

The Use of Politeness Strategies and Respect Markers by Call Center Agents



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ABSTRACT: Politeness is a basic verbal strategy that is commonly used by call center agents in handling customers, specifically when they encounter frustrated and irate customers, when they can hardly fix the problems of customers, or when they make mistakes in grammar and pronunciation. The aim of this study was to examine politeness strategies and respect markers employed by call center agents when transacting business with American customers. Data were gathered from interviews with 30 call center agents, and interview data were analyzed using words, phrases, clauses, and sentences as the unit of analysis. The responses of call center agents were coded/categorized and analyzed. Results of the study have revealed that call center agents utilized polite speech-act formulae, polite requests, apologies, and respect markers in the course of their transaction with the customers. Furthermore, analysis has shown that the use or choice of politeness strategies and respect markers has an impact on the interactions of call center agents with their customers and affects the customers' impression about the company and the quality of service.

KEYWORDS: Politeness strategies, respect markers, call center interactions, call center, call center agents

1. INTRODUCTION

In the business world, which is highly dependent upon building positive relationships between parties, politeness is used as an integral part of communication strategies. Common linguistic expressions of politeness are often utilized to make all the parties relaxed and comfortable with one another (Friginal, 2009).

Linguistics defines politeness as the regulation of exchanges between participants and the adaptation of their linguistic registers (Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 1986, cited in Schwab & Rosier, 2013). In addition, Urbanová and Oakland (2002, cited in Švarova, 2008) define politeness as the ability of the speaker to show respect, discretion, and goodwill.

Being polite requires the protagonists to adapt their speech register to the cultural context. (Simonin, 2010, cited in Schwab & Rosier, 2013). Simonin further opined that formal situations require a higher degree of politeness, and there is a lesser expectation of being polite in less formal situations.

Polite behavior is part of the relational work inherent in all human social interaction. (Locher, 2006). An individual has to consider the appropriateness of using words to show courtesy and respect to the other party. Politeness is a central force in communication (Grice, 1975; Leech, 1983; Brown & Levinson, 1978, cited in Mizil et al., 2013).

In a call center, a CSR is expected to constantly make lexical choices about when and how to use politeness or respect markers. Kaplan (1999, cited in Mizil et al., 2013) observes that "people desire to be paid respect" and identifies honorifics and other politeness markers, like please, thank you.

This study was based on the concept of politeness strategies and respect markers grouped into four sub-categories by Friginal (2009), and these categories are used as framework in categorizing the politeness strategies used by call center agents in the transactions with their American customers. These are polite speech –act formulae, polite requests, apologies, and respect markers.

In this study, the researcher aimed to investigate the use of politeness strategies and respect markers by call center agents in transaction with their customers. Furthermore, the researcher explored how the call center agents handled the transaction with the customer from the opening until the end of the conversation. In addition, the researcher tried to find out how the call center agents fix the problems of irate customers.

2. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This descriptive research involved gathering of data that described events and data collection. It employed the qualitative research method which was used in the investigation, through individual/face-to-face-interview, of the politeness strategies and respect markers from call center agents who handle customers in inbound calls. According to Taylor and Bain

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(1999; Mulholland, 2004, cited in Lockwood et al., 2008), these inbound centers are usually considered to be places of high stress and pressure for the customer service representative (CSR).

B. Participants of the Study

The participants directly involved in this study were the 30 call center agents of different call centers in Bacolod city. Call center agents as participants for interview were selected using a specific sampling scheme/technique, the non-probability, in which samples do not represent the population (Trochim, 2006). Furthermore, the call center agents came from different municipalities of Bacolod; and they were at least multilinguals, for they were able to speak and understand Tagalog, Hiligaynon, and English.

C. Research Instrument

The instrument in this research study was the researcher-made interview schedule which included open-ended questions. The format of the interviews was based on a set of prepared questions covering the areas under investigation. Interview questions for call center agents were intended to gather data on politeness strategies and respect markers.

D. Coding and Analysis of Data

The data that were gathered from interviews with 30 call center agents were transcribed verbatim. The responses of call center agents were coded using the categories suggested by Friginal (2009); these codes are polite speech-act formulae (PF), polite requests (PR), apologies (Ap), and respect markers (RM). The categorized data were then subjected to further analysis.

F. Validity and Reliability of the Coding Process

Qualitative validity means that the researcher checks for the accuracy of the findings by employing certain procedures (Creswell, 2009). Reliability, on the other hand, is concerned with the consistency, stability and repeatability of the informant's accounts as well as the investigators' ability to collect and record information accurately (Selltiz et. al., 1976; cited in Brink; 1993). Recorded interviews were submitted to an outside validator to check the clarity of voice and the consistency and accuracy of the participants' responses; and then the transcribed data were submitted to inter-raters/intercoders to code the transcripts. Very few differences were noted in the results of the analysis done by the inter-raters/inter-coders and those of the researcher; however, these differences were thoroughly discussed among them until an agreement was reached.

F. Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher conducted interviews with the 30 call center agents at an off-site venue because call center management disallowed interviews with their frontline employees for confidentiality purposes. The researcher used an audio/computer recorder to capture all the interviews for complete and accurate data transcription. Also, the researcher asked probing and follow-up questions to clarify the responses from participants. Each interview lasted for 45 minutes to 1 hour. The audio-taped interviews were transcribed verbatim for accuracy, and data were categorized and analyzed.

H. Ethical Considerations

Ethics was observed in accomplishing the design and purpose of the study. The call center agents were given the choice to refuse to participate if they wanted to; once they confirmed their participation, they were given a detailed explanation about the study and briefing ethical issues. After which, they were asked to sign informed consent forms that state the consent of their voluntary participation, and at the same time, assured them of the confidentiality of their responses. All data, such as the participants' information sheets, informed consent forms, audio recordings and interview transcripts, were safely kept.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Politeness, in this study, was a verbal strategy which was used by call center agents to compensate for breakdowns in communication, specifically when they faced angry, frustrated customers, when they knew nothing about the solution to the problem presented by customers, or when they made mistakes in phonological and lexical choices during the course of the interaction.

The four sub-categories proposed by Friginal (2009) were used as a framework in categorizing and in the analysis of the politeness strategies and respect markers used by call center agents in the transactions with their American customers.

Polite speech-act formulae, polite requests, apologies, and respect markers were identified from the interview extracts on the basis of the markers described in the said category.

3.1 Polite speech-act formulae

Polite speech-act formulae are used in opening scripts. According to Friginal (2009), in call centers, both agents and callers are positioned to show appreciation during the course of the transactions. It was revealed in this study that most call center agents used the following expression in their opening spiel:

Thank you for calling + account name + first name + how may/can I help you today, Sir/Ma'am?

Call center agents believed that it is the basic expression for an opening spiel, and it is already the standard greeting written in the script when attending to a customer. For other agents, these are the most common words they have to say to greet their customers and that they have to be aware of their choice of words and be polite as much as possible.

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Since the customers were Americans, call center agents used this standard formula for greeting. For those who experienced to have Australian or other foreign customers, a different opening spiel was used, as what the call center agents (CA) said:

CA4: *for Australian customers the company best suggests uhhh "welcome to" then uhhh your account or uhhh the account they're calling for, and uhhh and you will also state your name and then "how can I help you today".*

CA7: *I think most of the call center industries except for the Australian account agents because it would be "welcome" not thank you for them uhhh thank you is for the end of the call*

Other expressions used by call center agents in their opening scripts are:

*Thank you for calling and I do appreciate that you have took the time to call in today,
Hello, good day! Thank you for calling.*

No matter how the call center agents say their opening spiel there is an element of a polite formula expressed in the word/s thanks or thank you. According to Friginal (2009), many agents use *thanks/thank you* in their opening scripts to indicate that they are prepared to provide service to the callers and are appreciative of the customer's business. Agents also constantly use these markers in their turns to acknowledge a response or action from their customers.

However, besides the word/s *thanks or thank you*, agents have to see to it that other words used in their greetings must also be appropriate. All the components in the opening spiel are deemed important and must be in accordance to the accepted functional communication.

For example, in his study, Lockwood et al. ((2012) noted that the criteria for scoring of the greeting component at the opening of a call, which is an obligatory stage include, No "Hi", "Hello", "can", "speaking". For example, one the following opening statements is more preferably used than the other:

- (1) Customer services, this is Carlos, how may I help you?
- (2) Hi Customer services, Carlos speaking how can I help you?

Lockwood further emphasized that Example 2 is problematic and would not be given a score as it includes *hi* and *can* which have been identified as inappropriate. Although they both fulfill the function of opening the call effectively, a call center agent must be spontaneous in their functional communication with the customer. When the call center agents were asked why they used such polite expressions and what do these indicate, their responses revealed the following ideas:

It is a requirement/Part of script

The call center agents agreed that it is a requirement of a call center to be polite. They were given scripts on their opening and closing spiel during the training. These opening spiel (and closing spiel) is the standard expression which contains the polite word/s, such as *thanks or thank you*; the call center agents were directed to say or use such expressions when they answer the phone. The following extracts were the actual responses of agents:

CA2: *it is a requirement to be polite all the way uhm it is actually uhhh a mark down to be committed or if you utter any word or uhhh like uhhmm very impolite or unpleasing to the ears of the customers.*

CA4: *It is actually a uhhh required for us to uhhh be polite because when we are under training, we are taught to use that scripts or spiel as an opening uhhh before we proceed to the concern or query of the customers.*

It implies that the scripted/memorized or standard greeting with the polite expression *thanks/thank you* at the opening of a call is not just polite speech-act formulae; it also suggests the use of customer service strategy. And as a strategy, personalized/customized greetings were used by other companies to gain customer satisfaction.

To show respect/professionalism

Agents believed that the polite word/s *thanks* and *thank you* used in their greeting at the opening of the call indicate respect and professionalism. Since most of their American customers were also professionals, they believed it was even more appropriate for them to show politeness, as expressed in the following extracts:

CA26: *to show politeness to your customer, uhhh being polite shows respect and professionalism uhhh and on the part of our customers uhhh and for business as usual they are considered as uhhh the customer that you should be taken care of, because they are the one who "s paying you.*

Call center agents opined that by saying *thanks/thank you* at the opening of the call is one way of making the customers feel that they are valued by the company. Upon hearing the polite word *thank you*, a customer might feel that they would be well treated and respected. Good manner shows the agent's respect to the caller. Also, it can give the caller the impression that an agent is professional and pleasant. Politeness in conversation is generally perceived as a manifestation of proper social decorum, good manners, and respect. It is also used to make sure that parties acknowledge good or appropriate behavior (Beeching, 2002; Bargiela-Chiappini, 2003;cited in Friginal, 2009).

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To promote goodwill/provide better customer service

Saying *thanks* and *thank you* at the opening of a call may create an atmosphere of friendliness and a way of building good relationship with the customers. It can also be a way to make customers feel that they are welcomed. It may also be one way of providing good impression for the company. In this way, better customer service is attained. The following extracts were the actual words of call center agents:

CA9: *Uhh yeah, we use these polite words and this only means that we are ready to help our customers and uhh we also appreciate their business for calling us.*

CA17: *it's really a part of our training to be polite all the time and to find a way to uhm... you know, give them the best service that they deserve.*

CA18: *as a call center agent, I have to be very polite to the customer all the time so that I could be able to establish good and friendly atmosphere during the call.*

It indicates that the use of *thanks* and *thank you* as a greeting component may cultivate friendship with the customer, and when the atmosphere becomes friendly and welcoming, it may give the customer the reason to trust the agent and the company. Thus, it may give the customer an impression that an agent can provide better service. Friginal (2009) opined that many agents in call center transactions have developed speech mannerisms by automatically saying *thanks* or *thank you* whenever they receive a response from their callers.

Additionally, in the study of Warren (2007) on an initial corpus-driven analysis of the language of call center operators and customers, it was found out that there was a higher frequency of the word *thank* and *thank you* used by operators than customers.

3.2 Polite Requests

Polite requests were described in terms of the call center agents' use of "please" in service encounter with American customers as revealed from the extracts. It was also found out that call center agents use other polite expressions in making requests. These include the use of *kindly* and modals, such as *can*, *would*, *could*, *will*, and *may*. These modals were used by call center agents when they wanted to request the customers *to do something in their end so that agents would be able to fix their customers' issues* or to ask for permission. The following examples were given by agents to show how they used modals in polite requests:

Please check your load balance now, to ensure that you already received the minutes that you are asking for?

Ma'am, would you help me about some parts on your phone in order for us to fix the problem right away?

Ma'am/Sir, could you please repeat what you have said?

It can be observed that call center agents used the past tense form of modals *would*, and *could*, besides the polite words *kindly* and *please* with other two modals *can* and *may* in the given examples to express politeness in making requests and in asking for permission to the customers.

According to the Learning English Team of the British Council, *can* is used to ask for permission to do something, as in "*Can I ask a question, please?*" However, *could* is more formal and polite than *can*, as in "*Could I ask a question please?*" *May* is another more formal and polite way of asking for permission. For instructions and requests, *could you* and *would you* are polite ways of telling or asking someone to do something; *can* and *will* are less polite.

Could you take a message please?

Would you carry this for me please?

Could I have my bill please?

Modal verb usage in any type of conversation may also indicate politeness. The modal verbs counted were simply the standard ones commonly recognized in grammars: *can*, *could*, *will*, *would*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *shall*, and *should* (Kearns, 2000: 52; Biber et al. 1999, cited in Buckley, 2011). Modal verbs are more frequent in Friginal's (2009, cited in Buckley, 2011) call center data than in other registers, and it seems likely that the reason is that modals, along with quasi-modals and other grammatical stance markers, are used at a higher frequency in these contexts for politeness reasons, softening requests and instructions and avoiding the face-threatening nature inherent in these speech acts.

In Buckley's (2011) study of intercultural politeness in the language of the Indian BPO industry, with a special focus on modal verbs, he concluded that the Indian speakers use a lower frequency of modal verbs in their speech with Americans. A better interpretive framework for understanding these modal verb usage patterns may be the pragmatic framework of politeness and stance.

For call center agents, using polite words is important in making request to customers, for it will be a positive feedback for the agents as well as the company they represent. It is a way of maintaining good impression for the company. As professionalism is also displayed in being polite in making request to the customer, agents believed that they have ensured the callers of a seemly

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and proper treatment. Agents also claimed that good relationship is established, thus it will pave a way for customer retention and attraction.

CA13: *politeness in this company is important because we have to maintain the good impression for our company and we have to ensure that callers are being treated nicely.*

CA15: *Yes, it's very necessary for you to use polite words so that you can have a good relationship with them and uhm...uhm because at the end of the call we have survey so you have to make sure that you not get "Dissat" or dissatisfaction.*

3.3 Apologies

Apologies were described in terms of the agents' employment of such expressions like *I'm sorry, I apologize, pardon me, or excuse me.*

Call center agents admitted that they commit mistakes during their course of transaction with customers, as one agent said, *"because of the so-called human error"*; other agents admitted that they made mistakes many times and that is why they needed to apologize to the customer. They used the expressions, *I'm sorry*, and *I apologize*, and no other words or phrases they used except for one agent who stated that instead of saying *I'm sorry* or *I apologize*, he would tell a customer, *"Thank you for patiently waiting on the line"*. For the agent, it is the positive way of saying *sorry*. Examples of the call center agents' statements of apology include:

"I am sorry but could you please tell me again the number?"

"I apologize for the inconvenience"

"I am sorry Sir/Ma'am! It won't happen again."

In most instances, agents apologize to the customers for not immediately understanding the customer or the problem they presented and for not solving/fixing the problems right away. Other situations that require asking for an apology, according to agents, was when they provided wrong information/instruction, kept the customers waiting for a long time on the queue, and mispronunciation.

It can be noted that call center agents' use of apologies are gestures of politeness in order to mitigate the effects of the mistakes they made, not to worsen the situation, and to appease angry customers. Making an apology is an example of negative politeness. Politeness includes negative politeness, which refers to a speaker strategies for minimizing (or appearing to minimize) the imposition on the addressee, for example, by being indirect (Would you mind) or apologizing for the imposition (I'm terribly sorry, but) (Lakoff, 1973; Lakoff, 1977; Brown & Levinson, 1978, cited in Mizil et al., 2013); and elements of positive politeness, such as gratitude, positive and optimistic sentiment, solidarity, and inclusiveness. According to Wagner (n.d.), Brown and Levinson's Politeness Model regards apologies as "negative politeness strategies" in that they convey respect, deference, and distance rather than friendliness and involvement.

However, in the case of agents who apologized and gave re-assurance/promise of fixing problems, Ogiemann (2009) viewed the apologies as positive politeness strategies while describing their function as: "to assure the addressee that he is being noticed, respected, and that the maintenance of a conflict-free relationship is desired". In desiring to maintain a conflict-free relationship and to give assurance to disappointed and irate customers, call center agents offer empathy statements after they said "sorry" to the customer, which is another positive politeness strategy they used.

Examples of these statements are:

"I understand your concern sir/ma'am so I apologize"

I am very sorry Elizabeth, I know how you feel about it I know how annoyed are you right now and you got the right consultant anyway, don't worry I'll be fixing your request

"Sir, I'm sorry for what happened". I understand how you feel.

The use of empathy as a positive politeness strategy is supported by Clark et al. (2012) in his study which examines the nature and value of empathic communication in call center dyads. From the perspective of genre theory, Clark suggests that empathy work, as a construct, is a complex effort that can help mitigate the tensions underlying the shared purposes that engender customer calls. From this perspective, it can be inferred that empathy is an effective politeness strategy.

4.4 Respect markers

Respect markers were described in terms of the agents' utilization of courteous expressions such as *sir* and *ma'am* in addressing and accommodating their callers.

Almost all call center agents utilize two courteous expressions, *sir* and *ma'am*, when addressing and accommodating their callers. Some call center agents said, *—the call center trained us to call or address our customers using sir or ma'am only*, *"but*

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there are other American customers who would prefer to be addressed by their first names or family name". Some customers would like to be called by their first names because Americans would like to hear their first names being called rather than their last names or *sir* or *ma'am*, because, for them, it is too formal. Still, another agent opined that customers do not care how they are called or addressed as long as they can get help from the company. Call center agents added that, at times, they have first to ask permission from customers about how they wished to be addressed by saying, "Is it okay if I call you by your first name?"

This suggests that American customers do not give importance as to how they were being called or addressed by agents as long as both parties find themselves comfortable in the course of the transaction. However, to show high respect for clients, there were call center agents who asked clients of their profession and opted to address them according to their degree title such as *Doctor*, *Engineer* or *Attorney*. Other forms of honorifics used by agents are *Mr.*, *Miss*, or *Mrs.*

Call center agents showed high regard for their clients by using respect markers and other forms of honorifics. Although some agents claimed that it was a company rule to esteem highly their customers by using *ma'am* or *sir*, the agents, being Filipinos, displayed their deference or respectful nature. Filipinos, according to Friginal (2009), are polite and respectful of guests or visitors and foreign tourists. Older people and those of higher social status, rank, and education, are highly esteemed and respected. It is revealed in this study that almost all call center agents, in fact 23 of them, used and preferred to use *sir* or *ma'am* as respect markers. It is likely that Filipino agents overuse *ma'am* or *sir* because of their interlanguage background and the way service is typically conducted in the Philippines. Directing respect markers towards customers is highly expected during service encounters in this country (Friginal, 2007).

In the study of Warren (2007) on an initial corpus-driven analysis of the language of call center operators and customers, it was also found out that the Filipino operators make use of the honorific *SIR* many times to signal deference to the customer, such as *yes sir*, *I see sir*, *I understand sir*, *ok sir*, *that's right sir*, and *you're welcome sir*.

The agents' use of politeness was also shown to their angry customers. They said they have no choice but to be polite or else they will receive a mark down on their score. They were representing the company and that they aimed to have a *kudos* call. One agent said, "we are not allowed to become irate to an irate customers and we need to be polite all the way until the end of the call". However, as human as they are, they expressed that they felt tired of talking with irate customers almost every day. Just the same, they had to maintain their composure.

Call center agents also believed that by showing politeness to angry customers they have shown professionalism and they can prevent them in becoming angrier. And since it is a part of their job, they felt that they need to keep control of the call; and no matter what happens, they need to be patient with these customers and make the customers feel that they are still willing to help.

It is also part of agents' politeness in their manner of ending a conversation. They all said that during their training they should not be the ones to hang up the phone first but the callers. If they failed to follow this rule, it would mean disrespect to the client and they will receive mark down in the scorecard. If ever the customer would not be able to hang up the phone, the agents said they had to wait for two or more minutes before hanging up the call. The conversation with the customers ended with the polite spiel such as "Thank you for calling, have a nice day!", "Thank you again for calling, we value and appreciate your business, have a great day", "all the best".

4. CONCLUSION

The results of the study have revealed that call center agents utilized polite speech-act formulae, polite requests, apologies, and respect markers in the course of their transaction with the customers. Polite speech-act formulae are used in opening scripts, and it was the standard expression used in their opening spiel. Call center agents use of polite expressions indicates, respect/professionalism, goodwill/better customer service, and a requirement or part of the script that, without any choice, they need to follow. Polite requests were used by call center agents as a way of maintaining good impression for the company, for professionalism, and to establish good relationship with the customers. Apologies were used by agents for not immediately understanding the customer or the problem they presented and for not solving/fixing the problems right away, when they provided wrong information/instruction, kept the customers waiting for a long time on the queue, and mispronunciation. Apologies were also used by call center agents in order to mitigate the effects of the mistakes they made, not to worsen the situation, and to appease angry customers. Respect markers were utilized by almost all agents when addressing and accommodating their callers.

Furthermore, analysis has shown that the use of politeness strategies and respect markers has an impact in the interactions of call center agents with their customers and affect the customers' impression about the company and the quality of service. Therefore, it is recommended that aspiring call center agents be taught of excellent English and intercultural communication skills by including in the training program the linguistic and interactive or sociolinguistic competency features such as *phrasal verbs*, *modals used in polite requests*, *politeness conventions and strategies* and *Interpersonal/Functional exchanges*; and *strategic competency features*. These linguistic features may be given emphasis to fully equip call center agents with excellent oral and

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intercultural communication skills so that their experience of breakdown in communication, if not totally eliminated, may be minimized.

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