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“Express empathy through words”: What does this sound like and how is this achieved in call centre interaction?

The growth, development and expansion of the Information Technology Enabled Services industry (ITES) and business processing outsourcing (BPO) represents a new form of work. Call centres are one part of this booming industry, with, India and the Philippines leading the English language call centre market. The development of call centre work has very significant social, political, educational, economic and linguistic consequences for these offshore destinations. The enactment of individual calls can also have important consequences for both customers and call centre workers.

Call centre interactions are complex. The customer’s goal is to get information, or resolve a problem through a telephonic mediated interaction with a Customer Service Representative (CSR). The CSR’s goal is to provide the information or resolve the problem in the shortest possible time. Collaboration in a sharing of information is the key to a successful resolution. Towards this end, CSRs are strongly advised to ‘express empathy in words’ – a message that comes through in the training material, on the floor and in the evaluation of calls.

However, just what is meant by the notion of ‘empathy’ in call centre interactions is unclear. What is it? How is it done? What do we recognise or interpret as ‘empathy’ (or lack of empathy)? How might we explain this concept of ‘empathy’ in SFL terms? What are the consequences of empathy (or lack of)? I begin to explore these questions in this presentation, engaging you with some of the data as both transcript and sound files in order to open up discussions of the ways meanings of empathy may be expressed or interpreted differently across cultures and languages. Hopefully a closer exploration of the semiotics of empathy can be helpful for BPO training.