Styling the worker: Gender and the commodification of language in the globalized service economy[1]

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This paper discusses some sociolinguistic characteristics of the speech style prescribed to workers for interacting with customers in service contexts, focusing in particular on the linguistic and vocal 'styling' prescribed for operators in telephone call centres in the U.K. Attention is drawn to the similarities between the preferred style of speech and what is popularly thought of as 'women's language'. The intensive regulation of service workers' speech and the valorization of 'feminine' communication styles are analysed in relation to changes occurring as a consequence of economic globalization.

KEYWORDS: Language and gender, globalization, institutional talk, call centres

INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguists are increasingly recognizing that the phenomenon of globalization, a set of far-reaching, transnational, economic, social and cultural changes, has implications for patterns of language-use, linguistic variation and change (Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Fairclough 1992; Heller 1999). One aspect of globalization on which a number of researchers have focused is the 'new work order' (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996) in which new ('post-Fordist') ways of working make new demands on the linguistic abilities of workers. Commentators on this subject (e.g. many contributors to Cope and Kalantzis 2000; Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996; Gee 2000) place emphasis on the new forms of linguistic and other agency that workers must in principle develop to meet the demands of the new capitalism. There is also an argument, however, that new linguistic demands on workers may in practice entail new (or at least, newly intensified) forms of *control* over their linguistic behaviour, and thus a diminution of their agency as language-users.

The question of control is raised explicitly in the literature of business and management. In her book *Corporate Speak: The Use of Language in Business*, for

instance, Fiona Czerniawska (1998) explains that the adoption of new managerial approaches in a context of intensified global competition has sharpened awareness of language as a valuable commodity, potentially a source of 'competitive advantage', which therefore needs to be 'managed' rather than simply left to take care of itself. Particularly in the service sector of the economy, whose growth is one feature of globalization, one may observe an increasing tendency for employers to regulate even quite trivial details of workers' talk (Cameron 2000; du Gay 1996).

Here I examine the imposition on one group of English-speaking customer service workers (telephone call centre operators)[2] of a particular speech style as the norm or 'standard' for interaction on the job. As well as discussing the means used by organizations seeking to exert control over the speech of their employees, I will discuss some of the sociolinguistic characteristics of the speech style that is prescribed as a 'standard'. I will argue that its most salient features are not markers of class, region, or nationality/ethnicity, but symbolic markers of feminine gender (though they are not presented explicitly as gendered, and they are prescribed to workers of both sexes). The commodification of language in contemporary service workplaces is also in some sense the commodification of a quasi-feminine service persona.

Before I proceed, my use of certain terms requires clarification. When I talk about the imposition of a *standard* or about the *standardization* of speech within an organization, this is not intended to mean 'the imposition of the lexico-grammatical norms of a standard (national/international) language', but more abstractly, the practice of making and enforcing rules for language-use with the intention of reducing optional variation in performance (Milroy and Milroy 1998). As will be seen in more detail below, the rules in question tend not to target grammatical or phonological variation (these being the prototypical targets for language standardization in the less abstract sense). They are more concerned to prescribe features of interactive discourse such as prosody and voice quality, the way in which particular speech acts should be performed, the choice of address terms/salutations and the consistent use of certain politeness formulae. In this instance standardization is not prompted by the need to communicate across regional/national boundaries (though in the case of multinational companies it may operate across them), but rather by the need to subordinate individuals to a *corporate* norm. Employees' verbal behaviour, along with other aspects of their self-presentation such as bodily appearance and dress (cf. Witz, Warhurst, Nickson and Cullen 1998), is treated as a commodity – part of what organizations are selling to their customers, an element of their 'branding' and corporate image. The significance organizations accord to the prescribed style of speaking is evident from the degree of effort they put into its production via training, regulation and surveillance of employees' speech.

Above I used the phrase 'prescribed style of speaking', and throughout this paper I will refer to the object/product of linguistic regulation as a 'style'. At this

point it is helpful to clarify what I mean by the term *style* and how the phenomena discussed below fit into ongoing discussions of style in socio-linguistics.

STYLE, STYLING, STYLIZATION

Classically in the variationist paradigm of sociolinguistics, 'styles' were defined along an axis of formality: an increase in the formality of the situation leads to increased self-monitoring by the speaker and therefore, in the typical case, to rising frequencies of prestige variants in that speaker's output (cf. Labov 1972). Over time, however, there has been a tendency to adopt a less monodimensional view of style and of the meanings or effects produced by stylistic variation. An example of the more multidimensional approach is Allan Bell's influential theory of style as 'audience design' (Bell 1984, 1997) in which it is argued that stylistic choices are primarily motivated by the speaker's assessment of the effect certain ways of speaking will have on particular addressees. Bell's account is informed by accommodation theory (e.g. Giles and Powesland 1975): audience design commonly takes the form of convergence towards the ad-dressee's way of speaking (for empirical examples see Bell 1984; Coupland 1984). However, Bell also notes the existence of what he calls 'initiative' (as opposed to 'responsive') styleshift, and of cases in which 'the individual speaker makes creative use of language resources often from beyond the immediate speech community' (Bell 1997: 248). An instance which has attracted attention in recent sociolinguistic research is the phenomenon of 'crossing' (Rampton 1995) – appropriating linguistic features that index an identity which is in some salient way 'other' (as with the use of variants marked as Black by speakers who are themselves white; see Bucholtz 1999; Cutler 1999). Crossing is rarely a case of convergence towards the immediate addressee (more usually it reproduces features associated with an absent reference group – not uncommonly one whose speech lacks prestige by mainstream definitions). Allan Bell, following the literary theorist Bakhtin, puts this under the heading of 'stylization' – taking on a voice which is recognizably different from one's 'normal' or 'expected' voice (Bell 1997: 248).

The creative deployment of varied linguistic resources may also be manifested in linguistic behaviour that is not crossing, but rather involves some mixing of elements from different sources. Penelope Eckert suggests: 'The construction of a style is a process of bricolage: a stylistic agent appropriates resources from a broad sociolinguistic landscape, recombining them to make a distinctive style' (1996: 3). 'Style' in Eckert's usage can be a verb as well as a noun: the 'stylistic agent' who draws on the meanings made available by linguistic variation and combines these into a distinctive way of speaking can be seen as 'styling' her/himself. Eckert's particular interest is in the self-styling undertaken by adolescents and pre-adolescents as they experiment with various possible positionings within their newly significant peer groups and social networks.

My own use of the term *style* is broadly in the spirit of the post-Labovian work cited above, but there are some significant (and interesting) differences between the styling practices I am interested in and those studied by Bell, Rampton or Eckert. Their work focuses on practices of *self*-styling, where the speaker is also what Eckert calls the 'stylistic agent', the person who makes choices about her or his own linguistic performance. In the service workplaces investigated here, by contrast, the roles of speaker and stylistic agent are separated to a significant extent. It is of course true that any actual linguistic performance must, in the final analysis, be produced by the speaker her or himself. It is also true that *some* stylistic choices remain the prerogative of individual speakers, because they involve variables that have not become objects of institutional regulatory zeal (in the call centre case for example, accent is not normally a target for institutional regulation).[3] In general, however, service styles are designed by one set of people (managers on site or at head office, or – not uncommonly – outside consultants) to be enacted in speech by a different set of people (front-line customer-service workers). Typically a third set of people (supervisors or 'team leaders', and sometimes also 'mystery shoppers', people employed by companies to carry out spot-checks on service while posing as genuine customers) are charged with ensuring compliance through monitoring, 'coaching' (the ongoing provision of critical feedback) and appraisal of workers' linguistic performance.

A further difference takes us back to the question of 'audience design'. Corporate style designers do, of course, make stylistic choices with an audience in mind, namely the customers with whom service workers interact. In this they resemble the radio presenters discussed by Bell (1984) in his article on style as audience design, who are obliged to imagine their target addressees as a collectivity, and to make guesses about the preferences of those addressees. But whereas the radio presenters do their own speaking, the corporate style designers' relationship to the audience is indirect, mediated by the workers who actually talk to customers. These workers effectively have a dual audience: they speak *to* the customer, but at the same time they are also using the prescribed style for the benefit of the supervisor or manager who enforces linguistic and other norms through surveillance. Some workers I interviewed, though clear that in theory their job was to serve the customer, not their supervisor, reported that in practice they prioritized the requirements of the 'in-house' audience, whose judgements on their performance had more direct and immediate consequences. This is an intriguing case where the demands of what Bell (1997: 246–247) refers to as 'auditors' and 'overhearers' appear capable of overriding those of the actual addressee.

In sum, 'styling' in contemporary service workplaces is less a community practice, generated from the bottom up, than a prescriptive or 'verbal hygiene' practice (Cameron 1995), imposed from the top down. For this reason, and despite some points of resemblance, it is not wholly comparable either to the self-styling practices of adolescents (Cutler 1999; Eckert 1996; Rampton 1995) or to

the stylistic behaviour of workers modifying their speech (whether consciously or unconsciously) to advance their own interests in business transactions (Coupland 1984; Hall 1995; Johnstone 1999). It might be considered a case of 'stylization', since it involves speakers giving a performance, the 'script' for which has been written by someone else (literally in some instances, as will be discussed further below). Yet it lacks what might be seen as a defining feature of stylized utterance, namely the quality of calling attention to itself (however subtly) *as* a performance, of pointing to some kind of separation between the speaker's self and her/his speech at that moment. Though they may vary in their ability to bring it off, service workers performing standard routines are typically instructed to aim for a 'natural' and 'authentic' performance.

Workplace styling, then, is a distinctive phenomenon, and as such it prompts various questions, not all of which can be addressed in the space of a single article. The main question I set out to address here concerns the actual choices made by corporate style designers: what are they, and what is the motivation for them? What social meanings do the designers intend to index when they instruct service workers to adopt a particular style of speaking? Of course, one might also want to ask questions about the extent to which workers actually comply with the instructions they are given, and the meanings actually attributed to their speech by those on the receiving end, i.e. customers. These are important issues, but they are beyond the scope of the present paper. What follows, then, is a description and analysis of a stylistic *ideal*, or in corporate language the 'brand': a normative construct which shapes, even if it cannot wholly determine, the behaviour of those language-users to whom it is prescribed.[4]

THE DATA

My data were collected for a larger project (Cameron 2000) which looked at some range of service workplaces, but for the purposes of this article I concentrate on a single type of workplace, namely the 'call centre', an institution in which people are employed to make or take telephone calls. (The 'make or take' distinction is captured in the industry terms 'outbound' and 'inbound' to refer to call centres where employees either initiate or receive calls. The centres I looked at were exclusively 'inbound', i.e. calls were initiated by customers. Outbound call centres typically have sales rather than service as their prime function, whereas I was most interested in the provision of customer services.)

I chose to study call centres, in particular, for two reasons. First, they provide a prototypical example of a 'new' service workplace: the vast majority have existed for less than ten years, and their institutional culture has always incorporated the disciplines of globalized capitalism. Call centres as we now know them came into existence when it was recognized that advances in telephony and computing enabled customer service functions traditionally performed locally (e.g. in each branch of a bank or travel agency) to be

concentrated in a single 'remote' location with access to a central computer database. Companies can cut costs by routing all customer enquiries to one point, and since its physical location is irrelevant – customers do not have to go there – it can be put where rents and labour costs are low. In addition, since call centre operators, unlike more traditional clerical workers, perform only one function, the work itself can be organized to maximize productivity. Again, this goal is pursued with the aid of technology. Many centres use an Automated Call Distribution (ACD) system which ensures that incoming calls are passed to operators as soon as they become available, meaning that at busy times operators handle calls continuously, with no more than seconds in between. The work of call centre operators is notoriously stressful, being both extremely repetitive and subject to demanding performance targets, and this is reflected in high rates of employee turnover in the industry (Carter 1998; Reardon 1996). Media coverage of call centres has been both copious and generally critical, often suggesting that they are the sweatshops of the 21st century (Wazir 1999).

Second, language has a special significance in call centre work. The operator's job consists of little else but language-using – talking to customers on the phone and inputting/retrieving data using a computer – and her/his professional persona must be created entirely through speech. Typically, the speech of call centre operators is subject to intensive regulation and constant surveillance. Supervisors can covertly listen in on any call (known in the industry as 'silent listening'), while in some centres every call is recorded and may become the subject of 'counselling' (a worker and a supervisor or manager listen together to examples of the worker's performance and engage in critical assessment).[5] Call centres, then, are a good example of service work as language work, and as such they are also a particularly rich source of insight into the commodification and regulation of language on the job.

I collected data relating to seven centres located in various parts of the U.K. (central Scotland, the north of England and London). The service functions performed in these centres were: providing directory assistance to telephone subscribers, logging faults in telecommunications equipment, dealing with auto insurance claims, processing personal banking transactions, authorizing credit requests, booking rail tickets and handling enquiries for a utility (gas) company. The data at my disposal take the form of notes on observations, tapes/transcripts of interviews, and copies of written materials including employee manuals, training packs, appraisal forms and lists of criteria for assessing performance, scripts and prompt sheets for standard work routines, and memos discussing linguistic issues.

The analysis in this article draws most heavily on the last-mentioned of these data-types, namely the textual materials. These provide the clearest and most detailed picture of what linguistic ideal a call centre 'officially' wants its operators to aim for, what it prescribes and what it proscribes. However, it should be noted here that I was able to obtain a suitable quantity and quality of texts from only four of the seven centres in my sample; these four therefore

dominate the analysis presented below (it will be obvious which they are from my attribution of extracts). Of the other three centres, one did not as yet produce detailed written specifications for linguistic performance; in the remaining two cases I was not able to procure copies of the specifications from the sources available to me (see further below).

Some supplementary information comes from a set of interviews conducted between May and December 1998 (the main purpose of interviewing was to elicit insiders' perceptions of call centre work; since that is not the focus of the present article, the use made of interview data here is limited). I interviewed four call centre managers, two supervisors and six operators, employed in five different centres located in central Scotland, northern England and London (these are a subset of the seven mentioned above). All interviews were conducted individually, in most cases face to face but in two cases on the phone. (All but two took place 'off-site', for reasons explained below.) Interviews were 'semi-structured' – I had a schedule of questions, but I encouraged informants to respond at length where they had more to say, and to introduce additional concerns. Each interview lasted at least 30 minutes.

It will be evident from the details just given that different centres I had dealings with provided different kinds and quantities of information. This reflects some problems associated with researching commercial enterprises in general and call centres in particular.[6] In cases where I undertook observation in a call centre I did so with the co-operation of the management, but there were often restrictive conditions attached. Because of the critical media coverage I have already mentioned, I found many managers concerned about negative publicity, which led some to want to control what I saw, heard and ultimately wrote in ways that could not be acceptable to an academic researcher. Others refused certain requests (e.g. to record on-site, see also note 4) to protect the privacy of their customers. More unexpectedly, documents such as training manuals and assessment criteria were commonly defined as confidential and not to be reproduced, on the grounds that such texts constitute commercial assets from which competitors might benefit if they were in the public domain. In addition it proved difficult to interview employees in their workplaces, both because their work routines left little time for it and because of reticence engendered by the culture of surveillance.

When I became aware of these problems I resorted to approaching employees of centres where I had *not* secured any official co-operation, and speaking to them outside their workplaces, without the knowledge of their employers. This approach precluded on-site observations in the centres concerned, but it gave me access to more textual material (employees were generally not troubled by the commercial implications of letting me see their manuals) as well as more extensive and candid interview data. Even so, many of my subjects feared disciplinary sanctions if it were discovered that they had spoken to me and passed on internal documents. I have therefore left them anonymous and used generic labels (e.g. 'directory assistance centre') for the centres they work in.

STANDARDIZING SPEECH IN CALL CENTRES: SCRIPTING AND STYLING

The institutional regime of the call centre exemplifies the hyper-rationalizing tendency that the sociologist George Ritzer (1996) has dubbed 'McDonaldization'. For Ritzer this tendency is defined by its drive to maximize four things: efficiency (the most output for the least effort), calculability (the measurement of quality in terms of quantity), predictability (as little variation as possible) and control (of workers' activities by means of technology). Since explaining how these notions apply to the specific case of the call centre is also a useful way of describing the workings of call centres to readers who may not be familiar with them, I will examine them briefly in turn.

Efficiency is maximized in call centres by designing interactional routines so that they consist of the fewest moves needed to complete a given transaction successfully. For example, in the directory assistance centre, the standard routine for processing a request for a phone number has the 'core' moves 'which name please', 'which town', 'which address'. This reflects the fact that the software used to retrieve phone numbers needs all and only the answers to these questions (preferably in the order just given) to trigger a search. It is also specified in the manual that operators must repeat back to the customer the answer s/he gives to each 'core' question. This might appear inefficient, since it doubles the number of moves made by the operator, but it is intended to reduce the risk of incorrect details being input and preventing the successful completion of the call.

Calculability is maximized by setting targets for the time taken to process calls, and judging the quality of employees' work in terms of the number of calls handled in a given period (though as we will see, this is not the only measure of their performance). Operators in the directory assistance centre, for instance, are expected to process standard enquiries in 32 seconds or less. Operators in the rail reservation centre are given a target of four minutes per transaction. The use of standardized scripts for common routines enhances calculability as well as efficiency, since the duration of a pre-scripted routine can be estimated more accurately than if there is no script. Though the customer's moves are not scripted, it has been suggested that customers dealing with employees who follow scripts are apt to 'routinize' their own behaviour in response (Leidner 1993).

Not all call centre regimes use scripting proper ('scripting' being defined here as the provision of a full specification for every word uttered by the operator.) An alternative is to provide a 'prompt sheet', which specifies what interactional moves the operator should make in what order, but does not prescribe a standard form of words. Some centres do not even go that far, providing only general guidelines for the 'staging' of a transaction, leaving the exact number of moves in each stage to the operator's discretion. Others use some mixture of the strategies just described. These options exemplify differing degrees of emphasis placed on the *predictability* of call centre interaction. Scripting maximizes

predictability, and during my fieldwork I saw indications that call centres are moving increasingly in this direction, mainly because it is thought to produce efficiency gains. For instance, one centre in my sample was in the process of introducing what it called a 'standard telephone speech' (a script). While operators were informed that the intention was to improve the quality of service, a memo addressed to supervisors expressed the hope and belief that standardization would reduce call-handling times. It should not be assumed, however, that the only motive for maximizing predictability is to improve efficiency. Predictability is often presented as a virtue in itself. Thus a section of the directory assistance centre's manual asks, 'why have salutations?'. ('Salutations' is this company's term for all the polite, interpersonally-oriented formulae that operators are required to insert at various points in the standard routine, such as 'thank you', 'sorry to keep you waiting' and 'just searching for you'.) The answer given is that the use of standard formulae meets customers' expectations of 'professional' service by giving them an experience which is 'consistent every time they call'.[7]

Finally, technological *control* over human operators is seen in various aspects of the call centre regime. Automated call distribution systems dictate the pace of work, while the software used for functions like retrieving telephone numbers, bank account details and rail timetables shapes the sequence and content of many routines. Perhaps the most striking instance of technological control in call centres, however, is hi-tech surveillance. Supervisors can see at the click of a mouse how all members of their team are occupied (in some centres operators who propose to visit the bathroom must key a special code in on their computers so their supervisor can assess whether the time they spend there is reasonable), and they can constantly monitor performance statistics (e.g. how many calls a given operator has taken during a shift and what their average duration has been). In addition, as I noted earlier, the phone system is typically set up to permit 'silent listening' by supervisors to calls in progress, and taping of calls for retrospective assessment. These surveillance practices focus more specifically on the operator's handling of the *interactional* task, rather than simply on her/his performance as measured by statistics. If a script is in use, for example, silent listening and taping will be used to monitor operators' compliance with the prescribed wording. But even when there is no script, surveillance is used to monitor various aspects of operators' verbal behaviour. Whether call-handling routines are fully scripted, partially scripted or unscripted, their performance is usually subject to detailed specifications of the manner or *style* in which the operator should interact with callers. This is the approach that I refer to as 'styling'.

Styling is used – either on its own or in combination with scripting – because specifying a standard form of words does not on its own ensure the kind and degree of standardization many service organizations, including many call centres, are trying to achieve. Scripting standardizes *what* is said, but styling is an attempt to standardize *how* it is said, addressing the many aspects of

spoken interaction that are not readily represented in a written script. Consider, for example, the following remark made by a supervisor at an airline reservations centre to the sociologist Steve Taylor (she is discussing the use of taped calls for the purpose of 'counselling' operators):

> A lot of the time it isn't what they say, it's the tone in which they say it . . . I will play something and I'll just stop it and go, 'shall we listen to that again?', rewind it and then they'll go, 'I didn't know I said it like that'. It makes them analyse themselves and really wake up to their *mistakes* (Taylor 1998: 93, emphasis in original).

The object of concern here – tone of voice – lies beyond the reach of scripting, but it is nevertheless assumed by the supervisor to be susceptible to judgements of correctness (cf. her use of the word *mistakes*). Both scripting and styling are intended to ensure that workers speak 'correctly' from the company's point of view; one takes over where the other leaves off.

From a linguist's point of view the concerns embodied in styling rules fall into two main categories. Firstly, as in the above example, attention is given to the operator's use of her/his voice, with a particular focus on suprasegmental phenomena such as voice quality and intonation. Secondly, emphasis is placed on various aspects of the management of interactive spoken discourse. Operators may be reminded for instance to avoid gap and overlap in turn transitions, to use minimal responses frequently, to ask 'open' questions and to pause so that callers can assimilate important information. Some of these considerations (e.g. the phrasing of questions) can be incorporated into a pre-written script, but many cannot (e.g. the placement of minimal responses and turn transitions, which depends on the behaviour of the caller).

Probably the most important instruments of styling are the checklists used in many centres for purposes of assessment by supervisors, managers and 'mystery callers' (that is, outsiders employed to perform 'spot checks' by posing as real callers and then logging their assessment of the operator's performance). Here, for example, is a selection of the contents of a 12–point checklist used in the assessment of operators at the credit authorization centre in my sample (a centre, incidentally, which also scripts call routines exhaustively):

- Smiling. Does the member of staff answer the phone with a smile?
- Pitch. The depth of pitch in the staff's voice will determine the degree of sincerity and confidence associated with the message that they are giving the caller.
- Volume. Ensure staff are not shouting or hardly audible.
- Pace. Ensure the member of staff is not dragging out the sentences nor speeding through it [*sic*].
- Acknowledge. Staff can let the caller know they have understood them by making simple acknowledgement sounds, if the caller is not acknowledged in this way they will presume they have not been understood and repeat themselves.

This is hardly a sophisticated instrument of assessment (it is unclear for example what 'depth of pitch' the assessor is meant to be looking for, even if one

understands what 'depth of pitch' refers to), but it does at least specify which aspects of performance operators and assessors are expected to be attentive to. (Lists like this one are typically used in both formal appraisal and more informal regular coaching of individual operators by their supervisors. They also inform the preliminary training of operators.)

Having established what I mean by 'styling' and how it is embedded in the call centre regime, I now turn to a more detailed examination of the linguistic characteristics of the preferred style. I will seek to show that the style is *gendered*, produced through a consistent and deliberate preference for ways of speaking that are symbolically coded as 'feminine' (and that in some cases are also empirically associated with women speakers).

CALL CENTRE STYLE AND 'WOMEN'S LANGUAGE'

As is well known, 25 years ago Robin Lakoff (1975) elaborated a notion of 'women's language' (WL), a register or, in Eckert's sense, a 'style' characterized by linguistic features such as the use of 'weak' expletives and lexical items like *charming, divine*, rising intonation on declaratives, tag-questions in contexts where the speaker is not checking information, etc. Subsequent empirical investigations of the 'Lakoff hypothesis' produced a copious literature, the import of which is perhaps most succinctly summarized by saying that not all women use WL and not all WL-users are women. This however did not deter scholars from advancing alternative proposals about women's style of speaking and how it differs, on average, from men's. For example, one general claim widely canvassed in the 1980s and 1990s was that women are more co-operative conversationalists and more sensitive to the face-wants of others (Coates 1996; Holmes 1995; Tannen 1990). This difference has been invoked to explain women's use of an array of discourse features such as supportive simultaneous speech, precision-timed minimal responses and questions whose function is to show interest in or engage the participation of others, hedging and indirectness used to mitigate face-threat, and so on.

This brief excursion into the history of language and gender studies is relevant here, because it is evident that the products of the research tradition inaugurated by Lakoff have filtered steadily, though selectively, into popular consciousness. This process has produced a lay notion of 'women's language' that is an amalgam of long-established folk-beliefs, elements of the early Lakoff hypothesis, popularized accounts of more recent findings, and new, or at least reworked, stereotypes disseminated via popular psychology and self-help texts. However inaccurate it may be as an *empirical* description of the way women 'really' speak, and however unsatisfactory it may appear from the perspective of academic scholarship, this notion of 'women's language' provides a powerful *symbolic* 'meaning resource' for 'stylistic agents' to draw on. In the following discussion I will seek to show in more detail how various elements of the symbolic construct 'women's language' are appropriated and recombined in the

call centre context to produce a particular service style. The discussion is based on materials (e.g. training manuals and appraisal criteria) I collected from four call centres in my sample, and it focuses on concerns that recur across those materials.

One concern that is highlighted in all the materials I collected is with the styling of the operator's *voice*. Two instructions on vocal performance are invariably given: that operators should smile – even though, obviously, they are invisible to their interlocutors – and that they should use an 'expressive' intonation. What the instruction to smile actually means is that the routine (or sometimes just part of it, e.g. the opening) should be performed with the lips in a smile posture. 'Expressive' intonation means *emotionally* expressive, and is explicitly contrasted to intonation which will be heard as monotonous or uninvolved.

Smiling

Does the member of staff answer the phone with a smile?

(credit authorization centre appraisal checklist)

Remember, smiling can be heard as well as seen

(directory assistance centre employee manual)

Have a smile in your voice and avoid sounding abrupt

(performance guidelines, auto insurance centre)

'Expressive' intonation projecting attitudes/emotional states

Our commitment is to give the caller an impression of excitement, friendliness, helpfulness and courtesy. Your telephone manner should sound as if you have been waiting for that particular call all day. You must never sound bored on a call

(directory assistance centre employee manual)

The objective at the beginning of a call is to demonstrate sincerity and warmth. Try to make the caller feel you are there for them . . . [avoid] a disinterested, monotonous tone to voice

(performance guidelines, auto insurance centre)

It has been argued that both smiling and using expressive intonation are symbolically feminine behaviours. In the case of smiling, nonverbal communication researchers point out that it is not simply a spontaneous expression of pleasure but often functions, especially with non-intimates, to signal deference or appeasement. In the words of Nancy Henley, the smile is 'understood as a gesture offered upward in the status hierarchy' (1986: 171). This analysis of what smiling means has in turn been linked with findings suggesting that women smile more than men and that they are more likely to return smiles than men (Henley 1986: 175–178). It has also been linked with the observation that women are routinely expected to smile, and sometimes publicly castigated by complete strangers if they do not smile. Shulamith Firestone (1970: 90) once proposed a 'smile boycott' as a form of feminist political action;

in 1999 female flight attendants employed by Cathay Pacific airlines threatened to take industrial action in a dispute on pay and conditions by refusing to smile at passengers for one hour of every flight. Such actions are meaningful precisely because of the existence of strong symbolic links between smiling, femininity and subordinate status.[8]

As for expressive intonation, it is both a stereotype and in some cases an empirical finding that female speakers exploit a broader pitch range, in other words tend less to monotony. This characteristic has been used in the past to label women as over-emotional and lacking in authority, tempting women like Margaret Thatcher to deliberately reduce the pitch range they use. The fact that vocal expressiveness is valued in service-work might suggest that authority is not among the qualities workers are expected to display.

If we consider the sorts of emotional or attitudinal states operators are instructed to project through their intonation, we see references in the above examples to *warmth, sincerity, excitement, friendliness, helpfulness, confidence.* These are not inherently gendered qualities, but overall they produce a style of service which is strongly *affective* – that is, not just neutrally polite and efficient, but based on the expression of positive feelings towards the customer. Again, it has been argued that overt displays of positive affect, or of any emotion other than anger, are culturally coded as 'feminine' rather than 'masculine' (Gervasio and Crawford 1989).

Other recurrent styling concerns are to do with the management of interpersonal relationships through strategic choices at the level of discourse. One common instruction, for example, is to *create rapport* with callers, while another is to display *empathy* with them. In this example these (related) concerns are combined in the following, quite lengthy recommendation:

Rapport/empathy

> Creating a rapport and showing empathy is about adding the human touch to a business call relationship . . . This means treating the caller as a person, recognising their situation and building a genuine conversation to reflect this. . . . Use language which conveys understanding of and empathy for the caller's individual situation, e.g. 'are you OK?' 'was anyone hurt?' 'that must have been very distressing for you'
>
> *(performance guidelines, auto insurance centre)*

Here, two main discourse strategies are suggested. One is asking questions to show concern for the caller and encourage her/him to air her/his feelings about the incident that prompted the call (in this context, a traffic accident). The other is the technique known to communication trainers as 'mirroring', which means trying to demonstrate awareness of the interlocutor's mood and reflect it back to her/him in your own verbal and nonverbal behaviour. It is, of course, a common stereotype that women are better than men at inferring others' feelings from their outward behaviour, which is a precondition for successfully display-ing empathy. The association of rapport-building with women's talk appears in

many sources, notably Deborah Tannen's (1990) aphorism that men do 'report talk' and women do 'rapport talk'.

Another issue that is often addressed in call centre styling materials is the use of minimal responses. Concern about this aspect of interaction might seem to be motivated primarily by the need to make operators aware of specific constraints affecting telephone talk – that is, since there are no visual cues, verbal back-channelling is necessary to reassure the caller that the operator is still present and listening actively. However, the following example shows that the writer realizes there is more to the use of minimal responses than simply keeping the channel of communication open.

Minimal responses

> Use words of acknowledgement: yes, OK, thank you, I understand, I see. . . . [avoid] disruptive, disinterested or challenging use of listening acknowledgements, and using the same listening acknowledgement throughout the call
>
> *(performance guidelines, auto insurance centre)*

This is a recommendation to use minimal responses *supportively*: they should not be inserted where they will disrupt interaction, connote lack of interest or disagreement. It may be recalled here that some researchers (Fishman 1983; Reid 1995) have found women not only using more minimal responses than men, but also timing them more precisely, to coincide with or immediately follow the completion of the point they are responding to. The use of delayed minimal responses, which may suggest inattention, lack of interest or disagreement, has been associated more with male speakers. Once again, what is being recommended here would seem to be gendered, matching what is believed and what in some cases has been found to be women's rather than men's behaviour.

It is not surprising that service workers should receive instructions on the subject of asking questions, since question-answer routines are characteristic of institutional talk (Drew and Heritage 1992). What is more interesting, however, is the stress placed on using questions not merely to elicit information (the function that makes questioning so central to institutional discourse), but to display interest in the customer as a person, to make the interaction a more 'genuine' dialogue, and to give the customer 'space' to speak freely and at length. This concern (facilitating extended talk) is observable in advice on the *kinds* of questions workers are told they should prefer. Typically they are advised to avoid what linguists would call 'conducive' questions, those which strongly favour a predetermined answer, and select instead the kinds of questions that encourage extended talk by the addressee. (In training materials these are usually called 'open questions' and usually equated with WH-syntax, though some materials do distinguish 'how' and 'why' questions from the rest.) According to gender researchers like Pamela Fishman (1983) and Janet Holmes (1984), using questions to facilitate talk – an 'interpersonal' rather

than purely 'informational' use of language – is a strategy associated in particular with women speakers.

Asking questions

> Ask questions – don't demand information!
> > *(guidance for operators, utility company centre)*
> Staff must give the caller space . . . by . . . asking questions
> > *(credit authorization appraisal checklist)*
> Varying the type of questions gives a rounded and interesting communication
> > *(performance guidelines, auto insurance centre)*

With the foregoing examples I hope I have shown that the ways of interacting recommended in training and appraisal materials for call centre operators bear a striking resemblance to ways of speaking that are associated, in the popular imagination and also in some instances by empirical research, with women speakers rather than men. This might prompt the question: do the style designers themselves make the connection?

In my view, the answer to this question is 'yes and no'. On one hand, there is evidence that many call centre managers regard young women, in particular, as 'naturally' suited to the work (Reardon 1996). That the preference for women is based at least partly on a perception of them as 'better' at certain kinds of interpersonal communication is illustrated by the following remarks, quoted by Melissa Tyler and Steve Taylor from an interview with a manager at an airline reservation call centre:

> The vast, vast majority of the agents we select are women . . . it's not as if we don't get men applying for the job, up here [*in north east England, an area of high unemployment – DC*] you tend to get applications from everybody for everything . . . [women] just seem to fit better, they're better at it . . . we are looking for people who can chat to people, interact, build rapport. What we find is that women can do this more, they're definitely more natural when they do it anyway. It doesn't sound as forced, perhaps they're used to doing it all the time anyway . . . women are naturally good at that sort of thing. I think they have a higher tolerance level than men . . . I suppose we do, yes, if we're honest about it, select women sometimes because they are women rather than because of something they've particularly shown in the interview. (Tyler and Taylor 1997: 10)

On the other hand, organizations do not present the ideal speech style explicitly as a gendered style: women may be considered 'naturally good at that sort of thing', but the 'thing' in question is not just (tautologically) 'being women', and the same style is also expected of men. What the preferred style of communication overtly signifies is not 'femininity' but 'good customer service'. This raises the question: why should performing 'good customer service' involve so many of the same linguistic strategies as performing 'femininity'? What is the nature of the connection between the two?

To answer this question it is necessary to consider the question of symbolic

meaning. In an influential paper, Elinor Ochs (1992) argued that the linguistic indexing of gender is not usually direct – in other words, there are few verbal markers whose exclusive and unambiguous meaning is 'this speaker is a woman/a man'. More commonly gender is indexed by using language that signifies a role (e.g. 'mother') or a quality (e.g. 'modesty') which is linked in turn by cultural convention to femininity or masculinity. In a similar vein, one might suggest that the practice of styling in call centres recruits a linguistic style already conventionally coded as 'feminine' to index the meaning 'good customer service'. What enables this connection to be made is not simply the common-sense belief 'customer service is a woman's role' (that would just beg the original question of *why* serving customers is regarded as a woman's role), but rather the congruence between the meanings and values attached to 'femininity' and those attached to 'good service'.

Some degree of congruence between the two sets of meanings may well have existed for a long time, but the connection has become more compelling as a result of recent developments in the culture of business. What is entailed by 'customer service' has been redefined as part of organizations' response to globalization. A particular philosophy of service has come to dominate organizational thinking and practice, and it is this, I will argue, that has given the meanings attached to 'women's language' new relevance and value for the service sector.

REVALUING 'WOMEN'S LANGUAGE': CUSTOMER SERVICE AS EMOTIONAL LABOUR

It is frequently noted that globalization involves a shift away from industrial production. In his influential book *The Work of Nations*, former U.S. Labour secretary Robert Reich (1992) popularized the notion of two major categories of post-industrial workers, 'symbolic analysts' (a knowledge-producing elite) and 'in-person servers' (a larger and less privileged group servicing the needs of others). Of this second group, which includes call centre operators, Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996: 46–47) observe that their work 'tends to call primarily for reliability, loyalty . . . the capacity to take direction and . . . "a pleasant demeanour"'. And indeed, the issue of service workers' 'demeanour' has become increasingly salient as large numbers of organizations have adopted the philosophy known as 'customer care'. The idea is to make customers feel they are not merely being served but actively and individually 'cared for': it is believed that this close attention to each customer's needs and feelings promotes loyalty to the company and thus enhances its 'competitive advantage' in the market.

For service workers the upshot of all this is that they find themselves performing more and more of what sociologists of work call 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983) – the management of feelings. This has consequences for the language of customer service, which becomes a more

'expressive' language, a language of feeling and a language of caring. The ability, not merely to sound polite and professional but to project *positive* emotions towards customers using the resources of language and voice, is highly valued. Recall the instruction in the directory assistance centre's manual for employees, quoted above: 'your telephone manner should sound as if you have been waiting for that particular call all day' (this in relation to a service encounter lasting 32 seconds or less); or the auto insurance centre's exhortation about beginning a call, 'try to make the customer feel you are there for them'.

It is neither unusual nor coincidental that the quasi-therapeutic phrase 'to be there for someone' appears in this instruction: customer care training materials and management books about customer relations draw extensively on the register of therapy and counselling. In some instances, routine service work is portrayed as if it were a caring profession in its own right. Management consultant David Freemantle, for example, in a book titled *What Customers Like About You: Adding Emotional Value for Service Excellence and Competitive Advantage*, advises service workers (e.g. shop assistants) to practise what amounts to amateur therapy on their customers (Freemantle 1998: 109):

- If a customer comes across as cold and diffident, convince yourself that beneath the surface is a warm, caring, loving human being. Try to reach that suppressed warmth by injecting emotional warmth into your own words.
- If a customer comes across as being overpowering and effusive, convince yourself that beneath the surface is someone who is desperate for recognition and admiration. Therefore in responding to the customer, try to underline your words with a tone of emotional approval.
- If a customer comes across as being kind and caring then respond in the same way, ensuring that your voice is soft, rounded and undulates smoothly to reflect your own feelings of compassion.

By drawing on your feelings and emotions to fine-tune the way you use your voice, you will be much better able to connect emotionally with customers and become someone they really like.

Freemantle in this passage is clearly describing a form of 'emotional labour', involving the management of both the customer's feelings and the worker's own. (The section from which I take the quotation is titled 'The Emotional Voice'.) The point has often been made that emotion in general is discursively constructed (certainly in anglophone cultures) as a 'feminine' domain (Lutz 1990); both 'emotional expressiveness' and 'caring' are salient symbolic meanings of 'women's language'. If, as I have suggested, these are also key values in new regimes of customer care, that provides a rationale for making a 'feminine' or feminized linguistic style the norm in service contexts.

It should not be overlooked, though, that emotional labour, and indeed service work in general, is not performed only by women. Women still represent the majority of rank-and-file employees in many service workplaces (including

most call centres), but the relentless rise of the service sector and the concurrent decline of manufacturing industry mean that increasingly, men are also finding employment in routine customer service positions. Talk of 'changing gender roles at work' may conjure up the familiar icon of Rosie the Riveter, but in today's reality it is more likely to mean Charlie the checkout clerk and Kevin the call centre operator. Charlie and Kevin are subject to exactly the same communicational demands and linguistic styling practices as their female colleagues; it is of interest to ask how they negotiate the expectation that they will interact with customers in what is, covertly if not overtly, a 'feminine' linguistic persona.

The male call centre operators I interviewed in the course of my research in Britain did not consider their gender to be an issue. Where they were critical of the call centre regime, the main issue, for them as for female operators, was the artificiality, inauthenticity, and in some cases extreme subservience, of the persona imposed on them by scripts and styling rules.[9] These informants seemed to orient more to the overt meaning of the preferred style – 'good service' – than to its covertly gendered meaning. (Of course, I cannot claim that my own small group of male informants constitute a representative sample for the country as a whole.) In the U.S.A., on the other hand, although I did no systematic fieldwork, I did meet men, and hear stories about men, who perceived the behaviour they were required to produce in customer service contexts (such as shops, restaurants and call centres) as 'feminizing' and for that reason problematic. For instance, one woman told me a story about her son's experience working for a chain of Mexican restaurants. Employees were required to send diners on their way with a scripted farewell sequence that included a cheery wave. No one liked performing this embarrassingly phony routine, but the men found the wave especially problematic, since they regarded the gesture as 'effeminate'. Eventually they solved the problem by rendering it as a quasi-salute.[10]

Although the evidence given above is anecdotal, it does suggest that some of the risks involved in adopting a prescribed service style may be different for women and men. At least some men find aspects of the style threatening to their gender and/or sexual identity. For women on the other hand a recurrent complaint concerns the risk of being exposed to sexual harassment. Here the evidence is not just anecdotal. In 1998, a group of female Safeway supermarket workers in California complained at a union conference about the company's 'superior service' programme. The friendliness, personal interest and eagerness to please that employees had to display were treated by many male customers, the workers claimed, as signs of 'romantic interest' and invitations to 'lewd behaviour' (Grimsley 1998). If one accepts the feminist argument that sexual harassment is a way of asserting power over the target rather than simply a display of erotic interest in her (sex may be the means but domination is the end), this might well remind us of another symbolic meaning attached to 'women's language': powerlessness or subservience. In the culture of customer

care, the old maxim 'the customer is king' is taken to new extremes; this too may be a factor in the appropriation of WL as the preferred style for customer service.

CONCLUSION

In this paper I have explored some issues relating to the regulation of spoken language used by workers in contemporary service environments. I will conclude by trying to gather the main threads of the argument, briefly taking up a few outstanding questions, and suggesting reasons why the phenomena discussed here should be of interest to students of language and society.

One theme of the analysis presented above is the linguistic consequences of globalization. I have suggested that present-day corporate verbal hygiene practices may be analysed as part of a strategic attempt by organizations to maximize their advantages in a hyper-competitive globalized economy which is increasingly dominated by the provision of services. Yet it might well be asked whether current practices have precedents in the pre-globalization era. I certainly would not wish to argue that until the late 1980s (the moment of financial deregulation which is generally taken to have inaugurated the shift to today's global economy) workers spoke exactly as they liked, without norms or constraints. Clearly, for as long as 'work' has been a distinct domain of social practice, people have developed ways of acting and speaking peculiar to that domain, undergoing within particular workplaces processes of linguistic and other acculturation. It is also evident that what I have described here can be related to much older practices such as the scripting of sales encounters (Leidner 1993) and – an example with particular relevance to the call centre case – the regulation of telephone operators' speech in the period before direct dialling.[11]

However, I would argue that there has been significant intensification, both of the desire of organizations to control employees' language-use and of their ability to do it with some degree of effectiveness (in the case of call centres, by using hi-tech surveillance). Linguistic regulation is part of the general trend that George Ritzer (1996) has dubbed 'McDonaldization', and about which he has observed that its goal is to pre-empt any choice of means to ends by the people actually engaged in a given activity. Instead, decisions on what to do, how and when are reserved to people at the top of the organizational hierarchy. That, of course, is the very opposite of what is usually claimed about the new global economy, which is frequently said to require highly skilled, self-motivating decision-makers and problem-solvers. Research like that reported here might suggest, however, that accounts such as Ritzer's, and Gee, Hull and Lankshear's description of 'in-person servers' (quoted above) are closer to the reality of much contemporary service work.

Another field of scholarship to which the analysis of service styling is relevant

is the study of institutional, and more particularly workplace, talk. The spread of 'McDonaldizing' practices in what might seem the rather unlikely domain of language-use arguably poses a challenge to what is perhaps the best-established approach to the study of talk at work, that of conversation analysis (e.g. Boden 1994; Drew and Heritage 1992). Ian Hutchby summarises the orthodox conversation analyst's position: 'Institutions do not define the kind of talk produced within them: rather participants' ways of designing their talk actually constructs the ''institutionality'' of such settings' (Hutchby 1999: 41). 'Inter-action', say Drew and Heritage, 'is institutional insofar as participants' institu-tional or professional identities are somehow made relevant to the work activities in which they are engaged' (1992: 4). But while anything that goes on in talk has in the final analysis to be accomplished by the participants, in my view these formulations fail to capture the extent to which institutions like the ones discussed in this article (or more exactly, agents with authority in those institutions) *do* increasingly define the kind of talk produced in institutional contexts. Practices of scripting, styling and surveillance cannot entirely override the necessity for interaction to be locally managed, but they can and do place constraints on the freedom of participants to 'design their talk' or to choose how they will make their institutional identities 'relevant'. True, the practices discussed above were still marginal in the early 1990s when Drew and Heritage were writing, and they still have little purchase on the high-status professionals (e.g. doctors) whose interactions have always featured heavily in the literature on institutional talk. They are nevertheless increasingly common realities, which the study of talk at work must have something to say about in future.

Finally, the verbal hygiene practices which are the subject of this article are of interest for what they tell us about the relationship between language and gender. I have argued that the regulation and commodification of language in service workplaces has resulted in the valorization of a speech style whose characteristics include expressiveness, caring, empathy and sincerity – char-acteristics popularly associated with the speech of women (if anyone doubts this, let them consult any example of the 'Mars and Venus' genre originated by Gray 1992, whose tenets have subsequently pervaded popular culture (cf. Cameron 1999; Talbot 2000)). However, I hope it will be obvious that I do not regard the value attached to 'women's language' in service work as a cause for feminist celebration. Whether it benefits women in any way whatever is open to question; the advantage they currently enjoy over men in terms of numbers employed in the service sector may arise in part from discrimination in their favour, but it also reflects the continuing disdain of many men for service work. Though commentators have been warning for a decade that this contempt is a luxury men cannot afford – globalization is destroying alternative sources of employment for low-skilled workers – resistance is still pronounced among school-age boys, especially those from the white working class (Mahony 1998).

In time, it is possible that men will serve in equal numbers alongside women. If that happens, it raises the intriguing question whether the linguistic style I

have described will become 'de-gendered', associated in the popular imagination less with the supposed dispositions of a particular social group (women), and more with a social domain in which individuals play a particular social role (customer service). I do not of course suggest that the de-gendering of a particular style would put an end to the linguistic construction of gender in any form. For as long as gender remains a salient social category, linguistic behaviour will doubtless continue to be one site for its production and reproduction. But the meaning of 'gender' is not fixed for all time, and there is no reason either to suppose that its linguistic instantiations must remain forever the same.

Globalization is changing, or has the potential to change, many of the social realities that preoccupy social scientists, among them 'class', 'ethnicity', 'nation', 'gender', 'work' and indeed 'language'. These developments are as significant for sociolinguistics as for any other social science discipline, and sociolinguists should be prepared to follow them wherever they may lead.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to the editors of the *Journal of Sociolinguistics* and two anonymous reviewers for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and to audiences at the 1999 ILA and NWAVE conferences who commented on oral presentations of the material. I am grateful also to Sylvie Roy, Steve Taylor, Jack Whalen and Anne Witz for making unpublished work available to me. Last but not least, I thank the call centre operators, supervisors and managers (their names withheld at their own request) who provided me with the information and many of the insights on which this article is based.

2. This article deals only with call centres whose working language is (British) English. In the context of globalization, however, it is worth asking how far the same regulatory practices and interactional norms are being diffused across language communities. On this point, some suggestive observations are made by Sylvie Roy (1999), who finds evidence in a bilingual centre in Ontario of the same concern to regulate and standardize French usage, and the codification of French formulas which parallel established English ones (e.g. 'merci d'avoir appelé [la compagnie]. C'est [votre nom] à l'appareil. Comment puis-je vous aider?').

3. The issue of accent in service work is complicated and would bear further scrutiny. The perception of various local accents is often mentioned as a factor companies consider when choosing locations for call centres. For instance, the publicity materials produced by Scottish local authorities as part of their efforts to attract call centres to the region trade heavily on the positive connotations of a Scottish accent, such as friendliness, sincerity and reliability (see e.g. Louden 1999). However, I do not think this rhetoric can be taken at face value: the reasons why many call centres are concentrated in central Scotland have more to do with the availability and cost of labour, the supply of reasonably priced commercial property, the local telecommunications infrastructure, etc. Also, one might suspect (though I was unable to gather firm evidence on this point) that some Scottish speakers are

judged too 'broad' to be acceptable and are weeded out during the selection process for that reason. Since call centre work, like other occupations, tends to draw recruits with a certain kind of class and educational background, the most nonstandard speakers are likely to be excluded *a priori*.

4. One reason why I offer no observations on how far the actual performance of service routines matches the norms laid down for that performance is that the call centres to which I gained access would not permit me to use audio-recordings of routine transactions. This might seem curious given that many call centres record such transactions themselves for purposes of training and appraisal. In Britain, however, recording of calls is subject to conditions laid down by the telecommunications regulator Oftel, and in some cases also to agreements with trades unions about the use of recorded data. My own and others' observations (e.g. Tyler and Taylor 1997) suggest that compliance with style rules is variable, but workers are likely to display a higher degree of compliance when they assume they are being monitored – this being in most cases the default or 'safe' assumption.

5. Not all centres call this 'counselling': alternative labels include 'audit' and 'appraisal'. There are also variations in precisely what is involved (e.g. how formal the assessment is, how often it takes place): the details depend on the particular culture of the centre concerned, but six of the seven centres in my sample had some variant of the practice.

6. Other researchers have solved some of the problems I encountered either by developing a relationship with one particular centre over time (cf. Roy 1999; Tyler and Taylor 1997) or by acting as paid consultants to the management (cf. Whalen and Vinkhuysen in press). These alternatives have both advantages and disadvantages (a point discussed in more detail in the appendix to Cameron 2000).

7. As far as I can tell, there is no evidence supporting the assertion that customers want the routine to be 'consistent every time they call', at least if 'consistency' is taken to imply no variation at all in the words used by different operators on different occasions. Conversely, surveys have found customers dislike dealing with someone who is obviously reading from a script – though it is unclear whether their dissatisfaction is with scripting itself or just with inept delivery.

8. The Cathay Pacific action was reported in *The Scotsman* (7 January 1999). The report quoted a company spokesman who described attendants' smiles as 'sincere', 'genuine' and an expression of the 'warmth and superior service' for which Asian carriers are renowned. The racial stereotyping here is overt, but covertly there is also gender stereotyping. 'Superior service' in the past and present advertising of several Asian airlines (e.g. Singapore as well as Cathay Pacific) is invariably personified by a smiling Asian *woman*. A smiling Asian man would be a much less 'natural' and more problematic image with which to convey the desired meaning.

9. An anonymous reviewer commented that the reference to 'inauthenticity' in this sentence raises important issues. Limitations of space mean it is not possible to pursue them here, but they are discussed at length in Cameron 2000.

10. This story does not necessarily indicate a greater sensitivity about gender/sexual identity among American male workers than among their British counterparts. Rather it probably reflects the greater willingness of American businesses to prescribe this sort of behaviour. While British service cultures are changing (and arguably they are changing in the direction of 'Americanization'), routines like the one described in the anecdote would still be considered 'over the top' in the British context. In my U.K.-based research I came across several attempts to introduce American service customs, which had foundered on the rock of British customers'

bafflement, contempt or ridicule. (One example: the stationing at the entrance to a Scottish supermarket of a 'greeter' who exhorted customers to 'enjoy your shopping experience' while handing them a basket. Both staff and customers reportedly found this innovation embarrassing and ludicrous.)

11. That telephone operators were subject to quite intensive vocal and linguistic styling is apparent from a feature on U.S. National Public Radio's news/magazine programme *All Things Considered* (first broadcast 16 April 1999) using material from the archives of the phone company AT & T.

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