

## Is there a global 'call centre' speech style?



Recent research suggests that there is a global call centre speech style. Analysis of data from call centres in different countries shows remarkable similarities in style even when the languages or language varieties are different.

To investigate this you could collect your own data by phoning and comparing two call centres based in different areas in the UK (e.g. London and Scotland) or even in two different countries (e.g. UK and India) or you could compare two different business sectors (e.g. banking and a computer helpline). What similarities in style do you find? How do you account for any differences that you find? You could also look for gender differences between male and female call centre workers - do you think there are likely to be gender differences when the worker is presenting a corporate style rather than an individual style?



If possible, you should try to make your calls as authentic as possible by posing real problems.

### Tip:



Try to record the calls so that you can analyse them later. If this is not possible, make sure that you have a pen and notebook ready so that you can make notes during the call - you won't remember all the details afterwards!

### Things to consider:

Where is the call centre based: on-shore (in the UK) or off-shore (for example in India, South Africa or Ireland)?

### How does the agent open the call?

Does the agent give the name of the company?

Does the agent give his/her first name?

What else does the agent say in the opening greeting?

### Does the agent engage in 'active listening'?

Does the agent say such things as 'urgh huh', 'right', 'ok', 'I see', 'mhm' to indicate that they are still there and listening to you?

Does the agent ask questions to establish the exact problem? How many questions?

Does the agent summarise the problem before offering a solution?

### Call centre workers are often told to avoid jargon or technical language.

Does the agent use any terms that you did not understand?

Does the agent 'mirror' your own language back to you?

### Does the agent 'signpost' what they are doing rather than just getting on with fixing the problem? In other words:

Does the agent say such things as 'Firstly, I need to look at your account...' or 'I'm just getting this up on my computer screen...'

Does the agent repeat key details/actions 'To repeat, I will.....'

If you were put on hold, did the agent inform you that you would be put on hold?

If you were put on hold, did the agent ask your permission to put you on hold?

If you were put on hold and music was played, were you informed that music would be played?

### Empathising with customers and rapport building are also often key features of a call centre style.

When you are explaining the problem, does the agent use such expressions as 'I understand that must be really frustrating', 'I understand this is difficult but I'm here to help', 'I apologise for that, let's see if I can sort it out'.

At the end, does your agent ask things like 'does that make sense now?' or 'how do you feel about that'?

How often does the agent use your name during the call?

How often does the agent engage in small talk e.g. asking how you are at the beginning of the call, enquiring about the weather etc.

How does the agent end the call?

What conclusions can you draw from your analysis? Do you agree/disagree that there is a global call centre style?

#### SUGGESTED READING:

Cameron, Deborah. 2000. *Good to Talk? Living and Working in a Communication Culture*. London: Sage. (This volume has a chapter on call centres)

Hultgren, A.K. (2011). 'Building rapport' with customers across the world: The global diffusion of a call centre style. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 15/1: 36-64. (Click [here](#) for a summary of this paper)