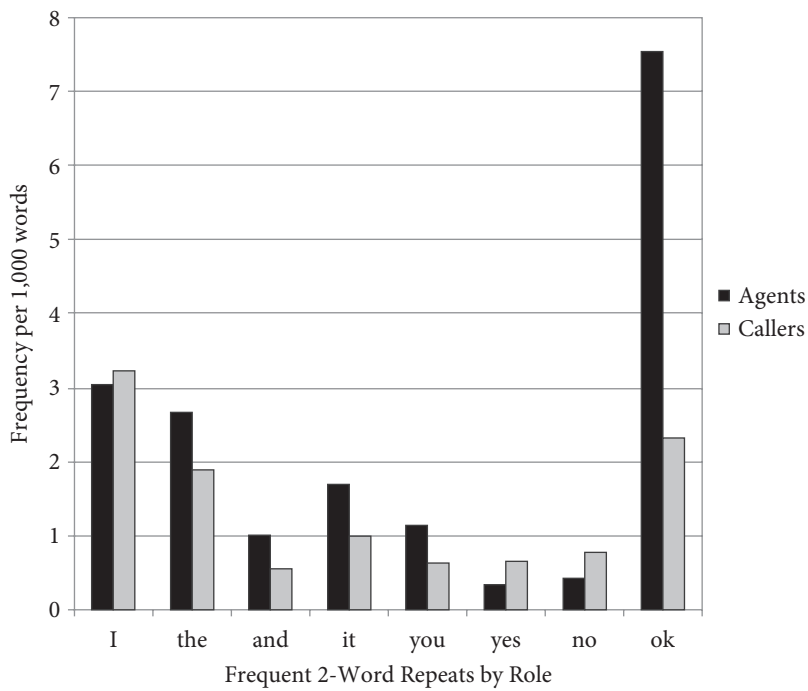


Figure 9.13. Most frequent 2-word repeats by agents and callers.

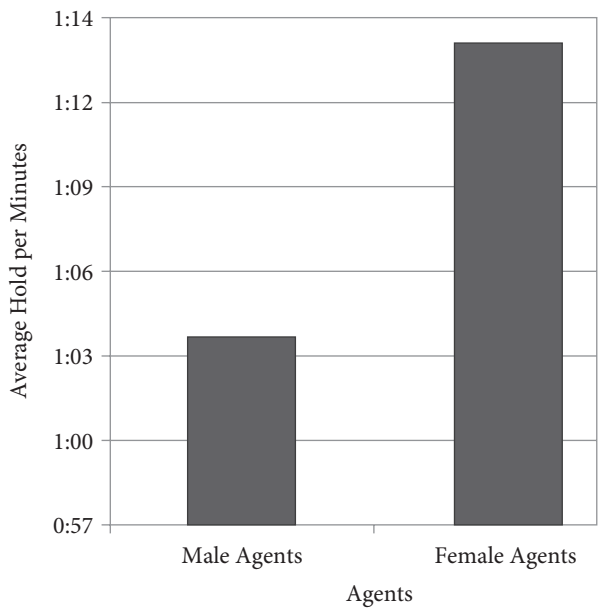


Figure 9.14. Average hold time by male and female agents.

variables such as pauses and repeats and are, therefore, more immediately and continuously in active communication with the caller to resolve the problem or provide the needed service.

9.3.12 Average hold time by agents' performance evaluation scores

The average hold time by agents' performance evaluation scores is shown in Figure 9.15. Agents in the Low-performing group, expectedly, have longer average hold time (1:21) per minute than the Mid (1:04) and High (1:07) - performing agents. Mid agents slightly "out-performed" High agents by :03 seconds. This slight difference in the hold times of Mid and High agents is quite difficult to interpret. It is clear, however, that Low-performing agents would benefit from more product training to improve their call handling time and reduce the length of hold time during their transactions.

As an interpretation of results in Figure 9.15, perhaps the High-performing agents are asking callers to hold while getting additional information or performing other service tasks "above and beyond the call of duty" and in addition to what is needed as the bare essential to resolve the immediate callers' needs. This might still be producing higher customer satisfaction perceived by quality assurance monitors. In looking back at my own assessment of the transactions, I generally, "rewarded" extra effort to serve the caller and this resulted in higher performance evaluation scores.

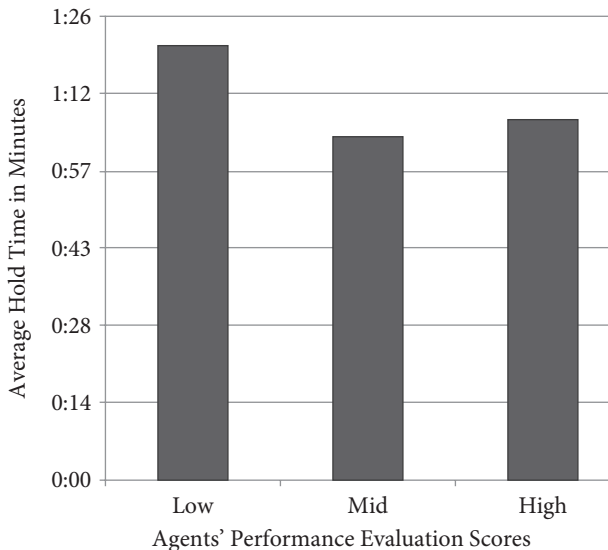


Figure 9.15. Average hold time by agents' performance evaluation scores.

9.3.13 Average hold time by agents' experience with their current accounts

It is clear from Figure 9.16 below that the agents' average hold time is an indicator of experience in providing services to callers and following account procedures. The linear improvement in hold time according to experience grouping shows that experienced agents are able to research information much quicker, thereby reducing the length of time the callers are put on hold. Agents with over 2 years of service to their current accounts have an average hold time of 0:50 while agents with 1 to 2 years of experience have 1:05. Agents with a length of service of less than one year have an average hold time of one minute and 36 seconds.

9.3.14 Average hold time across categories of accounts

Figure 9.17 shows the average hold time across categories of accounts. Inquire accounts have longer average wait times for callers (1:22) than Purchase (1:11) and Troubleshoot (1:08). Purchase accounts, however, have fewer total instances of holds in the corpus (26) than Troubleshoot (95) and Inquire (74). Holds in Troubleshoot accounts are common, but the agents are surprisingly able to return to the caller much quicker than the two other accounts. In some of these Troubleshoot accounts, agents have coaches or team leaders they can ask for specific procedures during hold times. There are longer holds in Inquire accounts, especially

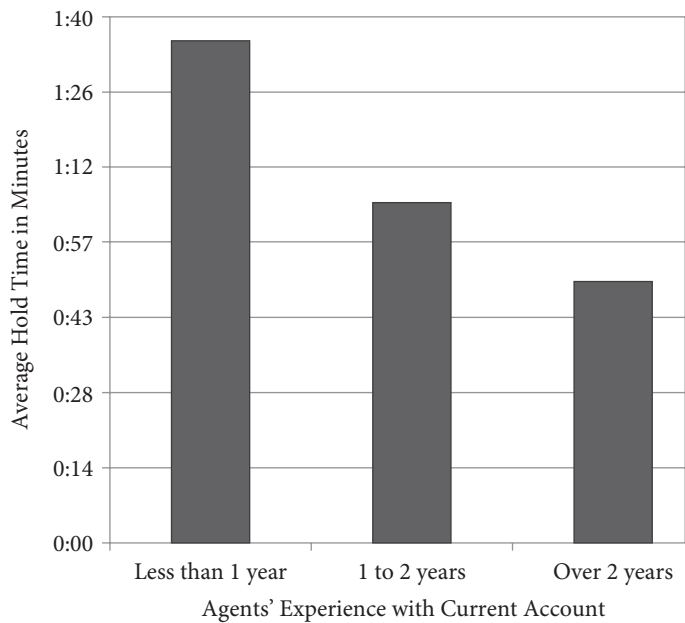
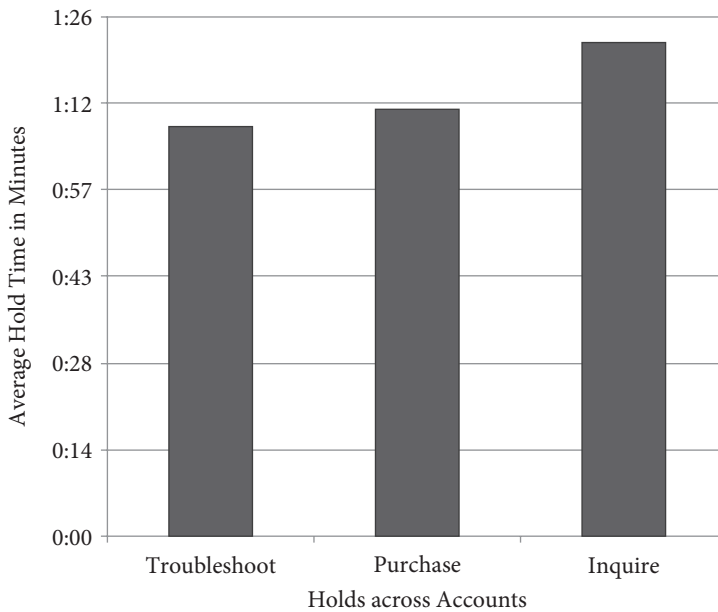


Figure 9.16. Average hold time by agents' experience with their current accounts.



Number of Holds per Account: Troubleshoot = 95; Purchase = 26; Inquire = 74

Figure 9.17. Average hold time across categories of accounts.

when callers are asking for information that requires the agents to conduct research. Agents in these accounts often need to look at different types of databases or catalogues to provide the needed information.

9.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I focused on performance phenomena in spoken discourse represented by dysfluencies. I presented the distributional data of filled-pauses, short and long pauses, repeats, and holds across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus, and for filled-pauses and repeats, across the three comparative corpora. The analysis of these features of dysfluencies was dependent on the transcription conventions followed during corpus collection. I noted that both American Conversation and Switchboard did not have annotations about the specific length of pauses. There were also no transactional holds in these interactions, unlike in customer service transactions. Although holds were not technically representative of dysfluent speech, I added these for analysis in this chapter because they also indicated agents' preparedness during the calls as well as their general familiarity with support

protocols. To some extent, caller holds could also indicate their comprehension of information or instructions.

It appeared that the frequency of these dysfluencies had relationships with the agents' overall performance and communication skills. Repeated filled-pauses and reformulations clearly showed the agents' level of proficiency in English as well as their ability to control the transactions. In some instances, these dysfluencies affected the flow of communication and seemed to distract the callers. However, most of the occurrences of dysfluent speech were tolerated by speakers. Gender differences from Filipino agents were evident in these performance features in spontaneous speech. Female agents outperformed male agents in their use of filled-pauses and repeats. However, male agents had shorter average length of hold times in their transactions than female agents.

Communication breakdown

Caller clarifications

10.1 Introduction

The study of miscommunication or communication breakdown in spoken discourse has captivated many discourse analysts over the years. It is clear that the concept of miscommunication is very hard to define completely and many approaches in the analysis of miscommunication have produced often conflicting interpretations (Mortensen, 1997). Miscommunication has been defined over the years to cover a range of issues from understanding, agreement, confusion, disruption, or distortion in speech (Harter, 1990; Hewes, 1995; Mortensen, 1997). For future related studies, however, I would like to consider, in greater detail, the occurrences of cross-cultural miscommunication or crosstalk (Gumperz, 1982a; Connor-Linton, 1989; Gumperz & Roberts, 1991) in outsourced call centers. There are many explicit instances of miscommunication in outsourced call center transactions that directly affect the discourse of agents and callers, and at the same time, are directly attributable to cross-cultural factors. For example, the language aptitude of the agents, particularly their sociolinguistic skills and ability to adjust to the demands of cross-cultural communication are often cited as culprits in communication breakdown.

10.1.1 Caller clarification sequences

I define caller clarification as a statement, request, question, or sequence of questions raised by the callers after the agents' turn or response providing information or a procedure (e.g., the caller stating "*What did you say it was?*" or "*I didn't understand you, could you repeat that?*"). These unnecessary caller clarifications should have been avoided if both speakers were able to effectively communicate and process simplified information, and assuming, also, that the communication failure was not due to extraneous circumstances beyond the control of the caller or agent, such as equipment failure, etc. Caller clarifications disrupt the flow of communication and add to the total handling time of a transaction. It is therefore ideal that the agents do their best to avoid these types of clarifying questions from the

callers. For example, the three highlighted questions from the caller in the excerpt below (Text Sample 10.1) are considered caller clarifications while the fourth highlighted question is not:

Text Sample 10.1 Caller clarification sequences

Agent: Thank you for calling [XX Company], my name is Raymond, how can I assist you?

Caller: Pardon me, what was that last sentence? [1]

Agent: I'm sorry ma'am?

Caller: What was that last sentence? [2]

Agent: How [interruption]

Caller: What did you say last? [3]

Agent: How can I assist you?

Caller: Oh, ok, I need to um add some minutes to my phone and I've never used the credit card to do that, I always just bought the uh, the um [interruption]

Agent: Re-fill card?

From the same call:

Agent: You can just use the automated system

Caller: Ok, let me ask you, but for the automated system, do I need to call the same number um 1-800-333-3333? [4]

Agent: Ok, yes yes and then once you dialed that number, you will be hearing a voice prompt. All you need to do is to interrupt that message by pressing any number buttons. And then after doing that [interruption]

In the first excerpt, the caller did not correctly hear the last sentence "*how can I assist you?*" possibly because of the agent's rate or clarity of speech, pronunciation or enunciation. The caller's clarification then was a reaction to the previous turn by the agent. In the second excerpt, the caller's question was a real question and did not come from the agent's production circumstances or information packaging. In other words, the caller clarifications coded and analyzed in this section only include those questions that could be directly attributable to how the agent produced his or her previous turn or packaged the information given to the caller.

Because these clarifications are explicit and easily observed, it is possible to provide an analysis of their structure and frequency in the corpus. I believe that these instances of caller clarifications point to a potential miscommunication or signal the start of a breakdown in the transactions. Many of these clarifications stem from the agents' inability to provide clear and specific information, pronounce words based on standard American phonology, use vocabulary that matches the callers' background, comprehend and utilize sociolinguistic

strategies, and other related technical (e.g., sound) and production issues during the calls. In some occurrences of caller clarifications, it is also possible that the callers themselves fail to understand clearly-explained information provided by the agents or are having physical hearing problems during the transactions. A combination of these factors contributes to clarification sequences in the transactions. In this chapter, only data of explicit clarification sequences originating from the callers – not the agents – are analyzed and presented in the figures below.

The main goal of this analysis is to show the distribution of clarification sequences among speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. It was not possible for me to also process the American Conversation and Switchboard corpora because of the difficulty rechecking the transcriptions in these large-scale corpora that used different transcription conventions. The Call Center corpus included manual coding of these clarification sequences performed by the transcriptionists by adding comments after each occurrence of caller clarification. Not all of the items identified by the transcriptionists qualified as caller clarifications and conversely, there were instances of request or caller questions in the corpus not tagged by the transcriptionists that could be considered as caller clarifications. Therefore, I needed to manually check these comments when I conducted the performance assessment of agents' transactions while, at the same time, reading the transcripts. This double-checking of data allowed me to accurately capture all instances of caller clarifications in the Call Center corpus based on my operational definition. I then designed a program that found these clarification comments in the transcripts and then copied KWIC lines around the comments to provide context for the particular clarification sequence. My KWIC output also provided the specific filenames where the clarification sequences came from for access to the entire transcript or sound file.

10.2 Factors causing caller clarification

For this analysis, I considered factors originating from the agents, callers, and technology (e.g., poor sound transmission) as causes of caller clarifications. For agents, these factors may come from ineffective information packaging (e.g., the vocabulary used did not match caller's background or instructions/explanations were too complicated for the caller to follow) and production (e.g., limitations in segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation). For callers, I considered factors such as physical hearing problems especially when they explicitly said it in the transaction (e.g., *"I'm sorry, I have a cold, I'm not hearing you well."*) and overall comprehension.

The following text samples show my interpretation of factors or combination of factors commonly causing caller clarifications in the transactions:

Text Sample 10.2 Information packaging and caller comprehension: “physical address”

Agent: Jason, and your last name Jason? [short pause] Can I have your last name also?

Caller: Yes, it’s Smith [name was changed]

Agent: Smith, thank you and um for security purposes what’s the company’s name and complete physical address?

Caller: Physical address, I don’t understand, what do you mean?

Agent: Uh-huh, your location, sir?

Caller: Oh, XX North Grandview Drive, Arkansas, 77777

Agent: Ok, thank you, and the company’s name again?

Caller: XX Services

Agent: Ok, thank you

Caller: Uh-huh?

Text Sample 10.3 Information packaging and caller comprehension: “extension line”

Agent: Ok Donna do you have any uh extension line?

Caller: Do I have what?

Agent: Extension line?

Caller: Uh, yes

Agent: Ok and uh I mean for the number that you have, do you have any extension line or the, is this a direct number?

Caller: I’m sorry I can’t understand what you’re saying. What do you mean?

Agent: Is this a direct number or do you have any extension line?

Caller: There is a direct number to the uh the meter if that’s what you’re wondering

Agent: Ok anyway uh can I have your, uh as I can see here ok, can I have your uh company name please together with your address?

Caller: My address is 222 Rouge River Highway

Agent: Uh-huh, the city, the state and the zip code for that?

Caller: Eugene, Oregon 99999

In the two samples above, the callers did not immediately understand the terms “*physical address*” and “*extension line*” used by the agents. These phrases prompted the callers to clarify what the agents meant. In Text Sample 10.2, the agent was able to instantaneously answer this question (“*your location, sir*”), while in Text Sample 10.3, the agent decided not to pursue his explanation of “extension line” after two turns although it was evident that the caller had not yet completely understood what he was referring to. The caller in Text Sample 10.3 said at first that she had an extension line but it appeared that she did not clearly understand the difference between a direct line and a telephone with an extension line (e.g., in most offices

there is a trunk line and specific extension line for individual telephones). The agent in this account needed this information because he would not be able to fix machines attached to a telephone with an extension line.

In Text Sample 10.4 the agent's explanation of the company's warranty was not clear to the caller, perhaps because of the way the agent structured the information. The agent talked about the company's lifetime warranty, but other information like "key warranty" and the related conditions of the agreement were too much for the caller to process. This apparent complexity of information prompted the caller to clarify.

Text Sample 10.4 Information packaging: "lifetime guarantee"

Caller: What [unclear] do you think your lifetime guaranty is?

Agent: Basically um Pauline all [XX Company] items are in lifetime warranty, yet we have some special items that are under a key warranty which is we can replace that if it is damaged or for warranty the agreement of five, uh guidelines for warranty is a year to five years, uh [interruption]

Caller: I'm sorry, I didn't understand what you have just said, could you explain that again?

Agent: Ok let me go ahead and explain that further may I please have your consultant id number please, for tracking?

Caller: [talked to a third party] I have, do you have a consultant number there Fanny?

Agent: I'm sorry am I speaking to a customer or a [XX Company] sales lady?

Text Sample 10.5 would be best explained with an accompanying sound file because it clearly demonstrated that the agent's pronunciation was a factor causing the clarification sequences from the caller. In this technical account, the caller was requesting help to resize an image file received as an attachment in an e-mail message. The agent's suggestion was to use the Paint program located in the accessories folder of most Windows-based personal computers. The agent did not clearly pronounce "paint," and because the caller appeared to have limited background with computers, she was not able to process the information immediately and had to make clarifications. In this case, it was evident that the cause of the caller's clarification was the agent's pronunciation, because the caller explicitly referred to the confusing word ("*I don't understand that word pain, like painful?*") in her question. The agent in this transaction received a low performance evaluation score both for task and linguistic performance.

Text Sample 10.5 Pronunciation: "paint or pain"

Agent: Uh-huh, let uh ok I will help you with that, uh I'll try my best to help you with that, ok? [short pause] uh I want you to open the the email attachment through Paint

Caller: Uh I didn't understand that last word, through what?

Agent: Paint, it can be seen [interruption]

Caller: I don't understand that word pain, like painful?

Agent: Ok that's Paint, uh you can see that um just click, ok, just click on start

Caller: Click on start

Agent: And then click on accessories

Caller: I have the email attachment open already

Agent: Ok

In Text Sample 10.6, a combination of different factors affected the flow of transaction and prompted repeated clarifications from the caller. The caller had a hearing problem (*"I have a hard time hearing you"*) and the transmission, according to the agent, was not good (*"we are experiencing a, uh bad connection.."*). In this case, the agent did not have pronunciation problems and appeared to ask clear procedural questions. However, the caller did not immediately understand what the agent was asking for (*"the name of my what?"*). The caller gave a telephone number that did not match the specific name on the agent's database (*"the name under this account"*). The sequences of questions and clarifications added handling time to this transaction and more turns from both the agent and caller.

Text Sample 10.6 Bad transmission and caller's hearing/comprehension (and other factors): "the name of my what?"

Agent: Yes sir, I'm listening

Caller: Ok. I purchased a fast card recharge for my [xxx] phone card? And I'm questioning the amount of time that I was getting credit for

Agent: Ok I'll be glad to check that for you sir. And I do apologize for any inconvenience that you have take time to call us now this. And thank you for bringing this to our attention. May I have your cell phone number please?

Caller: My what number?

Agent: Your cell phone number

Caller: My phone number? Yeah 999-888-4444

Agent: And your first and last name please?

Caller: Michael Matti M A T T I [customer name was changed]

Agent: Ok, Mr. um, Matti, can you also please verify the name under this account?

Caller: Name of my what?

Agent: The name under this account sir. It's not under Michael, but the last name is correct sir

Caller: The name of my? [interruption]

Agent: The name of, the name under this account

Caller: Uh, the name of my what?

Agent: The name under this account

Caller: Yes, Matti, is it?

Agent: I beg your pardon sir, what's the first name again?

Caller: Dennis

Agent: Ok, thank you for that, and uh, I was speaking to Michael Matti? Is that right?

Caller: **Pardon me?**

Agent: May I ask [interruption]

Caller: **Uh, I, I have a hard time hearing you**

Agent: Yes sir I'm uh, I do apologize for this but we are experiencing a uh bad connection, uh, let me ask you again sir, MAY I KNOW YOUR NAME PLEASE? [loud]

Caller: Yeah, Michael Matti

Agent: Ok, well sir we have a problem

Caller: What is it?

Agent: Uh, we're not understanding each other it seems, you know?

Caller: **What do you need then?**

Agent: The name in this account sir is not under your name, Michael and I can't proceed if you're not able to, uh, verify for me

Caller: Ok

For future studies, it would be relevant and useful to code the occurrences of clarification sequences in the corpus, specifying what language or paralinguistic factors, such as those in the samples above, prompted these clarifications coming from the callers. I realized, however, that when I attempted to conduct this type of coding for occurrences captured by my program that the identification of these factors required agreement among raters. What one listener may consider to be information packaging based on the use of difficult or new vocabulary might be considered by another listener as a pronunciation issue. Because many agents still have thick L2 accent, native speakers of English often hear unfamiliar pronunciation of English words in these agents' turns. Lastly, it also may not be possible to accurately conclude what prompted the caller to clarify in some instances simply by listening to the transactions. Nevertheless, I believe that by coding and categorizing the common sources of caller clarification (e.g., phonological, lexico/syntactic, or paralinguistic), training practices could be enhanced by data showing typical Filipino discourse features that often trigger clarification sequences from American callers. Results from such analysis could pinpoint production factors that should be prioritized in language training programs for Filipino agents.

10.3 Frequency of caller clarification

Results show that there are 1.338 caller clarifications per 1,000 words in the Call Center corpus. This means that there are almost 800 instances of caller clarifications

in over 73 hours of call center interactions. Of the 500 agents, 311 received caller clarifications while 189 did not receive any. The highest number of caller clarifications received by an agent in the corpus is 8.574 per 1,000 words. The structure of many of these caller clarifications often consists of polite apologies (e.g., “*I’m sorry, what?*” or “*Pardon me, how many miles?*”) or direct questions (e.g., “*What did you just say?*”).

10.4 Frequency of caller clarification received by male and female agents

Figure 10.1 shows the comparative data of caller clarifications received by male and female agents. Male agents (1.423) received slightly more caller clarifications than female agents (1.257) per 1,000 words in the corpus.

The frequency of caller clarifications received by Filipino male and female agents is consistent with results from performance evaluation and language ability scores of agents based on gender. Filipino female agents outperform their male counterparts in many of the assessment factors reported in this book. Segmental and suprasegmental pronunciation appear to be the main cause of the difference in the number of received caller clarifications between male and female agents.

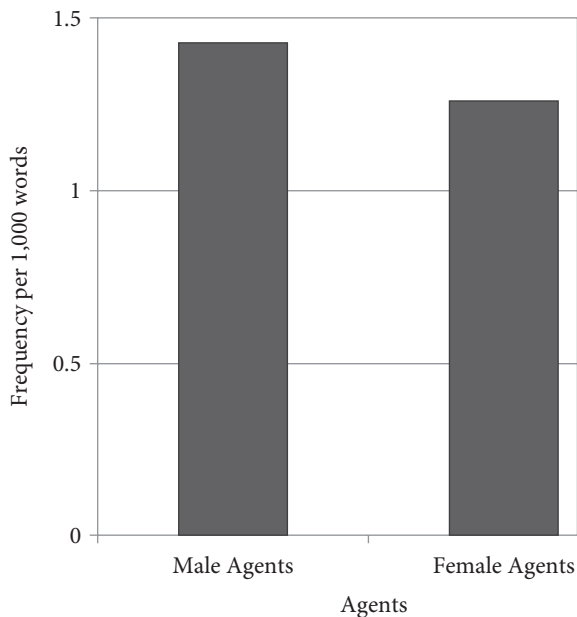


Figure 10.1. Frequency of caller clarifications received by male and female agents.

10.5 Frequency of clarifications made by male and female callers

Figure 10.2 shows the number of clarifications posed by male and female callers in the transactions. American female callers, to some extent, have more clarifications posed to the agents than male callers.

This slight difference in the number of caller clarifications between male and female callers is also consistent with other results discussed in this book. For example, data showing the use of direct apologies indicate that female callers are more vocal in admitting mistakes in comprehension than male callers. At the same time, females appear to be more vocal in clarifying information when they feel that they have not yet fully understood the agents' information or instructions. These observations from data may support some of the linguistic universals about the language and social behavior of American men and women in conversation. In these caller clarifications, female callers are more polite in requesting a repeat of information than male callers.



Figure 10.2. Frequency of clarifications made by male and female callers.

10.6 Caller clarification by agents' performance evaluation scores

It is clear from Figure 10.3 that the number of received caller clarifications is an indicator of agents' task and linguistic performance. High-performing agents have

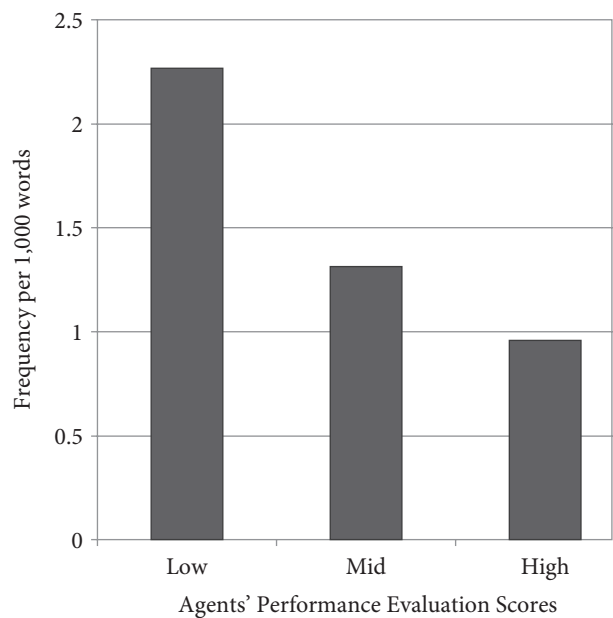


Figure 10.3. Caller clarifications by agents' performance evaluation scores.

less than one caller clarification per 1,000 words compared to over two by Low-performing agents. In following the assessment scale I used in the study, these repeated caller clarifications meant that the agents receiving them got deductions for maintenance of the transaction, accuracy of information, and service level observance and workflow compliance. Many of these repeated clarifications clearly indicate the agents' level of mastery of account procedures.

The limitations in overall linguistic performance and task familiarity of agents with low performance scores contribute to the frequency of caller clarification in this speaker group. The turns by agents in this group in response to callers' requests for clarification range from simple repeats of information to corrections of clearly inaccurate information which the agents have previously provided. Text Sample 10.7 shows an excerpt of a transaction handled by an agent with low performance evaluation score. The main source of clarification sequences from the caller came from the agent's turn, *"ok before we proceed ma'am can I have your permission for me to view your records for that request?"* This spiel is required for agents in this account before they open the caller's private profile in their database. The agent needed the caller's permission before he could answer specific questions or start the troubleshooting procedures whenever necessary. Agents memorize this question as part of the opening sequences of the interaction. The account is involved with troubleshooting internet connection problems for a DSL service.

Text Sample 10.7 Caller clarifications received by an agent with low performance score

Agent: Ok so when did you get disconnected from your DSL?

Caller: Uhm apparently when I moved I had a bill which I went and paid and I talked to a girl today and she told me I have to wait for about like 15 minutes and 30 minutes until they have no time to talk to me and now after 4 hours later after I was wondering why DSL is not working

Agent: Oh ok before we proceed ma'am can I have your permission for me to view your records here at XX Company?

Caller: I'm sorry what? [1]

Agent: Can I have your permission for me to view records here at XX Company?

Caller: I'm not understanding, I have a cold I'm sorry [2]

Agent: Can I have your permission for me to view your records here at XX Company?

Caller: To do a record? [3]

Agent: Uhm can I have your permission for me so that I can view your record here at XX Company?

Caller: Well I thought that's what you guys do every single time I've been screwed for the last six weeks and nobody's done anything so probably not if you cannot access [short pause] if I went down I paid another 60 bucks I don't know what else you want I had your service for almost 20 years what is the problem? [4] [agent is not able to control caller's outburst]

Agent: Uhm

Caller: I am self employed I need a computer

Agent: Ok ma'am I'll do my best

Caller: Uhm they wrecked me they uploaded my uh my uh password that's like a week after what else do I need to do I talked to Jesica I talked to Kia, Kaya, Kia the other day I've been calling every 15 minutes to get a hold of templates, like I really give a shit if they hold for 100 and 10 years [5]

Agent: I do apologize for the inconvenience ma'am uhm I just want [interruption]

Caller: No, sorry for the inconvenience it's just between your uh [unclear], ass, asshole I've been waiting for a guy to put a satellite on my house for a month nobody showed up now each year today they come up and install [6]

Agent: I'm sorry for that ma'am uhm I'm sorry for this again now can I ask again can I have your DSL telephone number again?

From a simple misunderstanding of the agent's initial request to get the caller's permission to access her private profile, the exchanges in the text sample escalated into a problematic transaction that the Low-performing agent was not able to control. The agent did not properly pronounce, "*to view your records*" in his opening turn to formally start the service interaction. The pronunciation of this request was garbled and not properly segmented to match the caller's expectations. In [3], the caller tried to repeat the actual request as she'd heard it ("*to do a record?*") and

instead of rephrasing his request to facilitate the caller's correct comprehension of "view," the agent continued to repeat the same information following the same script, "*can I have your permission for me to view your records here at XX Company?*" It was clear after [1] and [2] that the caller did not understand this process of viewing records and was, apparently, thinking that the agent was going to "do" something involving a record, but the agent did, himself, not comprehend that the caller was hearing "do" rather than "view" and change his choice of words to clarify his request to accomplish this simple, procedural matter and get on with the service transaction.

The caller's subsequent outbursts in [4] and [5] were no longer connected to the actual source of the first clarification. She was already pursuing a totally different complaint related to the kind of service she was receiving from the company. The agent was clearly rattled by these outbursts (the caller in this case was shouting and nearly hysterical in [4], [5], and [6]) and was clearly lost in his scripts. Instead of addressing this confusion, the agent repeatedly apologized and promised to do his best without taking control of the caller's reaction and refocusing on the original, routine, objective of getting the caller's permission to *view* (not *do*) her record. In these high-pressure situations, many Filipinos tend to get overwhelmed by callers' reactions and most of them allow the callers to take over "air time" and continue with – and expand, in some cases – their complaints. The agent in this case would benefit from more coaching in taking control of the situation and rephrasing questions, as well as in accurately and rapidly comprehending the cause of the particular communication breakdown. The agent may have thought that his initial request was simple and easy to understand because he had been asking this same question in all of his calls. He was clearly not ready for the first clarification sequence that caused the breakdown of the transaction. The implicit downside risk of over-reliance on scripts in training is also illustrated, in that, once "scripted," agent inclination to consider alternatives – even when the need is glaringly and painfully apparent (to everyone except the agent!) – may be precluded by strict adherence to the script, no matter what! In any event, in these scenarios, the needed clarification may not occur.

10.7 Frequency of caller clarification by agents' experience with their current accounts

The agents' experience with their current accounts also influences the frequency of caller clarifications. Agents with over two years of service with their current accounts have fewer caller clarifications (1.209) than agents with less than one year of service (1.401) as shown in Figure 10.4 below. Agents in the 1 to 2 Years group received 1.321 caller clarifications per 1,000 words.

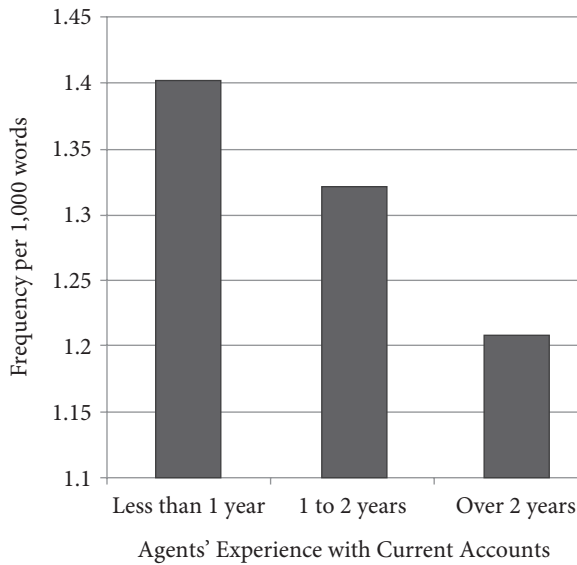


Figure 10.4. Caller clarifications by agents' experience with their current accounts.

In this case, familiarity with account procedures and the types of questions received from callers help experienced agents to avoid more caller clarifications in their transactions. Because of their experience, agents in the Over 2 Years group are able to respond more effectively and efficiently to the callers' questions and provide accurate response quickly after a clarification. Correct clarifying responses from the agents immediately solve caller issues and prevent further sequences of questions and clarifications. The experienced agents' awareness of the types of questions coming from a range of callers gained after years of service to their account is very useful. These agents are able to adjust to the callers' background (for example, as first-time caller/lay or experienced/specialist caller) and use appropriate language and level of information.

The ability to effectively handle caller clarifications could be acquired through time spent serving the callers. After several months of service, agents become very familiar with their support procedures and are able to learn from their previous mistakes. It appears that caller clarifications cannot totally be eliminated in outsourced customer service transactions because of the difficulty predicting internal caller issues. However, agents can continue to improve their information packaging and how they perceive the callers' level of comprehension and background. Improvement in the agents' language production variables through time could also limit the occurrence of unnecessary clarifications in the transactions.

10.8 Frequency of caller clarification across categories of accounts

The tasks involved in the different categories of accounts influence the frequency of caller clarifications in transactions. Figure 10.5 shows the distribution of these caller clarifications across account categories. Inquire accounts received the most number of caller clarifications, (1.653) per 1,000 words followed by Troubleshoot accounts (1.392). Purchase accounts have the least number of caller clarifications (1.153) in the Call Center corpus.

Inquire accounts are involved with the transfer of mostly technical information to the caller. In these transactions, the callers may find new information hard to process after the agents' turns. The amount of new information and data may prompt the callers to clarify what was just said by the agent. There are more caller clarifications in Inquire accounts because of the many question-answer sequences in these transactions. Because the callers specify what type of information they need during the calls, these callers require clearer explanations and delivery to get the correct information they need. In Text Sample 10.8, for example, the caller clarifications evidently resulted from information packaging ("*..do you have uh the uh type of uh equipment sir with you?*") and the caller's eventual understanding, after several clarifications, of a specification ("*..ok, then, for the 80KVA, you know you have to have 3 power modules*").

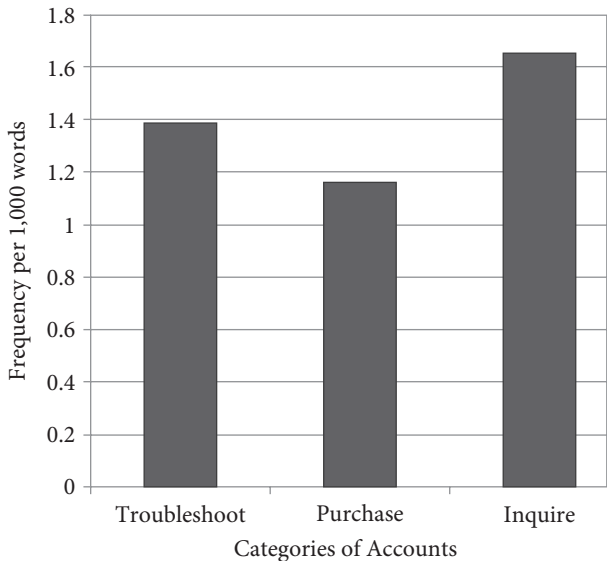


Figure 10.5. Caller clarifications across categories of accounts.

Text Sample 10.8 Clarification excerpt from an Inquire account

Agent: Ok [long pause] uh this uh do you have uh the uh type of uh equipment sir with you?

Caller: The type of equipment? [1]

Agent: Uh, uh, is this uh [interruption]

Caller: What do you mean by that? [2]

Agent: What type of UPS?

Caller: Uh what do you mean, what size or? [3]

Agent: No, this is uh this is a UPS, right?

Caller: Yeah

Agent: Yeah do you have uh any information regarding this, is this a 50K uhh KVA or 80KVA?

Caller: I guess 16, I'd have to run back upstairs to verify that, but I think it's 16KVA

Agent: Ok, then, for the 80KVA, you know you have to have 3 power modules

Caller: Say again, what do I need? [4]

Agent: 3 power modules for 80KVA

Caller: It's got 3 power modules and uh I think 8 battery modules with 1 control module. I've got a couple of power modules that keep going into alarm after we reset them, along with uh earlier this morning it uh the UPS tripped the main breaker going to it, for what reasons, we do not know

Agent: [mumbles] ok so this will serve as your uhm tag number for that equipment

Caller: Uh, uh I did not understand that [5]

Agent: Ok, this will serve as your tag number for that equipment

Caller: Oh ok

The types of caller clarification in Inquire accounts are easier to answer for the agents. Most of the clarifications involve asking for details such as numbers and figures or pricing. Many times, because the callers in these Inquire accounts are technicians and engineers, they are able to process the agents' response immediately. Although there are more occurrences of caller clarifications in Inquire accounts, these clarifications usually do not escalate into problems or breakdowns in communication. Agents often make mistakes in quoting a price or giving a series of codes and these are usually rechecked or clarified by the callers.

Troubleshooting accounts result in more difficult caller clarifications than do Inquire accounts. In some instances, these clarifications present multiple problems for the agents to address during the transaction. The interactions in these accounts are more difficult because they involve various procedures unique to the situation of the particular caller who is initiating the call. Also, the callers may have very limited technical background related to the problems being addressed by the agents. The agents need to be better prepared to give accurate information and use effective

language in these accounts to minimize caller clarifications. In Text Sample 10.9, there are many repeated caller clarifications in response to the agent's turns.

Text Sample 10.9 Clarification excerpt from a Troubleshooting account

Caller: So I buy one of those forty foot telephone chords

Agent: Ok?

Caller: And connected that from the wall jack to the modem will that be the problem?

Agent: Uhm that will be the problem ma'am that uhm [interruption]

Caller: Pardon?

Agent: That cable uhm it's too long for uhm connecting that modem

Caller: So that is the problem?

Agent: Yes so do you have a cable there?

Caller: But I

Agent: Uh-huh?

Caller: I'm sorry what? Go ahead

Agent: Do you have a cable that that that's not too long there?

Caller: Do I have a cable what?

Agent: Do you have a cable uhm shorter or not that long?

Caller: Well where I put the pc I need that longer cable

Agent: Ok now ma'am can I ask what type of modem are you using?

Caller: Uhm it's the one that you guys sent gt701

Agent: Oh is this wireless one?

Caller: Oh it's a high speed DSL modem is that what you want to know? I don't understand the question uh [interruption]

Agent: Is it the black box with the antenna at the back?

Caller: With the what?

Agent: Is it the black box with the antenna at the back?

Caller: With what?

Agent: An antenna at the back? Does it have does it have an antenna at the back?

Caller: No it does not, that's not the one

Agent: Ok

Caller: Let me go to the picture you can tell which one it is

Agent: Ok are you in front of your computer right now?

Caller: Yes I am

Agent: Ok good

Although there were many clarification sequences in the text sample above, the caller was calm and was patient with the agent. The agent did not clearly organize his information and sequences of questions addressing different issues from the length of the cord to the type of modem used by the caller. Because the tone of the

transaction was, for the most part, relaxed, the agent was not rattled by the clarifications from the caller. However, the agent needed coaching in properly identifying and matching the caller's technical understanding of support procedures. The caller needed more detailed and specific descriptions of what was required during the call (*"modem with black antenna"*; *"Oh it's a high speed DSL modem is that what you want to know? I don't understand the question"*). The agent in this transaction was in the Mid-level performance group and still had limitations in pronunciation.

10.9 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I presented the average number of caller clarifications received by male and female Filipino agents and other speaker groups such as those identified by the agents' performance evaluation scores, agents' experience with current accounts, and account categories. I also provided the average number of caller clarifications coming from male and female American callers. The main goal of the analysis in this chapter was to describe the instances and contexts of caller clarifications. I wanted to show examples of the types of clarifications coming from the callers and interpret the factors that prompted these clarification sequences. Factors that appeared to bring about caller clarifications after the agents' turns included pronunciation, information packaging or clarity of explanation coming from the agents, sound and transmission issues, and also caller comprehension. I did not attempt to code the actual number of these factors in my corpus, as this coding process clearly called for additional raters to provide valid and reliable results and report inter-rater reliability. This analysis could be pursued for future related studies of communication breakdown or miscommunication in outsourced call centers.

The average number of received caller clarifications showed a very strong relationship with agents' experience, performance scores, and to some extent, gender. Male agents received more clarifications than female agents and, as expected, less-experienced and Low-performing agents also received more clarifications than experienced and High-performing agents. Female callers slightly had more average clarifications than male American callers.

The data for this chapter were obtained following annotations in the corpus transcripts. I also manually rechecked these annotations during the time I evaluated the calls. A KWIC program allowed me to get frequencies and contextual excerpts of these clarification sequences. It was possible to design a program that could capture these clarification sequences in similarly-transcribed corpus and I found that the classification of factors contributing to clarifications coming from the callers could also be done automatically. For future studies, it would also be relevant to count the clarification sequences coming from the Filipino agents.

Synthesis and directions for future research

11.1 Synthesis

I have presented in the preceding chapters the linguistic characteristics of call center interactions relative to face-to-face conversation and spontaneous telephone discussions. I have also described the distribution of selected linguistic features used by different speaker groups in the Call Center corpus. I believe that more detailed analyses of the frequency distribution of linguistic data in this book and further consideration of the implications of these data should be the subject of future research. I have attempted to draw some generalizations and functional interpretations of the linguistic preferences of speakers in outsourced call center interactions, but a more qualitative elucidation of call center talk based on these corpus-based findings will further disclose the breadth and depth of these distinctive characteristics of the discourse. In Chapter 1, I summarized my two major goals in the current study, to wit:

- (1) To conduct a corpus-based register comparison between transcribed texts of outsourced call center interactions, face-to-face American conversation, and spontaneous telephone exchanges between participants discussing various topics; and,
- (2) To study the dynamics of cross-cultural communication between Filipino agents and American callers, as well as the demographic categories of speakers in outsourced call center transactions, e.g., gender of speakers, agents' experience and level of service performance, and the primary communicative tasks of interactions.

Results from register comparison and the analysis of cross-cultural interactions in outsourced customer service show that there are, indeed, systematic patterns of speech unique to the language of outsourced call centers in the Philippines and the specific roles of speakers engaged in the service transactions. Clearly, the language of outsourced call centers and the patterns of linguistic usage by agents and callers differ from speakers in face-to-face conversations and Switchboard discussions. The high frequency of discourse features such as politeness and respect markers, procedural language, and addressee-focused turns in call center interactions distinguishes this register from the comparison registers used in this book, as well as other registers analyzed in related research. The variation in the discourse of Filipino agents and American

callers, and other speaker groups in the present study, illustrates the prevailing linguistic preferences of these speakers as they carry out the major tasks in typical call center transactions. Additional descriptions of the functions of these linguistic features in future related studies will provide important data that will help Filipinos and Americans better understand the dynamics, and potentially improve the quality outcomes, of their cross-cultural interaction in telephone-based customer service transactions.

There are frequently-used linguistic features in call center interactions that are indicators of quality of service, experience and language proficiency of agents, types of account transactions, and callers' attitudes and behavior in service interactions with foreign agents. For example, politeness and respect markers are consistently used by agents more than by callers, by High-performing more than by Low-performing agents, and by female American callers more than by male American callers. Although I did not provide an extensive analysis of gender-based distribution of linguistic features across speaker groups in the Call Center corpus, results of my exploratory data related to the influence of gender in the frequency distribution of particular linguistic and paralinguistic features are encouraging and relevant for future detailed investigation. Tables 11.1 to 11.4 summarize the major linguistic characteristics of the three registers as well as the variation among the speaker groups in the Call Center corpus.

Table 11.1. Comparison of linguistic characteristics across registers.

Linguistic Feature	Call Center	American Conversation	Switchboard
Dim 1: 'Addressee-focused'	*		
Dim 1: 'Involved narrative'	*	***	**
Dim 2: 'Procedural'	**		
Dim 3: 'Managed information'	***		
Nouns	**	*	
Verbs		***	**
Adjectives	*		
Adverbs	*		
1st person pronouns		**	**
2nd person pronouns	***	*	*
3rd person pronouns		***	**
Pronoun <i>it</i>	*	*	**
<i>I</i>	*	***	**
<i>You</i>	***	**	*
<i>We</i>	*	**	**
<i>He</i>		**	*

(Continued)

<i>She</i>		**	*
<i>They</i>		**	***
<i>Kind of/sort of</i>		**	***
<i>Or something/and stuff</i>		**	**
<i>Stuff</i>		***	**
<i>Thing/s</i>		***	**
<i>Let's</i>	***	**	
Type-token ratio	***	**	*
Average word length	*		
Nominalization	***		*
Preposition		*	*
That-clauses	*	**	***
Wh-clauses			*
To-clauses		*	
Stance modals/semi-modals	***	**	*
Stance adverbs	*	**	***
Stance complement clauses	*	**	***
Polite speech-act formulae	***		
Polite requests	***		
Apologies	***		
Respect markers	***		
<i>I mean</i>			
<i>You know</i>		**	***
<i>Oh</i>	*	***	**
<i>Well</i>		***	**
<i>Anyway</i>			
<i>Because</i>	*	**	***
<i>So</i>	*		
<i>Next</i>			
<i>Then</i>	***	**	**
<i>Ok</i>	***		
<i>Alright</i>	***		
<i>Uh-huh</i>	**	*	***
Filled-pauses	***	*	**
2-word repeats	***	*	*
3-word repeats	*		
4-word repeats			

*** = extremely common; much more frequent than in other registers

** = very common; generally more frequent than in other registers

* = common; slightly frequent than in other registers

11.1.1 Register comparison

The three spoken registers compared in this book are clearly different in communicative tasks, relationships and roles between participants, medium of communication, and goals of the interactions. All of these, and other related circumstantial differences across these registers, contribute to the overall distribution of linguistic features used by the interactants. Table 11.1 shows the comparison of linguistic characteristics among these three types of spoken interactions.

A quick glance at the summary of distributions in Table 11.1 identifies politeness and respect markers, discourse markers *ok* and *alright*, nominalizations, 2nd person pronouns, and procedural language (Dimension 2) as the primary distinguishing features of call center interactions in contrast to face-to-face conversation and spontaneous Switchboard discussions. These features reflect the roles of participants (such as server and servee) with respect to the use of polite and respectful language and the communicative tasks that focus on technical language, delivery of instructions, and managing the flow of information. There are also more filled-pauses, two-word repeats, and dysfluencies in call center interactions that generally evidence the pressure of online production, the need to buy thinking time before a response, and, potentially, difficulty maintaining fluency of talk during turns. The frequencies of some of these linguistic features (e.g., dysfluencies and pauses) also indicate the cross-cultural nature of outsourced call center interactions and the L2 qualities of agents' speech.

Face-to-face conversations, on the other hand, are 'highly involved' (negative features of Dimension 1) and make use of more verbs, third (*he*, *she*) and 1st person pronouns, nouns of vague references, and discourse markers *oh* and *well*. These speakers often talk about past events and other individuals who are often not present during the interaction. In Switchboard, the interactions are somewhat more academic and quite formal structurally due to the kinds of topics discussed by the participants compared to the other two registers. The turns/exchanges in these spontaneous discussions of topics are similar, for the most part, to classroom discussions such as those reported in Biber's (2006) study of spoken interactions in American universities. Switchboard speakers have more stance adverbs and stance complement clauses, *that*-clauses, discourse markers *you know* and *because*, backchannels, and 3rd person *they*. Switchboard participants make use of these features to explain and support their ideas and arguments as well as to explicitly demonstrate engagement and participation during the discussions.

11.1.2 Role and gender

Table 11.2 summarizes the distribution of frequently-used linguistic features across role and gender in the Call Center corpus. There is a clear distinction in the

linguistic preferences and communicative goals of agents and callers in outsourced customer service interactions. Among the speaker groups in the Call Center corpus, role shows a clearer and more systematic distribution of features differentiating the language of agents and callers in the transactions. There are also issues inviting future research related to the influence of speakers' gender in the linguistic patterns of outsourced call center discourse. The commonly used features based on role and gender are shown in the table below.

Table 11.2. Comparison of linguistic characteristics across role and gender.

Linguistic Feature	Agents	Callers	Male Agents	Female Agents	Male Callers	Female Callers
Dim 1: 'Addsee-focsd	**		*	**		
Dim 1: 'Invd narative'		**			**	*
Dim 2: 'Procdrl'	***		*	**		
Dim 3: 'Mngd info	***		**	*		
Nouns	**	*	**	**	*	*
Verbs	*	*	*	*	*	*
Adjectives						
Adverbs						
1st person pronouns	*	***	*	*	***	***
2nd person pronouns	***		**	***		
3rd person pronouns			*			
Pronoun <i>it</i>		**			**	**
<i>I</i>	*	***		*	***	***
<i>You</i>	***	*	**	***	**	*
<i>We</i>		*		*		*
<i>He</i>		*			*	*
<i>She</i>		*			*	*
<i>They</i>		*			*	*
<i>Kind of/sort of</i>		**			**	**
<i>Or something/and stuff</i>		***			***	***
<i>Stuff</i>		**			**	**
<i>Thing/s</i>	**	***	**	*	***	***
<i>Let's</i>	***	*	***	***		**
Type-token ratio	**	*	**	**	*	*
Average word length	*					
Nominalization	***		***	***		
Preposition	**	*	**	**	*	
That-clauses	**	***	**	**	***	***
Wh-clauses		*			*	*
To-clauses	**	**	*	**	**	**

(Continued)

Table 11.2. (continued).

Linguistic Feature	Agents	Callers	Male Agents	Female Agents	Male Callers	Female Callers
Stance modals	***	**	***	***	**	**
Stance adverbs						
Stance comp clauses	*	*	*	*	*	*
Polite speech-act form	***	**	**	***	**	**
Polite requests	***	*	**	***		
Apologies	**	*	**	**	*	*
Respect markers	***	*	***	**	*	*
<i>I mean</i>			*			
<i>You know</i>		***	*		***	***
<i>Oh</i>	***	***	***	***	***	***
<i>Well</i>	*	***	*		**	***
<i>Anyway</i>						
<i>Ok</i>	***	**	***	**	*	**
<i>Alright</i>	***	**	**	***	*	**
<i>Uh-huh</i>	**	*	*	***	*	*
Filled-pauses	**	**	***	**	**	**
Short pauses	***	**	***	**	*	**
Long pauses	**	*	**	**	*	*
Holds			*	**		
2-word repeats	***	**	***	**	**	**
3-word repeats	*		*			
4-word repeats						
Caller clarifications			*			

*** = extremely common; much more frequent than in other speaker groups
** = very common; generally more frequent than in other speaker groups
* = common; slightly frequent than in other speaker groups

The differences between the linguistic characteristics of agents and callers' turns are captured in the MD analysis discussed in Chapter 4. Agents' turns are addressee-focused, polite, and elaborated; procedural; and constantly managed, whereas callers' turns are involved and personal, based on past tense narrative, and less-managed. The frequency of the particular linguistic features comprising these dimensions is also distributed consistently across roles. For example, agents consistently use more polite and respect markers as well as second-person pronouns than do callers. Because of the specialized, procedural, and technical content in agents' turns, they use more nominalizations, longer words, *let's*, temporal adverbs, and have higher type-token ratio. Manifestations of the cross-cultural nature of this register could be seen in the frequency of dysfluencies, respect markers

and apologies, filled-pauses, and repeats by Filipino agents. In some instances, typical Filipino communicative norms appear to play a role in the distribution of some of these linguistic features. I briefly discussed in Chapter 7 (*Politeness*) how the (over)use of respect markers *ma'am* and *sir* by Filipino agents reflects their cultural background and expectations in the context of customer service. Callers use more 1st person pronouns, especially *I*, vague nouns, *that*-clauses, and typical conversational discourse markers (*I mean, you know, oh, well*) in their turns.

Some established “universals” in the study of gender and the linguistic preferences of male and female speakers are also apparent in the current study. For American callers, females generally have higher frequencies of involved and personal narrative features and more politeness markers than do male callers. These results agree with many studies of language and gender from both qualitative and quantitative analysis of linguistic usage in a range of conversational contexts between males and females. Some of these features, however, do not appear to transfer cross-culturally to Filipino speakers. For example, the distribution of features such as respect markers, discourse markers, and filled-pauses by Filipino males resembles the general pattern of use by female rather than male American callers. Evidently, given the content and focus of the current study, I was not able to fully investigate the influence of gender in the discourse and interpret the linguistic preferences of male and female Filipinos and Americans in outsourced call center transactions. For future analysis of gender-based features in outsourced call centers, it would be relevant to further interpret the distribution of addressee-focused and procedural language (agents), *ok* and *alright* (agents and callers), *let's* (callers), involved narrative (callers), repeats (agents) and filled-pauses (agents and callers). It would also be relevant to create other gender-based speaker groups, such as interactions between male agents and male callers, female agents and female callers, as well as cross-gender interactions.

11.1.3 Agents' performance evaluation score

Linguistic comparisons following my initial analysis of the performance-based groups of agents are very encouraging, to say the least. Using these corpus approaches and methodologies to acquire real-world data and statistics that are applicable to training design, performance coaching, and materials development is very promising at this stage. The systematic distribution of linguistic patterns used in successful and unsuccessful transactions can be captured using corpus tools. It was easy to obtain text and sound excerpts of transactions that specifically identify areas for potential improvement in agents' speech and task performance. It is possible to further explore the distribution and use of particular linguistic and paralinguistic features that characterize and determine service quality and L2 agents' performance in outsourced call centers.

The summary of linguistic features commonly used by agents belonging to three performance-based speaker groups (Low, Mid, High) is presented in Table 11.3. The general goal of this grouping of speakers is to describe the linguistic characteristics of “good” and “bad” outsourced call center transactions as perceived by quality monitors listening to and evaluating the agents’ call-handling techniques and use of English. It would be ideal to also obtain actual callers’ perspectives and evaluations of agents’ overall performance in order to accurately represent the current prevailing sentiments American customers have about their experiences with foreign call center agents and, potentially, validate (or not) the conclusions derived from this study. Clearly, some callers may have a very different set of standards and expectations than those measured by various matrices set forth by call center companies.

In addition, there are, potentially, differences between the perceptions of callers during and after the transactions and the items measuring agents’ performance in the rating scale that I used in the study. My rating scale tries to address effective task and linguistic performance taking the callers’ perspectives of effective service and quality of interaction, but evaluations come from “insiders” who monitor the transactions based on pre-determined goals and expectations. One potential difference, for example, might be the average length of support agents spend in calls. Longer average call-handling time often negatively affects the performance scores of agents whereas callers, on the other hand, may actually demand more time for support, especially if they have more questions, and perceive the willingness of agents to spend more time with them as an indicator of good service and “engagement.” An obvious implication is the need for management and training staff in the call center industry to consider the congruence between their criteria for assessing quality transactions and those of the customers’. Again, as noted above, integration of this study’s findings with future study of customers’ service quality assessment and industry expectations would be interesting and productive.

There are linguistic features or groups of features listed in Table 11.3 that could be considered as quality indicators in the service transactions handled by Filipino agents. Some of these features are used with linear consistency by Low, Mid, and High-performing agents. The constant gap between High and Low agents in many of the features used in this book indicates that it is possible to describe the linguistic characteristics of “good” and “bad” transactions using corpus and quantitative data.

Clearer distinctions and linear patterns of linguistic use by Low, Mid, and High-performing agents are evident in Dimension 1 (“Addressee-Focused, Polite and Elaborated vs. Involved Narrative”), Dimension 2 (“Procedural Language”), Dimension 3 (“Managed Information Flow”), features of elaboration and lexical

Table 11.3. Comparison of linguistic characteristics by agents' performance scores.

Linguistic Feature	Low	Mid	High
Dim 1: 'Addressee-focused'		**	***
Dim 1: 'Involved narrative'	*		
Dim 2: 'Procedural'	*	**	***
Dim 3: 'Managed information'	***	***	***
Nouns	***	***	***
Verbs	**	**	**
Adjectives			
Adverbs	*	*	*
1st person pronouns	**	*	*
2nd person pronouns	*	*	
3rd person pronoun			
Pronoun <i>it</i>	*	*	*
Type-token ratio	*	**	***
Average word length	*	**	***
Nominalization	*	**	***
Preposition	*	**	***
Stance modals/semi-modals	*	**	***
Stance adverbs	*	**	***
Stance complement clauses	*	**	***
Polite speech-act formulae	*	**	***
Polite requests	*	**	***
Apologies	***	**	*
Respect markers	*	**	***
<i>I mean</i>	*	***	**
<i>You know</i>	*	**	***
<i>Oh</i>	*	**	***
<i>Well</i>	*	**	***
<i>Ok</i>	***	**	*
<i>Alright</i>	*	**	***
<i>Uh-huh</i>	*	**	***
Filled-pauses	***	***	**
Short pauses	***	**	*
Long pauses	**	*	*
Holds	**	*	*
Caller clarifications	***	**	*

*** = extremely common; much more frequent than in other performance speaker groups

** = very common; generally more frequent than in other performance speaker groups

* = common; slightly frequent than in other performance speaker groups

specificity (type-token ratio, nominalizations, average word length, and prepositions), stance (modal verbs, adverbials, complement clauses), politeness and respect markers, discourse markers (*I mean, you know, oh, well, alright*), back-channels, and short pauses. In the distribution of these features, Low-performing agents consistently have lower frequencies while High-performing agents have the highest frequencies across quality groups. The opposite is observed in the distribution of apologies (e.g., *sorry, I apologize, pardon me, excuse me*), *oks*, and received caller clarifications. Low-performing agents have more apologies, *ok*, and received caller clarifications than both the Mid and High-performing agents. Other linguistic features did not present the same linear distribution across quality groups. Content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs), pronouns, filled-pauses, long pauses, and holds have either very similar distributions or are not consistently defining the agents' quality of service. For example, Mid agents have more discourse markers *I mean* than both Low and High-performing agents. However, in all these linguistic features, the distinction and differences in the distributional data between High and Low agents are consistently maintained.

What, then, are the pedagogical and "business-interest" applications of these summary data in Table 11.3? Could the call center company in the Philippines benefit from these linguistic reports? As I briefly discuss in the following sections, results of these linguistic descriptions of quality of service in outsourced call centers are important in developing effective training programs, teaching materials, and assessment instruments. These corpus-based data also provide relevant statistics that support, or not, strong intuitive and subjective observations by professionals involved in the hiring and training of Filipino agents. My experience with the call center industry in the Philippines allowed me to observe, as well as participate in, training and hiring practices based largely upon staff's perceptions of the applicants' communication skills and performance during interviews and written/spoken tests. Some of these perceptions may be accurate, while some could be entirely wrong and unsupported by actual data. For example, I attended training sessions in this call center company where the trainers were advised to teach and train Filipino agents to not be "too polite" and to limit the use of respect and politeness markers in their turns. I have heard trainers, some of them trained by American trainers in the U.S., say that Americans do not expect "niceties" in conversations because they prefer direct focus upon and immediate resolution of their problems. This impression may, indeed, be characteristic of many Americans, but there certainly are regional differences and cultural preferences within the U.S. (as well as other multi-cultural countries) to which this generalization will not apply. Other anecdotal recommendations heard during training sessions in Philippine call centers include discussions about Americans' preference for vocatives (e.g.,

“Thank you so much for that Linda..”), use of more backchannels, and repeating what was said to confirm comprehension (e.g., *“I understand that you meant to return the box but you’re keeping the free kit, am I correct, Alice?”*).

I do not intend to question these suggestions, as most of them came from professional training experiences of materials developers and teaching materials that have been produced in the U.S. over the years. However, some of these training materials are also not clearly supported by actual data that consider cross-cultural interactions and the level of language proficiency of non-native speakers of English like Filipinos. In the use of polite and respect markers, for example, High-performing Filipino agents consistently use more of these markers than Low agents. The frequency of these markers appears to not negatively influence a listener’s perception of what quality of service entails, again, at least from the perspective of the call centers who are developing the criteria and performing the quality assessments, as noted above, if not from the perspectives of the customers themselves. Polite agents are able to establish rapport and good relationship with the caller during the call and are able to be confident and relaxed in the process. Actual data, in this case, show that some perceptions and intuitions do not directly apply to the complete context of outsourced customer service between Filipino agents and American callers. In summary, at the very least, it would seem that there would be value in obtaining empirical, research-based validation for these assumptions before basing call center training and quality assessment programs exclusively on them.

My call center experience and corpus-based data incline me to be cautious about claims made in course and training design, particularly if they originate from the U.S. or European settings. On the other hand, I know also that data alone cannot inform or direct the “perfect” training program for Filipino agents serving American callers. It is very important to consider the functional parameters and contexts in which these sets of data are applied and used by speakers, and the corresponding relationships they have with quality of service – as defined both by the industry and the customers – and quick resolution of callers’ problems. Corpus data are good starting points for many training programs and these, I believe, will achieve good results when utilized effectively in the training classrooms, particularly if they are used in conjunction with empirical, customer-provided data, as previously discussed.

11.1.4 Other speaker groups

The following tables (11.5 to 11.8) summarize the distribution of commonly-used linguistic features across experience groups, categories of accounts, callers’ background (lay vs. specialist), and perceived level of pressure in the transactions.

I present data only from features that provided noteworthy results in my empirical chapters (Chapters 4 to 10). Unlike role, gender, and agents’ quality of service groups, these supplemental speaker groups do not consistently provide greater, statistically-defined differences. I used only the last two groups: callers’ background and level of pressure in my MD analysis in Chapter 4. However, these grouping categories actually provided very interesting results that invite future, more detailed analyses.

11.1.4.1 Agents’ experience with current accounts

Table 11.4 shows the comparison of selected linguistic features across experience groups in the Call Center corpus: Less than 1 Year, 1 to 2 Years, and Over 2 Years. I mentioned in Chapter 3 that I interpret these experience groups with caution because I do not have complete data of each agent’s actual experience in Philippine call centers. In other words, I do not know whether or not a particular agent in my corpus who has only served this particular call center for less than one year has had previous service experience in another call center. This issue potentially affects the validity and reliability of results in this section of the book. Nevertheless, I am

Table 11.4. Comparison of linguistic characteristics across experience groups.

Linguistic Feature	Less than 1 year	1 to 2 years	Over 2 years
Stance modals/semi-modals	**	***	*
Stance adverbs	*	**	***
Stance complement clauses	**	**	**
Polite speech-act formulae	***	**	*
Polite requests	***	**	*
Apologies	***	*	*
Respect markers	**	***	*
<i>I mean</i>	*	**	*
<i>You know</i>	*	**	***
<i>Oh</i>	**	*	***
<i>Well</i>	*	***	**
<i>Ok</i>	***	**	*
<i>Alright</i>	*	***	**
<i>Uh-huh</i>	*	**	***
Filled-pauses	**	***	*
Holds	***	**	*
Caller clarifications	***	**	*

*** = extremely common; much more frequent than in other speaker groups
** = very common; generally more frequent than in other speaker groups
* = common; slightly frequent than in other speaker groups

still convinced that it is relevant to use available agents' experience data for comparison in the distribution of linguistic features in the corpus. Agents with more than two years gained from serving the same account in this call center could have linguistic patterns that newly-hired agents do not have in their turns. For future studies, it would be appropriate to compare language-based performance evaluation scores of Filipino agents and their length of service within their current accounts in order to see if there is a continuing acquisition of fluency in the context of outsourced call centers in the Philippines. Because Filipino agents continue to communicate in English on a very high level with native speakers, it is possible that they are able to acquire important skills that provide them training and preparation for higher-level acquisition of L2 skills. The same could be said about the acquisition of increased cultural awareness and development of greater familiarity with communicative behaviors and preferences of American callers.

There are various interesting data that show the influence of experience in the agents' use of selected linguistic features in Table 11.4. Features such as the frequency of caller clarifications, backchannels, stance adverbs, frequency of holds, and polite speech-act formulae could be considered as experience indicators due to the linear distribution across experience groups. These features are typically performance-based features that indicate the agents' familiarity and mastery of support procedures. For example, because experienced agents have extensive background in using their software, website tools, and equipment, they are able to avoid repeated caller clarifications and longer holds. Experience in this case helps achieve quick resolution of callers' issues and limit call-handling time.

It is quite surprising, however, that the length of call center experience of many Filipino agents does not necessarily correlate with quality of service as defined by the agents' evaluation scores. Some linguistic features such as politeness and respect markers, stance modal verbs, and discourse markers *well*, *alright*, and *I mean* are used infrequently by more experienced agents (Over 2 Years group) compared to the two other experience groups (Less Than 1 Year and 1 to 2 Years). These features are, however, often used with high frequency by High-performing agents in the previous table. Agents in the Over 2 Years group have relatively fewer respect makers (*ma'am* and *sir*) and polite speech-act formulae *thanks*, *thank you*, or *I appreciate* in their turns. It is possible that experienced agents have shifted their focus from generally polite customer service to behaviors that prioritize call-handling times and efficient resolution and delivery of support, thereby, perhaps, inadvertently reducing the frequency of indicators which would, according to the criteria in use, positively influence performance assessments. It is also possible that, after months or years on the floor taking customer calls, some experienced agents have grown tired of the repetitive nature of this job so that they no longer show explicit enthusiasm and interest in establishing stronger positive relationships with their callers.

11.1.4.2 *Categories of accounts*

I grouped the eight accounts in the Call Center corpus into three categories of accounts that describe the typical communicative tasks involved in these transactions. To review, Troubleshoot accounts are involved with machine or equipment malfunction that the agents try to resolve or fix with the caller during the interaction. Purchase accounts focus on taking orders or actually selling products, while Inquire accounts take customer questions/inquiries about certain products or services. The different sets of tasks in these categories of accounts clearly influence the overall flow of turns, the callers' type of questions or responses, and the agents' support protocols. Table 11.5 compares the distribution of commonly-used linguistic features in the three categories of accounts in the Call Center corpus.

The main goal of the analysis in this section is one of description. I wanted to describe the similarities and differences in the linguistic characteristics of the three categories of accounts. The transactions in these accounts included agents' and callers' turns, and I did not intend to break the data down further into sub-sections or sub-categories. Inquire accounts have more *oks*, filled-pauses, longer holds, and more frequencies of caller clarifications. These features collectively indicate some type of difficulty in maintaining well-flowing exchanges in these calls because both the agents and callers often take time to research for information

Table 11.5. Comparison of linguistic characteristics across categories of accounts.

Linguistic Feature	Troubleshoot	Purchase	Inquire
Stance modals/semi-modals	**	***	*
Stance adverbs			
Stance complement clauses	*	*	
Polite speech-act formulae	**	***	*
Polite requests	**	***	*
Apologies	***	*	*
Respect markers	**	***	*
<i>Ok</i>	**	**	***
<i>Uh-huh</i>	**	***	*
<i>Let's</i>	***	*	
Filled-pauses	**	*	***
Holds	*	**	***
Caller clarifications	**	*	***

*** = extremely common; much more frequent than in other speaker groups

** = very common; generally more frequent than in other speaker groups

* = common; slightly frequent than in other speaker groups

and answer specific questions. Purchase accounts are “heavily” polite, have more stance modals/semi-modals, and backchannels or confirmatory responses. These features point to a more customer-oriented series of exchanges because of the nature of the tasks involved. Agents need to sell their products and services while callers are in need of these products and services and are ready to purchase. There are very limited conflicts and problems in these types of transactions. Finally, Troubleshoot accounts are clearly procedural, repetitive, and have higher frequencies of apologies and *let’s*. Agents and callers engage in working together to resolve a problem and there are commonly-repeated procedures in many exchanges. Agents’ discourse in these accounts is very different from callers’. Callers talk about past events and often use first person narratives in explaining their situations, while agents make use of procedural language and features that engage the callers (*let’s*) during the support transactions.

11.1.4.3 *Lay vs. specialist callers and level of pressure/potential conflict*

Finally, I used two additional speaker groups in my MD analysis: callers’ background (lay vs. specialist) and level of pressure or potential conflict (low vs. mid to high) of accounts. I did not use these speaker groups outside of the discussions in Chapter 4, primarily due to the amount of time as well as programming and corpus processing work needed to add these analyses throughout the entire study. It is clear, however, that these additional speaker groups provide another layer of information about call center interactions that illustrates additional, unique characteristics of the discourse. Agents and callers’ roles in the interaction could be further broken down into different sub-categories (e.g., callers’ background) because these variables affect the way callers ask questions and how agents, correspondingly, respond to them. The level of pressure or potential conflict in each account also affects the tone and tenor of the transactions, and therefore, the linguistic patterns used by speakers, as these speakers not only engage in giving information or solving problems but also in managing the conversation properly. Tables 11.6 and 11.7 summarize the MD results (Chapter 4) for these two additional speaker groups.

Table 11.6. Comparison of linguistic dimensions between lay/specialist callers.

Linguistic Feature	Lay	Specialist	Agents + Lay	Agents + Specialist
Dim 1: ‘Addressee-focused’		*	***	
Dim 1: ‘Involved narrative’	**	*		***
Dim 2: ‘Procedural’			***	
Dim 3: ‘Managed information’				

*** = extremely common; much more frequent than in other speaker groups

** = very common; generally more frequent than in other speaker groups

* = common; slightly frequent than in other speaker groups

Table 11.7. Comparison of linguistic dimensions by accounts’ level of pressure/potential conflict.

Linguistic Feature	Agents Low	Agents Mid-High	Callers Low	Callers Mid-High
Dim 1: ‘Addressee-focused’	***			
Dim 1: ‘Involved narrative’		***	***	**
Dim 2: ‘Procedural’	***	*		
Dim 3: ‘Managed information’				

*** = extremely common; much more frequent than in other speaker groups

** = very common; generally more frequent than in other speaker groups

* = common; slightly frequent than in other speaker groups

As noted in Chapter 4, the agents who are serving lay callers are more addressee-focused, polite, and have elaborate turns. This pattern shifts to short and direct turns when agents serve specialist callers who express their familiarity with account procedures. In troubleshooting transactions, for example, specialist callers have a good understanding of the process; hence, there is not much need for the agents to give specific and longer explanations. Agents serving lay callers also have more procedural features explaining the process of support and the instructions in troubleshooting the problem. Lay callers, on the other hand, have more involved narrative features in their turns which often include past tense verbs, 1st person pronouns, and some politeness markers. Lay callers also try to engage more in customer service-type interactions with agents by explaining their situation or experiences and also by referring to third parties such as family members or other agents.

Agents in low-pressure accounts have more addressee-focused features (with more politeness markers, and higher lexico/syntactic complexity features) and more procedural features in their turns than agents in mid to high-pressure accounts. Callers often dominate the interaction in many mid to high-pressure accounts as they have complaints or difficult questions posed to the agents. In these mid to high-pressure accounts, agents need to be more in-control of the transactions. Many Filipino agents, especially those with enough service experience, are able to maintain good composure in allowing the callers to express dissatisfaction with services or products. Filipino agents are very patient in dealing with angry/irate callers and this often helps them to stay with the caller and attempt to completely address the issue. However, there is a need for control and “equal leveling” with angry callers that Filipinos should be better prepared for. In high-pressure accounts, there are agents who get rattled easily by outburst from callers. They lose their scripts and scramble to determine their next steps.

11.2 Future research

The interpretation of corpus-based, quantitative data in this book is still very limited at this point. I attempted to briefly discuss the functional characteristics of speakers' discourse across registers and internal speaker groups in the Call Center corpus, but more detailed descriptions and analyses of these features are needed to further explain the systematic patterns of talk based on my corpus findings. For example, my exploratory sociolinguistic study of gender and speakers' roles would benefit from a theoretically-informed analysis that incorporates important perspectives from previous research (e.g., Tannen, Lakoff, or Holmes). I have also tried to refer to studies on crosstalk and cross-cultural (mis)communication in some sections of the book, but additional, extensive analyses are still needed in order to describe the nature of interaction and instances of miscommunication between Filipino English speakers and American customers. I am interested in further identifying and defining the influence of the typical Filipino culture and communicative norms in international business interactions, specifically focusing on telephone-based customer service. The cross-cultural analysis of call center interactions between Filipinos and Americans will help these speakers better understand each other and resolve issues and problems more productively in outsourced call centers. For my immediate future related research, I intend to pursue the following:

- Pedagogical implications of the current results
- Correlation between segmental and suprasegmental features of L2 speech and corpus-based data
- Similarities and differences between Filipino, Indian, and American agents from parallel corpora
- Related research directions focusing on task performance and the agents' behavior and attitude in customer service; description of quality of service in outsourced call centers in the Philippines; implications for hiring of new call center agents; and more detailed analysis of the language and behavior of American callers
- Inclusion of customer-provided assessments of agents' service quality and correlation with and use of this information together with industry-developed criteria and corpus-based training programs.

11.2.1 Pedagogical implications

The call center company participating in this book agreed to provide data for research primarily because of the pedagogical implications of corpus-based results to be potentially derived from this study and applicable to the training of Filipino

agents serving American callers. The outsourced call center industry in the Philippines has evolved over the past few years to include applied linguists and ESL specialists in the English and communication skills training of agents. ESL trainers are also gradually receiving relevant training in outsourced call center interactions and are being sent to the U.S. to gain more knowledge about American customer service practices and the use of advanced technology in the training classroom. In addition, real world, ESL-based materials are increasingly being used in the “core-skills” training of agents. More and more culture-specific training curricula targeting the needs of Filipino agents are now being produced locally. Specific training programs to address needs such as listening and comprehension, questioning and negotiation strategies, American culture and typical communicative norms, etc., are constantly provided to particular groups of agents.

The argument supporting the important contribution of corpus-based data in the development of training materials for Filipino agents is compelling. Corpus findings from a representative sample of outsourced call center transactions are valid starting points in designing training materials and activities. In an industry that relies so much on customer opinions and various customer satisfaction reports, it is essential to produce actual data that support, or not, many of these subjective assessments of agents’ quality of service and overall performance. It has been proven by corpus linguistics that speakers’ and observers’ intuitions about language use are often unreliable. For example, in my experience working for the quality assurance and language monitoring of agents in the Philippines, different American account managers I consulted and communicated with had different sets of expectations of quality and different descriptions of efficient service performance. These account managers would benefit from data that combine their customer satisfaction reports and linguistic descriptions of agents’ performance available from corpora.

At an even higher, practical, and equally compelling level, as suggested at the outset of this study, the very viability and future of this critical industry and the resultant socio-economic impact it has on the Philippines and other countries to which it has been outsourced by American clients depend upon its successfully meeting the needs of these American clients and their customers. Findings from research such as this, if applied, might well contribute positively to the success of this industry and, consequently, to the lives of people employed in and served by the industry.

What, then, are potential starting points for training/curriculum design that focuses on the use of English by Filipinos in outsourced call centers? In answering this question, which could, in fact, come directly from a call center account manager in the Philippines, I can offer results of my analyses of the difference between the linguistic characteristics of High-performing and Low-performing

agents as the initial focus of my training design. A possible course design outline could begin with the following considerations:

- Use corpus comparison data of “good” vs. “bad” agents or transactions: As noted above, there are linguistic features that I would define to be quality indicators of agents’ speech in call center transactions. I can use the pertinent differences in the use of these linguistic features by groups of agents in designing specific training activities. It is ideal to start with corpus figures and tables illustrating the distribution of these linguistic features across performance groups from the time Filipino agents start their core-skills language training.
- Obtain corpus-based text and sound files: As a learner of English, I have always preferred actual examples of what others, especially native speakers of English, consider to be good or effective linguistic performance. I believe that I have learned to focus on developing my spoken English in U.S. graduate schools – a higher level of usage than typical in communication settings in the Philippines – because I have been exposed directly to the level of usage that I wanted to achieve. For Filipino agents, exposure to corpus data and sound files of selected representative samples of effective performance can provide this type of exposure. As they continue to gain experience in serving American callers, I believe that this exposure would lead to heightened awareness for them to focus on areas for improvement in communication skills. Therefore, this training design will include the use of transcripts and sound files in many activities identifying, describing, and discussing multiple areas for improvement as well as the various contexts agents need to focus on in their transactions.
- Show correlations: Learners could be motivated by data that show how the use of specific linguistic features affects customer satisfaction scores. Correlations between language and task performance factors can potentially define what callers actually pay attention to during the transactions. Do callers care about agents’ L2 grammar? Do they appear to appreciate polite language? Do callers pay particular attention to word choice and sentence structures? How important are pronunciation features of the L2 in relation to customer satisfaction scores of agents? In answering these questions, the training of agents then focuses on establishing the relationship between task performance and linguistic performance and highlighting factors identified by corpus data as important areas for improvement for Filipino agents.
- Focus on cultural implications: Linguistic data coming from American callers are good examples of the different cultural manifestations present in outsourced call center interactions. Agents will benefit from a detailed discussion of cross-cultural factors evident during communication breakdowns or

miscommunications. There is a need to further develop the core-skills training provided by many call centers in the Philippines to include a well-designed section on crosstalk and understanding U.S. cultural norms. In this particular call center, for example, the section on “U.S. Culture and Geography” is often given during the last day of training for new agents. This cultural awareness has to be incorporated from day 1 of core-skills training and directly linked to language use and phone-handling activities.

Finally, increasing numbers of corpus-based textbooks and reference materials targeting the L2 classrooms or language training in professional L2 settings have been produced in the past years in addition to the LGSWE, e.g., “From Corpus to Classroom: Language Use and Language Teaching” (O’Keeffe, McCarthy, & Carter, 2007), “Corpus-Based Language Studies: An Advanced Resource Book” (McEnery, Xiao, & Tono, 2006), “Corpora in Applied Linguistics” (Hunston, 2002), “Discourse in the Professions: Perspectives from Corpus Linguistics” (Connor & Upton, 2004), and “Reading Concordances” (Sinclair, 2003) to name a few. It is clearly possible to adapt corpus approaches in the design and development of training courses and materials for the outsourced call center industry, given the wealth of available tools and corpora to which we have access.

11.2.2 Incorporating segmental and suprasegmental features of L2 speech

The analysis of spoken registers using corpus-based approaches has always been perceived by many as somewhat deficient and limited in the overall description of the discourse of speakers because segmental and suprasegmental features of speech are not captured in traditional transcriptions. The traditional transcription conventions of available spoken corpora such as the British National Corpus (BNC), the American National Corpus (ANC), or even Switchboard, the Longman Corpus, and the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), represent lexico/syntactic features of spoken data but not the situational contexts and actual acoustic measures in which these linguistic features are used. The prosodic elements of speech which are very important in capturing the affective focus and tenor of interactions are generally not present in these corpora. Although there are recent attempts to manually code prosody in transcribed texts, for example, the Hong Kong Corpus of Spoken English (HKCSE) (Warren, 2004), or to develop a multi-modal annotation of interactions (Gu, 2007), spoken texts are still mostly treated as written texts in many studies using corpus approaches and tools.

Like these corpora, my Call Center corpus is transcribed traditionally with limited comments and annotations related to prosodic features of agents and callers’ speech. In future studies, I intend to experiment with multi-modal annotation designs

and use machine-based annotations of selected acoustic measures of speech. There have been recent advancements in the use of computer technologies in measuring acoustics (rate, pause, stress, and pitch measures) and accentedness in L2 speech (e.g., Pickering, 2001; Komos & Denes, 2004; Kang, 2007; Rajadurai, 2007) which could well be applied in this call center study. I am interested in adapting automatic acoustical analytical techniques and integrating these measures relative to the distribution of corpus data in call center interactions.

In my previous exploratory research into the relationship between Filipino agents' linguistic attributes and perception of quality in customer service, I found that prosody measured by suprasegmental features of speech (e.g., intonation, pitch, volume) generally influenced the performance evaluation scores of agents (Friginal, 2007). I compared four language attributes in the actual performance scorecard used by the same call center company to measure English proficiency. These were: 1) pronunciation – articulation of segmentals; 2) application of speech techniques – intonation, pitch and volume, rate – suprasegmentals; 3) vocabulary and grammar; and 4) listening and comprehension. These attributes were scored on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 – poor, 5 – native-like) by QA monitors. The scores for each attribute were compared to the quality monitoring data to see if these attributes could predict variability in overall quality scores. This attempt was made to identify a particular area of the agents' speaking ability that might have a significant effect on variations in the quality scores. A major implication for training in ESL in the customer service setting could be gleaned from this result. Attributes that correlated highly with variance in quality scores would be a relevant focus of training in English. This analysis, however, should be interpreted with caution since it would be very difficult to fully separate these attributes as individual qualities independent of the others. Results showed that only Application of Speech Techniques (suprasegmentals – intonation, pitch and volume, and rate of speech) registered as a significant variable ($F(1/72 \text{ d.f.}) = 13.825, p < .001$) predicting 16 percent of the variance in quality monitoring scores. None of the other variables were significant predictors.

This finding demonstrated the role of prosody in non-native speech in relation to the service quality scores of Filipino agents. It could be inferred that in native speaker and non-native speaker customer service transactions, intonation, pitch and volume, and rate of speech were relevant attributes that raters and customers identified as predictors of success in delivery of service. Because of the very nature of customer service, affective and emotional factors in speech, communicated to a great extent by prosodic patterns of the speaker, impacted significantly the way a transaction was scored and interpreted by customers and quality monitors. The acquisition of effective prosody might significantly improve the callers' perception of the service encounter allowing the agents to be more confident and in control

of the transactions. Intonation carrying discursual features of meaning and concern for the client might also be effective in handling irate callers and maintaining control of the transaction.

Current trends in the teaching of L2 pronunciation now focus to a greater extent on prosody. This is relevant because traditional, telephone-based instruction and repetitive drills in segmental features of the L2 are proven to be limited in the acquisition of fluent speech (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Brazil, 1997). This new emphasis upon and direction for training in many outsourced call centers with increased concentration on prosodic patterns of English might contribute to the development of speaking skills and the overall effective delivery of service by Filipino agents.

11.2.3 Comparison with related call center corpora

My original design of the study included the collection of comparable corpora with Indian and American call center agents serving in similar accounts. I was extremely motivated by this design because such comparisons in the performance and linguistic preferences of these groups of call center agents would clearly address very important factors related to quality of service, varieties of English, and the influence of relevant demographics of speakers present in these transactions.

I believe that the sponsoring call center in this study also wants to support this line of research to obtain data that show characteristics of interactions handled by agents coming from different cultural backgrounds. There have been reports in the Philippines coming from American call center administrators and some internal studies of Manila-based call centers claiming that “Americans do not *prefer* the Indian accent,” and that this perception has triggered increased relocation of call center services from India to the Philippines.

I do not know of actual studies conducted to test this contention or if there has actually been an empirical investigation that surveyed Americans’ perceptions of accents in outsourced call centers. Clearly, however, the need for “accent-reduction” training in India has been discussed in the media and settings such as industrial sociology and language research (Cowie, 2007). Indian agents are coached to modify their accents and also to change their names – part of what some researchers consider as “disguising national identity” – as an explicit management practice in Indian call centers (Taylor & Bain, 2005; Cowie, 2007; Poster, 2007). It is noteworthy that even in the U.S., accents are present and American customers are generally exposed to multi-cultural service employees in stores and companies. However, perceptions from surveys exemplified by the Indian accent notion can affect decisions and future planning directions for many of these outsourced call centers operating in the Asia-Pacific region. It would be relevant to acquire actual, corpus-based data that will prove, or not, this and other similar claims.

Another direction along this line of investigation is the quality of service between American agents (native speakers of English) and “accented” agents as perceived by customers, as alluded to earlier. Although American agents clearly have the facility of language, they may or may not have the necessary expertise in technical support compared to the technically-trained Indian or Filipino computer engineers, for example. Outsourced call center companies are able to hire these well-educated engineers and programmers as call center agents because they can afford to pay their salaries; in the Philippines, salaries which these professionals would receive as call center agents are actually competitive by national standards. Also, because these positions utilize English and often have provisions for immediate promotion, travel, and training, they are generally viewed as prestigious and desirable. In contrast, however, in the U.S., hiring college-educated professionals for call center jobs is clearly too costly. Consequently, there may be some American agents who can communicate very well but are not, by comparison, technically equipped to provide competent and knowledgeable service that their Filipino counterparts can provide. I have had conversations with some American account managers in this call center company who talked about their experiences establishing call centers in locations outside of urban areas such as Los Angeles, Atlanta, Miami, or New York only to be frustrated with the cost of maintaining these centers, difficulty in hiring qualified and trainable agents, and failure to achieve quality standards and expectations. Ironically, perhaps, some of these managers also talked about language problems such as accents and comprehensibility as well as other problems with attitude or motivation with which they had to deal.

11.2.4 Additional research directions

There are performance factors in addition to the agents’ use of linguistic (including prosodic) features and their technical knowledge and/or account experience that are also highly important in ensuring success in call center transactions. To this point, I have been able to show some of the linguistic characteristics of High-performing contrasted with Low-performing agents. However, more detailed analysis of agents’ task performance and their evident enthusiastic customer service persona, or lack of it, is equally essential. Part of my previous study referenced above (Friginal, 2007) considered Filipino agents’ English proficiency through a language monitoring scorecard and how these proficiency measures could be used to predict variability in quality scores from quality assurance monitors. I believe that it is important to study the correlation between English proficiency and effective delivery of service because most of the managers and officials in the call center industry in the Philippines have been spending a majority of training time and resources on language training to the comparative exclusion of other areas of

focus such as interpersonal skills in customer service, service level observance and workflow compliance, and accuracy of information.

I analyzed the data using Pearson Correlation (Pearson r) and found that there was a weak correlation ($r = .318$; $r^2 = .1011$) between language proficiency scores and service quality scores (in this study, there were two separate rating scales measuring language and quality; these instruments were used in actual call evaluations). This result showed that only 10 percent of the variability in quality scores could be accounted for by the English proficiency scores of agents. It could be inferred from these data that problems and errors in customer service transactions are not strongly related to the English proficiency levels of agents. Other factors such as product knowledge, cultural sensitivity, rapport, and “personalization” of service are also highly important. Fluency in speaking is not the sole predictor of which Filipino agents will successfully deliver accurate support and connect well with the callers as measured by the quality scorecard. An example supporting this contention would be the agent who received the highest score, 93, in language monitoring, but received only 73 as a quality score, while a low-performing agent with a score of 70 in language received a score of 86 in quality (all scales had 100 as highest score). A clear implication is that additional training in cultural sensitivity in outsourced call center transactions would be necessary. Filipinos need to be more attuned and responsive to their American callers, many of whom might also not be aware that they are calling the Philippines.

Based on the results of my previous study referenced above and the analysis in this present study, I intend to continue developing my rating scale and related means of evaluating quality of service in outsourced call centers. By combining task and linguistic performance variables, I am able to give agents a holistic performance score in their transactions. At the same time, I can show specific areas for improvement in the performance of tasks during the transactions. It appears that this combination of task and linguistic performance scores, augmented, perhaps, by inclusion of affective, “customer service persona” criteria, results in a more comprehensive description of customer service performance in the outsourced call center setting. I believe that measures that show proficiency in English and effective product support should be equally considered in one assessment scale, because it appears that callers are more concerned with effective and efficient service that addresses their own personal needs rather than grammar or L2 accent. The same rating scale could be used in the hiring of new call center agents.

The call center industry in the Philippines needs a reliable rating and assessment instrument that can be used to check the qualifications and preparedness of potential agents as well as the ongoing performance of agents, once hired and trained. Available ESL-based assessment instruments based on the TOEFL or TSE which some call center companies in India and the Philippines have started to

implement do not necessarily capture the range of contexts in call center communications or address the variables affecting these communications.

Finally, I am encouraged to look further at the language of American callers in outsourced call center transactions. In this book, I only considered gender and, to some extent, callers' background, in my analysis of the linguistic preferences of Americans in telephone-based customer service. I have some data that could show the influence of geographic locations of callers, age, and potentially, level of education or type of profession. By including these factors in future studies, I can provide a more representative set of data that can describe how groups of American speakers representing various demographic categories in the U.S. communicate with Filipino agents.

11.3 The future of outsourced call centers

The future of international outsourcing of call centers serving customers of American corporations continues to evolve. The ultimate outcome, driven by a variety of socio-economic factors, some of which were alluded to earlier in this book, is unknown at this time. The purpose of this book, of course, is not necessarily to advocate for or argue against the practice of outsourcing call centers. Rather, recognizing that the phenomenon apparently developed in the first place out of a belief that there were mutual, synergistic benefits which might devolve to both the American corporations and their customers as well as to countries to which the industry is outsourced – and certainly to the people employed in these call centers. It is the objective of this book and others like it to describe and analyze the dynamics of these outsourced customer service transactions in the hope of identifying elements of successful interactions and strategies with the potential to improve the quality of, and, consequently, the satisfaction with the service provided. If we are successful, research like this will not only describe and analyze the nature and evolution of internationally-outsourced customer service call centers, but may actually play a role in their continued viability to accomplish whatever benefits might accrue to nations and people involved, assuming they have the potential to deliver such benefits. This would be a worthwhile application of this research.

APPENDIX A

Assessment instrument

Rating Scale

Diagnostic Speaking Scales for L2 Customer Service Agents

Agent's Name: _____
Account: _____
Rater's Name: _____

A. Task Criteria

1. Adequacy of Support						
a. Maintenance of the transaction	6	5	4	3	2	1
b. Accuracy of information	6	5	4	3	2	1
c. Service level observance and workflow compliance	6	5	4	3	2	1

2. Interpersonal Skills						
a. Engagement and rapport and cultural understanding of customer needs	6	5	4	3	2	1
b. Politeness and personalization of service	6	5	4	3	2	1

Average Task Criteria

B. Linguistic Criteria

1. Language						
a. Range of discourse structure and spoken grammar	6	5	4	3	2	1
b. Breadth and precision of vocabulary and expression	6	5	4	3	2	1

2. Production						
a. Pronunciation	6	5	4	3	2	1
b. Intonation, stress and rhythm	6	5	4	3	2	1
c. Flow of speech	6	5	4	3	2	1
d. Voice quality	6	5	4	3	2	1

Average Linguistic Criteria

Total Rating

Evaluation of Specific Criteria

Criteria	What to Evaluate?
----------	-------------------

A. Task Criteria

1. Adequacy of Support	
a. Maintenance of the transaction	- Directness, assertiveness, and confident control of the call in handling customer questions, requests, and complaints - Ability to process customer information accordingly by active listening, gathering of relevant details, and confirmation of customer understanding - Ability to carry-out a conversation with an irate caller - Ability to resolve a range of customer concerns - Ability to deliver “bad news” or deny a service
b. Accuracy of information	- Correctness of information provided to the customer - Completeness of solution
c. Service level observance and workflow compliance	- Time management in the delivery of support - Observance of steps and procedures that best match customer issue - Awareness of service levels – escalation procedures, logging customer information, question-answer protocols

2. Interpersonal Skills	
a. Engagement and rapport and cultural understanding of customer needs	- Ability to maintain positive flow of communication throughout the transaction - Consistency in controlling the mood of the conversation - Cultural adjustment to humor, sarcasm, and level of formality of the customer - Ability to control emotions in difficult transactions
b. Politeness and personalization of service	- Greeting and closing spiels - Appropriate use of politeness markers and customer’s name - Ability to show genuine and sincere concern for the customer - Tailoring and personalization of support according to customer needs - Maintenance of service-oriented persona

B. Linguistic Criteria

1. Language

a. Range of discourse structure and spoken grammar	– Sentence and spoken discourse structure – Specific L2 grammar features (check: verb tense and agreement, prepositions, clause structure, use of articles, determiners, and quantifiers)
b. Breadth and precision of vocabulary and expression	– Use of vocabulary in delivering information – Choice of words suited for the customer and the nature of support (example: the use of technical vocabulary and jargon for non-technical customers)

2. Production

a. Pronunciation	– Articulation of vowels and consonant sounds especially those identified to be problematic for L2 agents (example: /f, v, z, æ/sounds) – Correctness of word-level pronunciation
b. Intonation, stress and rhythm	– Use of prosody to express emotions, attitudes, and mental state in the transaction – Matching of prosodic features of speech to native speaker expectations – Stressing and accentuation of questions or clarifications
c. Flow of speech	– Rate of speech – Fillers, asperative pauses, repeats – Impact of other dysfluencies in speech
d. Voice quality	– Voice modulation – Pitch and volume

Description of Numerical Rating Scales

6	Task and linguistic performance highly effective – Customer support performed very competently – No customer effort required in understanding and processing information – Sophisticated expressions and personalization strategies – Very strong content and range of vocabulary and discourse structure – Highly effective pronunciation and prosodic patterns – Excellent grasp of cultural and interpersonal issues related to the transaction
5	Task and linguistic performance almost always effective – Customer support performed competently but may have minor clarification sequences and occasional hesitations in the delivery of information and procedures – Some customer effort required in understanding and processing of information – Strong content and range of vocabulary and discourse structure – Effective pronunciation and prosodic patterns with only minimal errors in production – Expressions and personalization strategies are applicable to the customer and nature of support – Clear grasp of cultural and interpersonal issues related to the transaction
4	Task and linguistic performance generally effective – Customer support generally competent but with unnecessary clarification sequences and hesitations in the delivery of information and procedures – Noticeable customer effort in understanding and processing of information through occasional customer questions and clarifications – Above average range of vocabulary and discourse structure – Above average pronunciation and prosodic patterns but with occasional errors in production – Expressions and personalization strategies are applicable to the customer and nature of support with only minor lapses and errors in interpretation – Generally clear grasp of cultural and interpersonal issues related to the transaction
3	Task and linguistic performance somewhat effective – Customer support somewhat competent but with frequent unnecessary clarification sequences and hesitations in the delivery of information and procedures – High level customer effort in understanding and processing of information through repeated customer questions and clarifications – Average range of vocabulary and discourse structure – Average range of pronunciation and prosodic patterns but with errors in production affecting the conversation – Expressions and personalization strategies are applicable to the customer and nature of support but with occasional lapses and errors in interpretation – Somewhat clear grasp of cultural and interpersonal issues related to the transaction

2	Task and linguistic performance generally not effective – Customer support not competent with very frequent unnecessary clarification sequences and hesitations in the delivery of information and procedures – Very high level customer effort in understanding and processing of information through repeated customer questions and clarifications – Below average range of vocabulary and discourse structure – Below average range of pronunciation and prosodic patterns with errors in production affecting the conversation – Expressions and personalization strategies are ineffective to the customer and nature of support – Below average grasp of cultural and interpersonal issues related to the transaction
1	Needs major improvement in task and linguistic performance – Customer support fails due to agent's limitations in delivering support, asking questions, and clarifying information – Limitations in task and linguistic performance result in miscommunication with customer – Limited range of vocabulary and discourse structure – Limited range of pronunciation and prosodic patterns with errors in production highly affecting the conversation – Expressions and personalization strategies are highly ineffective to the customer and nature of support – Limited grasp of cultural and interpersonal issues related to the transaction

APPENDIX B

Structure matrix of the three-factor solution

	Factor		
	1	2	3
Typ-ken	.022	.630	-.240
WrdLen	.612	.422	-.343
WrdCnt	.236	.821	-.161
PrvtVrb	-.439	.178	-.283
ThtDel	-.506	.071	-.202
Contrctn	-.256	.036	-.031
Vrbpres	.026	.341	-.232
SecPPro	.683	.515	-.190
VrbDO	-.321	-.053	.055
DemPro	-.094	-.227	.109

(Continued)

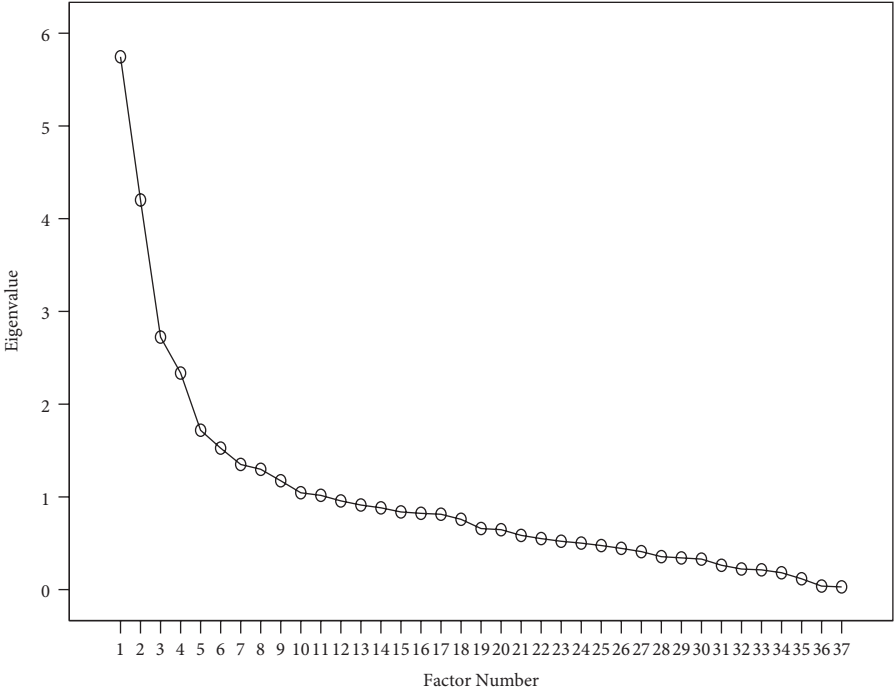
APPENDIX B. (continued).

	Factor		
	1	2	3
FrstPPro	-.663	-.246	-.138
ProIT	-.687	-.183	.112
VrbBE	.251	.138	-.069
DiscPart	.047	-.312	.947
ModalPoss	.445	.277	-.171
CoorConj	.143	.298	-.090
WhClause	-.397	.003	-.123
Noun	.515	-.214	.061
Prep	.247	.383	-.282
AttribAdj	.287	.172	-.105
VrbPasttns	-.609	-.171	-.094
VrbPerf	-.345	-.051	-.095
Nominalztn	.394	.321	-.156
AdvTime	.000	.409	.155
AdvOther	-.031	-.175	.845
ModalPred	.251	.285	-.125
VrbHAVE	.298	.016	-.116
Let's	-.063	.300	.422
LengtTurns	.376	.678	-.349
MaamSir	.309	.036	-.014
Uhms	.082	-.237	.110
Thanks	.325	.079	.012
Ok	.127	-.216	.865
NextThen	.001	.417	.143
CozSo	.023	.310	-.115
Please	.523	.369	-.052
IMean	-.338	.131	-.172

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.
Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization.

APPENDIX C

Scree plot of the three-factor solution



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