

**Monika Szafrńska**

**Kulturowe uwarunkowania aktów mowy w call center**

**Kulturbedingtheit der Sprechakte im Callcenter**

**Abstract**

The aim of the following thesis is analysis and description of phone conversations in the institutional context of call centre. The main focus of the analysis is the difference between linguistic behaviours of customers from different cultural backgrounds. Three countries have been selected for the needs of the research; Germany, Great Britain and United States of America. Comparative analysis have been applied to selected discussions with customers. The basic concept behind the selection of comparative analysis method was the cultural motivation of the speech acts and what follows, different communication strategies applied by call centre customers from various (distinctive) countries.

The analysed texts compromise 59 transcripts of authentic conversations recorded in one of Gdansk's call centres. All of the conversations are about obtaining rights to use copyright materials. GAT2 system has been used to transcribe the conversations followed by three-stage analysis. A collection of speech acts common for the text corpus has been created during the first stage of the analysis. The data has been classified according to Zaefferer and Frenz's (1979) model. The analysis revealed that some of the acts of speech excerpted in the context of call centre would be classified differently should they appear in different or more general context. The group of acts directed to the recipient (Searl's directive acts of speech) has been significantly more extensive.

The second stage of analysis has been focused on the global organization of conversation in call centre. The method of the analysis has been informed by conversational analysis research, German academic exploration of conversation in the context of an institution as well as generally understood communication theory. The core body of the thesis consists of the analysis of the middle or central part of a conversation, specifically the section where customers present their questions. This is the section of a conversation that according to many authors is susceptible to many disruptions. The process of explaining one's agenda is not a singular speech act. On the contrary, it is a hierarchical sequence of dominant and secondary acts. The directive speech act is dominant intention, it determines the nature of conversation.

The analysis also covered the surrounding of directive speech acts as every chosen communication strategy is the result of many contextual elements. This assumption justified classifying three major types of conversations; advisory, second contact service and complaints.

The final stage of the analysis has been informed by the intercultural pragmatics as well as Hofstede and Lewis' cultural communication research. The request strategy types of call centre customers have been analysed and classified. The analysis takes into account the scales of straightforwardness of speech acts such as requests and complaints. It also considers strategies of expressing courtesy and intensification of speech impact. Directive speech acts are the key to this analysis, however, except from addressing requests, the call centre functions are also explanatory, co-operative and communication-role assigning.

The research findings verify initial assumption of the thesis. The verbal communication behaviour of call centre customers is clearly shaped by their cultural background. The differences in communication strategies chosen by certain nationalities are defined by their body of cultural knowledge and reflect cultural standards and behaviour patterns. The differences exist on three distinctive levels; structural, stylistic-linguistic and the pragmatic-communicative. The cultural differences between verbal behaviour of call centre customers encompass the length and structure of statements, the different speech act selection as well as the complexity of acts that are consequence of the conversation.

The call centre has specific strategies for requesting and expressing complaints that are independent from the type of conversation or the nationality of a customer. Majority of the attempts to convince a consultant to address customer's demands is constructed as a stating the deficits, very often without clearly expressing the recipient of the speech act. However the context of call centre implies that the person responsible for dealing with the deficit is a representative of the company. The group of complain conversations had significantly higher level of straightforward and directive speech acts that have been used as calls to take action. In order to compare directive speech acts and complaints, Blum-Kulka and Olshtain's (1984) scale has been applied to the directive acts and House and Kasper's (1981) scale to complaints. It is important to notice that the speech acts applied as communication strategies were varied in between the analysed groups. The major difference referred to various techniques of intensifying and mitigating the intention of speech act which is directly linked to cultural background of the speaker.

It has been observed that among the American customers there is strong tendency to use directive speech acts without clear identification of the addressee. The strategy is regarded

as courteous by American customers and reflects the nature of individualistic cultures (or linear active cultures according to Lewis' model). The American customers express their requests directly and avoid giving additional information that would contextualise the problem. The specific structure positions the customer above the call centre consultant. In case of difficulties the American customers use stronger directive speech acts which is common strategy characteristic for this cultural group. The American nationals hold strong belief that any problem can be solved. They are also very straightforward when comes to expressing requests and do not hold back from clearly expressing emotions and judgements. Their focus on action and immediate consequences expresses through frequent use of instruction requests and acts of intention.

The analysed German customers also displayed their culturally conditioned trait which is focus on long term solutions. This has been expressed through requests for complex explanations dictated by the desire to deeply understand complex procedures. Such approach stands in comparison to Americans' requests for instructions solving only the immediate current problem. German speakers expect detailed and extensive information therefore they also put a lot of effort into expressing their intentions logically, drawing the context and background of the problem. Despite very strong focus on the practical content of the conversation, German customers also respect the act of creating certain personal relationship with the speaker. The relationship always stays very formal. When a call centre consultant, accustomed to British and American expectations, does not introduce his second name it is always noticed by German customer as they do not use more personal or direct forms of address.

The analysis of British customers' communicative behaviour revealed certain elements common for both Germans and Americans. By using addressative forms, the British customers create symmetrical relations with their speaker. British phrases differ from American ones as they apply a wide variety of soft forms of speech acts which makes them sound very polite. The deeper analysis however revealed that the politeness is very sophisticated and has a 'hybrid' nature. The speech politeness is achieved through 'softening' the previously applied directive, quite often also ironic. In order to correctly interpret British customers' intentions it is vital to understand the background and wider context of the discussed issue. Against some previous research, it has to be claimed that British customers tend to use direct negations (directives), that force the call centre consultant to look for alternative solutions. Among the gathered data, only British customers expressed threats. This could signify that in case of difficulties, when their cultural strategy of communication (described by Lewis as "don't rock the boat") is under

a threat, British customers are prone to very strong verbal reactions. Those reactions are often almost immediately 'softened' by courteous expressions. There is a lot of inconsistencies within British communication strategies which supports the findings of Hofstede, who discovered that British nationals have very low level of avoiding uncertainties. In comparison to Americans, the British customers do not express their emotions openly and tend to mask it with illusion of courtesy.

The strategy of initial demand, that omits the element of defining the addressee, serves to negotiate the position of both speakers. By using a query with a preparatory condition without relating to addressee ('*can I*') the customer positions himself as subordinate (Brits and Germans). On the contrary, by directly communicating one's requests and plans the asymmetry of communication situation is highlighted and customer's dominating position is established (Americans). The strategies of expressing expectations and requests within the discussed context are very diverse. Among all of the above discussed groups of customers there is a habit of beginning the conversation on very low level of directness, that can be adjusted depending on the current outcome of the situation. Moreover, the directive speech acts are modified on linguistic, pragmatic and communicative levels that reflect cultural norms representative of different nationalities.