“How may I be of service?” Foreign Accent adoption in off Shore Call Centres.

Sarbari Bordia*

School of Management, University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia

Email: Sarbari.Bordia@unisa.edu.au
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Abstract

Linguistic skills are important in organisations with geographically dispersed links; particularly in the off-shore call centre industry, where employees with diverse first languages are required to speak English with a foreign accent to effectively communicate with customers in English speaking countries. Yet, the call centre literature does not reflect an in-depth understanding of foreign accent adoption. This paper aims at initiating a research agenda by drawing upon sociolinguistic research on ethno-linguistic vitality (ELV) – defined as a sense of pride in one’s linguistic and cultural heritage – to explain the dynamics of foreign accent adoption. Based on the ELV literature I present propositions for antecedents and consequences of foreign accent adoption in the off-shore call centre industry.

Key words: cross-cultural management, multinational corporations, cross-cultural competence, international OB.

Communication in organisations that have geographically diverse operations requires employees to have specific linguistic skills (Luo & Shenkar 2006). Extant literature shows that language use in multi-national corporations or organisations with a linguistically diverse client base can act as an alternative shadow structure within the organisation and a source of power for multi-lingual employees (Marschan-Piekkari, Welch & Welch 1999). Indeed, the linguistic strategy (e.g., choice of functional languages) of multi-national organisations can play a crucial role in coordination and knowledge sharing between linguistically diverse units of operation (Luo & Shenkar 2006). Lack of appropriate linguistic skills can affect marketing and sales as well as employee recruitment (Feely & Harzing 2003). Recognition of the crucial role of language in international management has given rise to tools for measuring language barriers such as Linguistic Auditing (Reeves & Wright 1996) and Language Check-up (Reeves & Feeley 2001) in organisations. These tools help organisations identify their requirements and capabilities in relevant foreign languages, including, the validity of the functional language and the availability of information in more than one language. While linguistic strategy of multi-national corporations has had some research uptake in recent years (e.g., Cossette 1998; Marschan, Welch & Welch 1997; Zaidman 2001), the socio-emotional experience of employees that have to adopt a functional language other than their first language has been relatively under researched. This is despite calls by researchers to consider the growing trend of ‘linguistic nationalism’, defined as employees’ and clients’ preference in using their first language in corporate
communication in multi-national operations (Feely & Harzing 2003: 43). Off-shore call centres present a unique case where employees have to communicate with clients/customers using a foreign language or accent. In this paper, I explore the impact of adoption of foreign linguistic skills on employees in the off-shore call centre industry. Using socio-linguistic research as a starting point, the aim in this paper is to build a research agenda on adoption of foreign linguistic norms in the off-shore call centre context.

In the paper there are three specific aims. Firstly, I discuss the contextual issues that assist in successful foreign accent adoption. Individuals can successfully learn an accent based on linguistic stimuli present within their social context. These stimuli may be in the form of audio-visual media as well as business and governmental usage of the accent (Landry & Bourhis 1997). The more the presence of such stimuli, the more success individuals will have in adopting the accent. Secondly, adoption of a foreign accent may have certain psychological effects on call centre employees. Employees may feel their local accent of English undermined when they are asked to adopt a foreign one. This will lead to a diminished sense of well-being among employees (Sachdev & Bourhis 1993). Finally, there may be social effects from accent adoption. With extended use of the foreign accent, call centre employees may use the accent in social context with friends and family that are not familiar with the accent. This may change the nature of the relationships they have in their social network leading to possible social alienation (Evans 1996). In the rest of the paper, I discuss the linguistic context of off-shore call centres as well as review the socio-linguistic literature on second language/accenct adoption and apply it to the off-shore call centre context. I present propositions on the availability of linguistic stimuli (e.g., multi-media, advertisements, etc.) of the foreign accent that will assist in success of foreign accent adoption. Psychological consequences of foreign accent adoption (e.g., psychological distress, lack of well-being) and social consequences (e.g., alienation from existing social network) due to foreign accent adoption are also proposed.

LINGUISTIC CONTEXT OF OFF-SHORE CALL CENTRE WORK
Several well known Australian companies (e.g., Qantas, ANZ & Telstra; Brinsden, 2008) currently outsource business activities overseas. Nearly 3800 jobs have been created in India to service the Australian banking sector alone in the past three years (Johnson, 2009). The context of the off-shore call centre industry has given rise to a set of professionals who need to display expertise in foreign linguistic and cultural norms. Quality of communication (leading to effective problem solving) between off-shore agents (often in India, Philippines, etc.) and customers in USA, UK, Canada or Australia is improved if the call centre agent adopts some of the linguistic norms used in the customers’ country. Yet, the adoption of a foreign accent has not received much research attention in the call centre literature. Empirical research has sought to understand some of the job requirements of service employees. For example, stress among call centre employees leading to withdrawal and turnover has been the focus of several studies (e.g., Coscia 2006; Deery, Iverson & Walsh 2002; Marquez 2006; Ranganathan & Kuruvilla 2008; Somner 1995). Stressors such as exhaustion due to large volume of calls (Narayanan & Moynihan 2006), odd working hours, dealing with disgruntled customers and fear of job loss due to the unregulated nature of the industry (Pal 2004), have been identified.

From a social identity perspective, adoption of a foreign persona, such as adopting a western name (e.g., an Indian call centre agent called ‘Sunita’ may change her name to ‘Sue’) and pretending to live in a western location (e.g., an agent from Manila may pretend to live in Manhattan, learning about the location in order to make small talk with customers) has been found to add to the stress which eventually leads to turnover of the off-shore call centre workforce (Das, Dharwadkar & Brandes 2008). The rationale behind the adoption of a foreign persona, including the accent, is to bridge perceptions of linguistic and cultural distance between service employees and customers (Budhwar, Verma, Singh & Dhar 2006). In a voice-to-voice communication setting, an individual’s linguistic skills are important in bridging perceptions of cultural gap. Indeed, much of the training for off-shore call centre work is on accent adoption (known as ‘voice and accent training’; Cowie, 2007). It is mandatory for call centre employees to pass the voice and accent training before they are given any substantive or technological training required for specific processes (such as airline booking,
banking services or product information). Given the centrality of accent adoption in off-shore call centre work, the call centre literature needs to display an understanding of the factors that lead to successful foreign accent adoption and potential effects of accent adoption on call centre employees and the organisations. However, the adoption of foreign linguistic norms has not received much research attention in the call centre literature.

Much of call centre work from English speaking countries has been off-shored to countries such as India and the Philippines that have access to a large English speaking workforce (Budhwar et al. 2006; Friginal 2007). Yet, upon commencement of employment, the call centre agents are asked to relinquish their Indian or Filipino accent of English and take on an American, British or Australian accent. For example, call centre agents have to accentuate vowels such as ‘o’ for British and Australian customers while they use more pronounced ‘r’ for north American customers. Also, some words have to be pronounced differently in order to make it comprehensible for international clients. For example, an Indian agent will have to pronounce ‘schedule’ as /skedju:l/ highlighting the /sk/ consonant cluster sound at the beginning of the word for north Americans. ‘Schedule’ in Indian English would be pronounced with /sh/. Similarly, the word ‘route’ will have be pronounced as /rəʊt/ (rhymes with ‘shout’) for an USA based client instead of /ruːt/ (as in ‘root’) in Indian English. In addition to differences in pronunciations, off-shore call centre agents adopt the rate of speech, pitch of delivery, intonation pattern, use of colloquial words, and culturally defined conversation styles that are inherent to the customers’ country (Sitt 1997).

One way of understanding the adoption of foreign accent and its associated para-linguistic norms is to draw upon the socio-linguistic literature on second language adoption in migrant context (e.g., Lawson & Sachdev 2004). A dominant theoretical perspective driving this line of research has been Ethno-linguistic vitality (henceforth ELV; Giles, Bourhis & Taylor 1977). ELV has been defined as the pride people hold in their first language and associated cultural heritage (Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey & Chua 1988). Individual’s perceptions of their own linguistic strengths or weaknesses impact their psychological state in communicating in a foreign language or accent. ELV has been
studied extensively to determine individuals’ willingness to participate in foreign or second language communication. Research on ethno-linguistic vitality posits that people with high vitality (i.e., greater pride in their first language) will find it distressing to adopt norms of the foreign language and therefore may not be able to effectively communicate in that language (Gudykunst et al. 1988). When forced to speak in the foreign language, they may experience diminished sense of well-being. While research on ethno-linguistic vitality is prolific in the field of socio-linguistics (e.g., Rubenfeld, Clement, Lussier, Lebrun & Auger 2006), social psychology (e.g., Montreuil, Bourhis & Vanbeselaere 2004) and communication (e.g., Lawson & Sachdev 2004), it has been under researched in the organisational context. Much of the ELV research has been in the migrant context where individuals are new or short-term residents in the target language country. This allows individuals to be part of the target culture and observe others using the cultural and linguistic norms first hand. The dramatic growth in the off-shoring industry presents a unique context in which employees are expected to adopt a foreign accent, its associated para-linguistic norms and cultural features, without physically being in the geographic location of that accent. Unlike migrants, call centre employees have limited experience in authentic non-work communication that will help them develop an understanding of the linguistic and cultural norms of the target accent (Cowie 2007).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

ELV is a multi-faceted construct and has been operationalised at group and individual levels. First introduced by Giles et al. (1977), ELV helps in understanding why some individuals and groups are able to learn a second or foreign language/accent after immigrating to a country with a different language or accent while others choose to use only their first language. In a bilingual context (e.g., French-Canada: Côté & Clément 1994; South Africa: Bornman & Appelgryn 1997; Israel: Yaeger-Dror 1988), ELV helps explain the dominance of one language/accent over another. In general, the sense of pride in one’s community, language, culture, political power and economic contributions determine whether individuals (or linguistic groups) continue to speak in their first language with others from or outside their linguistic group (Ehala & Niglas 2007). Early research on ELV proposed the continuance of a language based on three objective variables: the size, social status and
institutional support for the group (Giles et al. 1977). Therefore, if a linguistic group has a large population, enjoys higher socio-economic status compared to other linguistic groups and has businesses and governmental organisations using the language, the language is likely to be used by members to communicate within and outside the group. While the objective approach to ELV provided some explanation for groups that maintained or relinquished their language, it did not always explain why some people in the same linguistic group were more successful than others in adopting a second language. In order to find answers for situational (e.g., need to communicate in the other language for work) and dispositional (e.g., intrinsic interest in the other language) individual differences, a subjective ELV approach evolved (Bourhis, Giles & Rosenthal 1981; for reviews refer to Currie & Hogg 1994; Sachdev & Bourhis 1993). Speakers of a language evaluate the objective features against their own linguistic needs and goals, thereby, forming a subjective perception of the value of their first language. For example, individuals working for a bank in the country they have migrated to may need to use the new language for career achievement. This may not be the case for the owner of an ethnic grocery store where most customers will be inclined to speak in the store owner’s first language. The subjective perception, in turn, motivates speakers to keep using their first language or adopt another.

Speakers’ subjective ELV is also influenced by the company they keep. For individuals that primarily communicate with others that share their first language, a second language may be relatively irrelevant. When such individuals are put in a position where they have to adopt and perform in a second language, they may suffer some psychological effects in adopting the second language as compared to others who have the need to communicate outside their linguistic group on a regular basis. Individuals’ network of linguistic contacts (INLC) – referred to as peoples’ personal and professional relations such as family, friends, neighbours, peers, colleagues – influence subjective ELV (Allard & Landry 1994). More recently, Ehala & Niglas (2007) suggested that knowledge of a second language is desirable in the current global business and commerce setting. The authors also state that all cultural groups sharing a common language adhere to a combination of innovation and tradition. The more tradition-driven groups may choose to hold on to their first language and more
innovation-driven groups may choose to adopt a second language based on their utilitarian needs such as better education or jobs.

**Success of foreign accent adoption**

The success of adoption of a new language or accent will be dependent on the availability of visual and auditory stimuli in the new language/accent. The ELV literature posits that individuals use such stimuli to learn and practice their linguistic skills (Backhaus 2006). Such stimuli may be present in certain geographic locations by way of *linguistic landscaping*, defined as use of a language in public spaces (Landry & Bourhis 1997). Some examples of linguistic landscaping include road signage, commercial and governmental advertisements, audio-visual media, the internet and commonly accessible written texts. Subtly, linguistic landscaping acknowledges the superior status of the language in relation to other prevalent languages (Ben-Rafael, Shohamy, Amara & Trumber-Hecht 2006). This is especially true in bilingual locations where the official language is different from the one used for business or entertainment. The dual linguistic landscape can provide indication of which language is important in which domain. For example, citizens of India may encounter a predominantly local linguistic landscape of Hindi (the overall official language) and a local official language (India officially recognises 18 languages based on its linguistically diverse states; The Constitution of India 1992) for governmental organisations such as hospitals, taxation departments and public schools. However, the linguistic landscape based on private business organisations may be in English, indicating the superiority of English over local languages for business purposes. Similarly, The Philippines has two official languages (Filipino and English) with several other commonly used languages (The Ethnologue report for Philippines 2009) and different languages may dominate different aspects of the linguistic landscape.

In the call centre context, the success of foreign accent adoption will be effective in locations where individuals have access to this accent and its associated cultural context by way of linguistic landscaping. As the official language of the locations that host off-shore call centres will be different from the foreign accent, much of the linguistic landscaping that assist in accent adoption will be from non-governmental sources. The linguistic landscape may include the presence of advertisements made
in English speaking countries, screening of foreign made films (e.g., Hollywood or British),
availability of western style shopping centres selling products with global brand names such as
Reebok and Microsoft, American fast food outlets such as McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken as
well as the use of English language websites and internet services. The presence of western-based
commercial products and services that symbolize the western ways of life can help bridge the psychic
distance (Wiedersheim-Paul 1972) – defined as cultural and linguistic differences between two parties
in an intercultural or multi-lingual encounter (Marschan et al. 1997; Luostarinen 1979) – between call
centre employees and their customers. Such a global linguistic landscape – not uncommon in many
large Asian cities such as Manila and Bangalore – may provide prospective call centre agents
additional stimuli to learn and practice the new accent, its cultural context and paralinguistic norms.
In case of call centres that are set up in locations that have a weaker global linguistic landscape (i.e., a
linguistic landscape dominated by the local language), success in adoption of the foreign accent may
be limited or may take more time. Given the substantial difference in operating costs between larger
cities and smaller towns (National Association for Software and Service Companies, India,
NASSCOM, 2007), off-shore call centres choosing to operate out of smaller towns should be mindful
of the effect of linguistic landscape on employees’ foreign accent adoption. For example, an agent
from a town that may not have large bill boards advertising Pizza Hut or Dominos Pizza may not
know that ‘pizza’ is pronounced as /pɛtsə/. Instead, the agent, unaware of the consonant cluster /ts/
may pronounce the word as /pɛsə/. Therefore, call centres in locations without appropriate linguistic
landscape may have to provide additional voice and accent and cultural training than their larger city
counterparts to counter this effect. Therefore I propose that:

**Propositions 1:** Success in foreign accent adoption will be dependent on the
prevalence of a global linguistic landscape. Larger cities with a multi-lingual
landscape that project symbols of western culture by way of western brands and
media presence, will facilitate employees’ foreign accent adoption. Call centres
in town with a local linguistic landscape will have to provide in-depth linguistic
and cultural training to their employees who do not have the benefit of living in
a global linguistic landscape like their larger city counterparts.

**Psychological and social effects of foreign accent adoption**
Adoption of a language or accent for pragmatic reasons such as better education or jobs, social status or need to reside in a new country, often leads to psychological ramifications for individuals (Sachdev & Bourhis 1993; Yagmur, de Bot & Korzilius 1999). Migrant communities needing to learn a language for utilitarian reasons, thereby forgoing their first language can feel culturally isolated and therefore experience diminished sense of wellbeing. Yagmur et al. (1999) found that older members of Turkish-Australians felt distressed by the loss of their first language among following generations of the group. Such drop in sense of wellbeing due to drop in ELV in the next generation has also been noticed among the older generation of the small Greek community living in Istanbul, Turkey (Komondouros & Mc-Entrée-Atalianis 2007). Mexican-American parents have been found to feel a sense of psychological loss in making a decision to educate their children in English for utilitarian reasons (Evans 1996; Gao, Schmidt & Gudykunst 1994). In providing their children a better life in USA, Spanish speaking parents felt distressed by the lack of identification their children will have towards the Mexican culture, the Spanish language and ultimately, the older members of the family (Evans 1996).

Adoption of a foreign accent in the off-shore call centre context can also create a diminished sense of wellbeing among employees. It is not by chance that certain geographic locations such as the Philippines and India have attracted the lion share of BPO operations (Budhwar et al. 2006; Friginal 2007). The abundance of English speaking workforce (at a lower cost) is a significant cause for the dramatic rise of the BPO industry in these countries (Shome 2006). Therefore, individuals that are recruited into call centre training programs or directly into the call centre work must feel a sense of pride in their English speaking abilities (one of the major reasons for their recruitment). Yet, these individuals are expected to relinquish their current accent in English (which is seen as unfit for transaction) in favour of a foreign one. This devaluation of their existing language skills will hurt their sense of self (Hogg & Terry 2000) and lead to a diminished sense of wellbeing. Indeed, adoption of a foreign national identity (e.g., an Indian agent pretending to be American) in the call centre context has been found to create a sense of emotional burnout and stress (Das et al. 2008). Similarly, adoption of the foreign accent can lead to lack of psychological wellbeing among call centre employees. For
example, employees may feel a sense of loss in not being able to use the accent they have always used in professional and social settings. Inability to use their native accent may lead them to feel that the call centre, its client company and individual consumers do not value the culture and language associated with the geographic region the call centre is situated in. Along with lack of confidence in the foreign accent they have recently acquired but have experienced little authentic non-work communication in, individuals may feel a lack of confidence in their domestic accent of English as it is perceived to be undesirable for call centre work. Therefore, I propose that:

**Propositions 2:** Foreign accent adoption will lead to diminished sense of psychological wellbeing among off-shore call centre employees. Employees will not only lack confidence in the foreign accent they have recently adopted but also in the accent they use in their non-work related communication.

With consistent usage of the foreign accent, employees may find it increasingly difficult in switching from the foreign accent to the domestic one in social conversations with friends and family. Just as the first language can interfere with second language communication, over time, second language can start to encroach upon communication that is primarily in the first language (Tseng & Liou 2006; Zughoul 1991). The same can be expected in communicating with two different accents. Unlike the immigrant context, where the entire migrant group of common linguistic origin adopts the foreign/second language adoption, albeit at various levels of proficiency, in the off-shore call centre context, the decision to adopt a foreign accent is taken by individuals for him- or herself and the whole community is unlikely to make the switch from domestic to the foreign accent. Therefore, the call centre employee may be the only one (or among a few) within the family and social network that has acquired the foreign accent. Individuals are often recognised by their speech patterns (Eckert 2000; Podesva 2007). In the absence of visual cues, speech patterns are the next best distinguishing features that help us identify one person from another (Bourhis, Giles & Tajfel 1973; Hogg & Terry 2000). Changes in the speech pattern by way of foreign accent adoption may alter perceptions of individuals’ intent, attitudes or motives (Côté 1996). This in turn can inadvertently alter relationships between call centre employees and their social network. Call centre employees may be perceived as rude or arrogant by their friends and family when they use the foreign accent. Employees’ social network may also perceive them to have relinquished their cultural values (something they may be
proud of) for a foreign one. Such perceptions will change the nature of relationships between call centre employees and their social network. Changes in existing relationships with friends and family can lead to further loss in sense of wellbeing among call centre agents (Umberson, Chen, House, Hopkins, & Slaten 1996). Therefore I propose that:

**Proposition 3:** Over time, call centre employees will start to use the foreign accent in non-work context. This will change the perception of these employees among their social network. Changes in perception of employees will alter relationships between the employees and their friends and family. Changes in relationships will lead to loss of wellbeing.

**METHODOLOGY FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

Given the lack of existing research on this topic, exploratory research is an appropriate start in building a body of knowledge on accent adoption in off-shore call centres. Exploratory research can include interview of stakeholders, ethnographic observation of the call centre workplace and training contexts as well as document analysis of training material and transcripts of service encounters. In addition, existing quantitative ELV scales such as the subjective vitality questionnaire (Bourhis, Giles & Rosenthal 1981), individuals’ network of linguistic contact questionnaire (Allard & Landry 1994) and the cultural distinctiveness scale (Ehala & Niglas 2007) can be adapted for the off-shore call centre context. Surveys can be administered to prospective and current employees of call centres and when ever possible to employees engaging in voluntary turnover.

**CONCLUSION**

With little prior research dedicated to accent adoption in the off-shore call centre context, the aim of this paper has been to open a research agenda on the antecedents of foreign accent adoption and the psycho-social ramifications of accent adoption. The prevalence of appropriate linguistic landscaping will determine the success of accent adoption. In the absence of such landscaping, additional cultural and voice and accent training can result in successful accent adoption. While employees may adopt the accent successfully, they may still suffer psychological dissociation from their native accent. This may lead to lack of wellbeing. Training and initial orientation sessions may alert employees to such feelings and call centre management can counter this effect by putting in place appropriate organisational support systems such as counselling services. Accent adoption can also lead
to alienation from existing social network leading to further lack of wellbeing. However, formation of
a new social network with other call centre employees with similar accent adoption can counter this
effect. Call centre management can create a workplace environment where employees have the time
and resources to form such networks.

Incorporation of the theoretical construct of ELV into the international business and
organisational communication literature will assist in understanding how individuals’ pride in their
language and culture affects multi-lingual business communication in off-shore and multi-national
organisations. Previous research on use of languages in a business setting has alluded to the negative
consequences (e.g., lack of trust, group divide, etc.) of linguistic differences in organisations (Feely &
Harzing 2002). More importantly, a rise in “linguistic nationalism” – whereby clients and employees
of multinational corporations expect their languages to be recognised in corporate communication –
has been noted in recent research (Feely & Harzing, 2003: 43). In addition, the growing trend of
Australian organisations outsourcing customer service operations to call centres overseas (and those
from other English speaking countries) implies that employees in these off-shore locations will
continue to learn and adopt foreign accents. Therefore, the use of ELV in understanding the adoption
of foreign linguistic norms is both vital and timely.
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