

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](#)

Journal of Pragmatics

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma

Critical intercultural impoliteness: “Where are you located? Can you please transfer me to someone who is American?”

Gerrard Mugford

Universidad de Guadalajara, Mexico

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Impoliteness
Critical
Interculturality
Foreign-language user
Language play
Mock politeness

ABSTRACT

With their increasing participation in globalised labour markets, users of English as a foreign language frequently face conflictive situations where their linguistic and work competence is severely called into question. This is the specific context of call centres in Guadalajara, Mexico, bilingual (Spanish–English) where agents often deal with United States callers. To interact within this globalised context, Mexican bilingual telephone operators need to accommodate to new discursual patterns and access pragmatic resources to deal with perceived acts of impoliteness, disrespect and aggression. Triangulating self-reports from nine agents with three call centre supervisors, I examine key incidents involving rejection, racism and insults. I develop the concept of critical intercultural impoliteness as a way of understanding how operators actively try to overcome discrimination and a smothering sense of powerlessness.

© 2018 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Foreign-language users are often ill-prepared to confront situations and predicaments involving impoliteness, disrespect and aggression especially in globalised institutional contexts including service encounters. Communicative choices may be restricted as interactants adhere to prescribed discursual routines and patterns of behaviour. The situation is made even more intense in non-face-to-face situations, such as in international call centres. To deal with impoliteness and hostility users of English as a foreign language (EFL) need to develop critical intercultural impoliteness strategies.

Critical intercultural impoliteness refers to foreign-language users' pragmatic knowledge and resources that allow them to identify and contest rudeness and discourteousness in the target language. Critical examines how agents confront dominance, challenge power and adopt resistance strategies. Impoliteness provides an umbrella term to cover a range of face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson, 1987) such as rudeness, aggression and intimidation which reflect speaker intentionality, purposiveness and hearer perception (Culpeper, 2005; Bousfield, 2008).

I examine the specific context of bilingual agents working in Mexican call centres. To understand the challenges, difficulties and confrontations they face, I conducted post facto interviews with Mexican bilingual (Spanish–English) operators from three call centres in Guadalajara, Mexico, who deal with United States customers. I then identify different aspects of intercultural impoliteness through which foreign-language interactants recognise face-threatening behaviour. The objective of this paper is to understand how bilingual call-centre agents, limited by company policies and procedures, employ a range of resistance strategies e.g. language play and mock politeness to overcome customer antagonism and communicative frustration.

E-mail address: gerrardmugford@gmail.com.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.03.014>
0378-2166/© 2018 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

Please cite this article in press as: Mugford, G., Critical intercultural impoliteness: “Where are you located? Can you please transfer me to someone who is American?”, Journal of Pragmatics (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.03.014>

2. Critical intercultural impoliteness

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) examines aspects of power, domination and discrimination in society (Fairclough, 2009, 2010) – extremely pertinent issues for bilingual agents working in Mexican call centres. Preferring the term Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), van Dijk, in contrast, adopts a problem-oriented approach that aims to identify and combat ‘discursive injustice’ (2014:389) and be socially committed ‘with those who need it most, such as various dominated groups in society’ (2014:390).

Rather than starting with language *per se*, CDA examines social issues such as the effects of globalisation, negotiation of (national) identity and interactional struggles (Fairclough, 2009). By identifying ‘social relations of power and domination’, CDA tries to capture ‘general self-consciousness about language’ (2001:230). With specific reference to globalisation, CDA examines identity and relationship issues in the ‘technologisation of discourse’ (Fairclough, 1992) as employees are expected to use language to achieve transactional and institutional goals.

By focussing on a specific issue rather than merely being theory-oriented, van Dijk aims to ‘analyse, and thus contribute to, the understanding and the solution of serious social problems, especially those that are caused or exacerbated by public text and talk, such as various forms of social power abuse (domination) and their resulting social inequality’ (2014:390).

Whilst CDA and CDS reflect ways of representing the world, critical intercultural impoliteness examines how foreign-language interactants confront and contest rudeness and discourteousness including attacks regarding their linguistic ability (e.g. lack of language proficiency), country (e.g. disparaging cultural aspersions) and work competence (e.g. level of helpfulness). In their transactional role of helping to resolve callers’ inquiries, agents would have been thought to have power over clients and that it would not be in the clients’ interest to antagonise agents. However, in pursuing transactional goals, callers may have little interest in recognising and supporting the agents’ face (Goffman, 1967). Callers may react negatively to rigidity and standardisation when dealing with call centres because as observed by Hultgren and Cameron (2010:324) “the inflexibility of the call centre’s routinized procedures may lead agents and customers having conflicting priorities. Sometimes the customer’s most immediate goal is to circumvent the standard operating procedure, which the agent is required to follow”. Furthermore, callers may become extremely aggressive if they think they are not being told the truth: “When customers believe they are being lied to over location, anger can become overtly racist” (Taylor and Bain, 2006:49). Hultgren and Cameron also note that operators are in a weakened power position because “agents, though institutionally responsible for controlling interactions with customers, are themselves controlled by intense linguistic regulation and surveillance” (2010:324). Callers can take advantage of this situation since agents are not allowed to retaliate and normally cannot arbitrarily end a call. Caller-agent relationships may be further compounded by physical distance as callers do not have to confront agents face to face: “Aside from the mechanistic and script-driven work process, workers are also encouraged to distance themselves from their work through the requirement of anonymity” (Mirchandani, 2004:189).

Reflective intercultural impoliteness involves understanding the appropriate use of a particular resource in a given genre, especially since “language, cultural expectations, and value judgements are context specific” (Fernández-Amaya et al., 2014:130). This subsequently involves identifying available courses of action which can be described in terms of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic knowledge and resources. Pragmalinguistic resources refer “to the resources for conveying communicative acts, and relational and interpersonal meanings. Such resources include pragmatic strategies such as directness and indirectness, routines, and a large range of linguistic forms which can intensify or soften communicative acts” (Kasper and Rose, 2001:2). When employing sociopragmatic knowledge which concerns “the social appropriateness of communicative behavior” (Kecskes, 2014:16) agents need to decide on the contextual suitability of their answers in a given service encounter.

Reflective cultural impoliteness offers a framework within which to understand how call centre agents confront power imbalances, communicative disadvantage and racist messaging. Reflective cultural impoliteness complements other approaches that have investigated impoliteness and resistance in call centres e.g. impoliteness and verbal aggression in call centre interaction (Archer and Jagodziński, 2015; Hultgren, 2017). Meanwhile, critical approaches have looked at the workplace exertion of power, domination and employee resistance (Bain and Taylor, 2000; Mulholland, 2004). Building on these previous studies, this research takes an emic approach by examining how call centre agents themselves perceive and react to intercultural impoliteness.

3. Mexican call centres

The three call centres in this study have approximately 1200 workstations. They mostly manage bilingual (English–Spanish) ‘campaigns’ (the particular services that business clients ask call centres to provide e.g. billing, complaints or reservations). Levels of control (e.g. agents having to follow scripts) and management supervision (e.g. monitoring calls) vary from campaign to campaign. In this study, only client-originated calls in English are examined as opposed to outbound calls i.e. those generated by the call centres. The working context of a call centre agent may be characterised in terms of genres and globalisation (Fairclough, 2001) as operators either follow standardised and monotonous routines (for a description see, for instance, Fernie and Metcalf, 1998 or Taylor and Bain, 2006) or face interesting challenges within the context of providing an information service (Russell, 2016). In call centres in this study, agents were often not allowed to state where they were located and this hindered their attempt to construct a professional identity. Some campaigns strongly discourage agents from giving their last name. There is a

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/7297179>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/7297179>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)