



Language and power in India's "new services"



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ABSTRACT

Language is at the heart of service interactions and a crucial element influencing the relationship between service provider and customer. As a specific form of symbolic capital, language can also be used to exclude and dominate. Our research looks at the role of language in shaping the power dynamic between service providers and customers in the Indian context. This study builds from extensive fieldwork conducted in the area of "new services", following Indian gym trainers and coffee shop baristas as they interact with elite English-speaking clients. The findings detail how English operates as an invisible boundary in service settings, by excluding Indians who do not speak it with fluency. However, when used to develop expert knowledge, language also becomes an opportunity for lower middle class Indians to resist and invert the domination of the elite.

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In debates about globalization, the Indian call center stands for multiple ills, including job outsourcing and colonial-style power dynamics (Boussebaa, Sinha, & Gabriel, 2014; Mirchandani, 2012; Ritzer & Lair, 2009; Shome, 2006; Taylor & Bain, 2005). Imitating the American accent turns Indian call center workers into "clones" who help diffuse the linguistic imperialism of the West (Mirchandani, 2012: 5). In popular culture and academic scholarship, the Indian call center worker personifies Western domination enacted through language.

However, call centers represent a distinctive organizational setting. Call center workers have to follow strict organizational guidelines circumscribing their autonomy (Shome, 2006; Taylor & Bain, 2005). Therefore, before we come to more definite conclusions about the effects of globalization on language, we must consider a variety of service settings.

The study here examines language dynamics in what we call India's "new services." We concentrate on two relatively new professions in the Indian context: gym trainers (e.g. floor instructors, personal trainers) and coffee baristas (frontline service workers employed by large coffee chains such as Starbucks or Indian-owned Café Coffee Day, to prepare and serve caffeinated drinks). As in other parts of the world (Rofel, 2007; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012) the rising wealth of the transnationally-oriented elite has resulted in a growing number of malls (Varman & Belk, 2012), cafés (Platz, 2012), beauty parlors and gyms, which serve both as playing

grounds for the Indian elite, as well as professional opportunities for Indians from the lower classes.

A defining feature of these servicescapes is the deep cultural and linguistic divide that exists between customers and service workers (Varman & Belk, 2012). While a minority of Indians speak English fluently, English remains critical to progressing in these "new services." English is a critical difference structuring the Indian market (Cayla & Elson, 2012). Service interactions represent an especially fertile context to study how these disparities come into play.

As our findings confirm, language reproduces power in service interactions but in ways that are more nuanced than previous scholarship may suggest. English operates as a violent boundary for service workers who cannot develop enough communicative competence (Hymes, 1972). These dynamics, however, work differently across the two organizational contexts we study. By highlighting these differences, our study demonstrates that understanding the effects of globalization requires attending to the organizational context in which service interactions take place.

The definition of "new services" needs clarifying though, since both gyms and coffee shops have historical antecedents in India through the related concepts of akharas (Alter, 1992) and tea stalls (Burton, 1993). In addition, the job of gym trainer or coffee barista may not be particularly new in the Western world (George, 2008). Nevertheless, we define these professions as "new services" because modern gyms and coffee shops involve radically distinctive interactions when compared to akharas and the tea stalls; both servicescapes are organized around distinctive service tangibles; both professions confuse many people in India about what these jobs entail, in a way that evokes the difficulty of categorizing really new products (Moreau, Markman, & Lehman, 2001).

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First, the scripted interactions of coffee shop chains have little to do with the easy informality of tea stalls. While a majority of coffee shop customers have experienced routinized fast food interactions before, the service workers we met face a steep learning curve, especially since they have to conduct their interactions with customers in English, a language they rarely master when starting to work in coffee shop chains. As for gym trainers, they have to adapt to a completely new situation where they give orders to elite clients.

Second, in terms of service tangibles, coffee shops and modern gyms have very little to do with tea stalls and akharas. In terms of products, the espresso-based caffeinated drinks served in coffee shop chains contrast with the sweet masala-infused tea served in tea stalls, and many Indian baristas initially struggle to appreciate the products they are meant to serve. In addition, the interior design of coffee shop chains and modern gyms are drastically different from tea stalls and akharas. The akhara's mud pits and rudimentary weights contrast with the mechanized model of modern gym training. The tea stall, often a temporary shelter on the side of the road, consists of wooden benches with the owner preparing and serving tea. In contrast, modern coffee shops are typically enclosed spaces with seats arranged along window fronts looking out onto the street. Phadke (2007, 1514) argues that coffee shops are "privatized spaces that masquerade as public spaces, where entry is ostensibly open but in reality regulated through various subtle and overt acts of (intentional and unintentional) intimidation and exclusion."

Third, at an emic level, both coffee shop chains and modern gyms represent a radically new service offering that Indians often find difficult to understand and categorize. Most of the coffee shop workers we interacted with have never experienced this type of servicescape as a consumer, in part due to high prices that limit access, but also because of the cultural incommensurability between the world they grew up in and the world these servicescapes represent.

The novel dimension of these Indian servicescapes makes them especially relevant sites to study the issue of language in service interactions. Indeed, language is critical to the process of adaptation and accommodation that takes place between service workers and customers when they are from different cultural backgrounds (Callahan, 2006; Miller, Craighead, & Karwan, 2000; Peñaloza & Gilly, 1999). A distinctive feature of the Indian context though, is the way English is not merely "a skill that the new middle class can use for instrumental socio-economic ends; rather it is constitutive of the identity of this group" (Fernandes, 2006: 69). In other words, English, in the Indian context, is a distinguishing feature of middle-class identity that isolates the English-speaking elite from the rest of the population.

We use this context to study language dynamics in service interactions. More specifically our research questions are: 1) What role does language play in these new servicescapes; 2) How do Indian service workers view having to interact with customers in English?; What role does English play in their lives? 3) How do language dynamics vary across organizational contexts? Does language play a different role in coffee shops versus modern gyms?

1. Theoretical foundations

In framing our theoretical foundations, we want to highlight the gap that exists in the services literature, on the power dynamic between service provider and customer, especially the role of language in shaping such dynamics. Our research attempts to bridge that gap.

1.1. Language as service communication

Service scholarship emphasizes the importance of keeping customers informed in a language they can understand (Bitner, Booms, & Tetreault, 1990; Gummesson, 1991; Mattson & den Haring, 1998; Rafaei, Ziklik, & Doucet, 2008; Stiles, 1985). Clear communication improves consumer understanding (Mattson & den Haring, 1998; Rafaei

et al., 2008), leads to better customer evaluations (Bitner, 1990), an increase in referrals via word of mouth (Van Vaerenbergh & Holmqvist, 2014), and enhanced consumer satisfaction (Holmqvist & Grönroos, 2012).

Despite these advances, Holmqvist (2011: 188) notes, "The literature on service management has, by and large, blithely assumes that the consumer and the service personnel speak the same language." Holmqvist argues that language has an emotional dimension that goes beyond the transfer of information, and that language use strongly correlates to the assertion of historical, national, or regional identity by consumers. For instance, consumers expect service providers to make an effort to converse in customers' first language.

We see these inter-cultural service encounters as attempts from customers and service providers to uphold and reinforce their self-definitions. Socio-linguistic work demonstrates that linguistic exchanges are mobilized to construct specific identities (Hall & Bucholtz, 2012). Pavlenko and Blackledge (2004: 21) argue that individuals will use "linguistic resources which allow them to resist identities that position them in undesirable ways." The resistance of customers to use their second language in French Canada can be interpreted as one instance of such resistance (see Holmqvist, 2011). These insights are also consistent with our perspective on service as a power struggle, a perspective on interactions that has been especially prevalent in sociolinguistics (Blommaert, 2005; Fairclough, 1989) and sociological studies of service work (Gooptu, 2013; Hanser, 2008).

1.2. Language and the power dynamics of service interactions

Language reflects and at times amplifies broader power dynamics. For instance, young working-class American men struggle to use the compliant language expected in many service jobs because such servility conflicts with the bravado involved in working class masculine identity projects (McDowell, 2011). Indian security guards in India mention the insults and other forms of humiliation that middle-class Indians subject them to (Gooptu, 2013).

However, while past scholarship emphasizes the way language amplifies the service workers' inferior social position (Gooptu, 2013; Leidner, 1993), research also highlights the way service workers use language to resist the servility that the notion of "service" evokes (Hollander, 1985; Jeantet, 2003; Paules, 1991; Sherman, 2007). The application of customer power inevitably leads to various forms of resistance (Foucault, 1980). For instance, French post-office workers can become excessively polite with rude customers, as a way to confront customers to their own impoliteness (Jeantet, 2003).

In highlighting the way service workers use language to resist subordination, past research also identifies the role of language registers in fashioning expert identities. Expert language helps service workers such as doctors (Fisher & Todd, 1983), funeral directors (Unruh, 1979), bridal workers (Corrado, 2002), lawyers (Blumberg, 1967), and hair stylists (Gimlin, 1996; Jacobs-Huey, 2007; Üstüner & Thompson, 2012) assert their authority. Service workers can mobilize linguistic resources to either resist unfavorable identity positions or to create favorable expert identities in their interactions with customers.

1.3. The postcolonial context: English as an instrument of domination and a resource for mobility

English has long been an instrument of domination in India. As part of colonization, the British created a class of English-speaking local intermediaries—"Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and intellect" (Macaulay, 2005: 121)—who served as instruments of British control. In addition to making English the language of colonial administration, the British made every effort to position English as a marker of cultural distinction and sophistication while devaluing Indian literature and culture as un-modern (Ambedkar, 2005; Chatterjee, 1993).

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