Current trends and the way forward on call center research in a post-covid world: An introduction

Johanna Tovar

Abstract
Applying sociolinguistic perspectives, this issue explores the most recent developments in call center research and the impact call center work has on agents. Significant issues are addressed in call center interactions, including web chat, agent stigmatization, agent resistance, agent training and the impact of Covid-19. The essays provide a forum where developments are critically reviewed and future areas of research explored, including how call center work can be improved. The first article by Nielsen addresses the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic in India and working from home through the notions of chronotopes. The second article in the issue by Lockwood develops a framework for the assessment of written web chats in offshore call centers. The third essay by Friginal examines how the voice assessment of Filipino agents can be improved through caller clarification sequences. Tovar’s paper, the fourth paper in this collection, focuses on the strain that working in a call center creates for agents and how they resolve this. The fifth paper by Orthaber examines resistance and passive compliance in call center interactions in a Slovenian call center using turn-by-turn micro-analysis of service conversations with a focus on silences. Despite the different angles, the papers share themes of resistance (creative compliance) and the development of a new register of call center speak, while also highlighting agency among call center workers.

Affiliation
WU Vienna (Vienna University of Economics and Business), Austria
email: johanna.tovar@wu.ac.at
1 Introduction

This issue examines from diverse sociolinguistic perspectives the most recent developments in call center research and the impact call center work has on agents. Over the last ten years, technological innovations in the service sector include developments such as the rise of chat, increasing automation and multiple messaging options (Lockwood, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic has further created another set of challenges for the industry, primarily how it adapts a physical workplace characterized by constant surveillance (Lanshear, Cook, Mason, Coates, and Button, 2001) and large open floor plans, so called phone factories, to virtual offices and working from home. While technological advances in automation and chat had been assumed to lead to the end of call centers (Lockwood, 2017), resulting in an overall drop of academic research on call centers, this issue argues that call centers and their dominance are far from over. In fact, I suggest they are long from dead and go back to looking at them here with a view to future directions as well. Specifically, the essays in this volume assess and examine how the tasks of call center labor affect agents on and off work in onshore and offshore destinations, in terms of their intercultural communication and multicultural politeness conventions, their stigmatization and their compliance or resistance to standardization measures commonly used in the industry.

Interactions with call centers, through voice or chat, are increasingly common for customer service related matters (Lockwood, 2017), and most readers of this special issue are familiar with them. They continue to be an important medium of communication around the globe, making them of particular interest. Yet despite the efficacy of call centers and their crucial reliance on language, there has not been much sociolinguistic research on them since the turn of the millennium (Woydack, 2016, 2019). The global Covid-19 pandemic and the measures taken by countries to combat it, such as social distancing, lockdowns and curfews, are likely to have led to even more interactions taking place online and on the phone instead of in person. Most probably, these measures have further increased the ubiquity of call centers in our lives. However, while agents spend a lot of time on the phone or on chat, the conversations are not likely not to cover much more than an agent’s name and the details of scripted call guides devised to make interactions efficient and ensure customers’ needs are addressed. For instance, although a customer may notice that agent’s accents differ from their own,
conversations seldom address where an agent or even firm is located, their time zone, their experience of working the phones, or whether they are working from home during the pandemic.

Our experience of call centers as customers and interlocutors as described here, in many ways mirrors the current state of call center research in sociolinguistics. Although call centers, as a new, language-intense occupation were the focus of sociolinguistic research at the turn of the millennium, there has not been much research since then. Many things are still unknown about both agents and call centers. Considering the many social and technological challenges the industry and its staff have faced since the turn of the millennium, including the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the rise of chat, automation and chatbots, many issues remain to be investigated.

This issue provides a collection of five essays addressing this gap. All essays share an analytical focus on the agent. The themes of this collection overlap among the different papers and they support the notion that call centers worldwide and across sectors, share particularities and related themes, which make them unique vis-à-vis other service sector jobs. The first theme is the reoccurring attention to various notions of time. From their beginning, call centers have been known for their emphasis on diverse forms of time measurement, such as call handling time and efficiency practices meant to optimize time. This time-quantity measurement aspect of call centers is not the only notion of time mentioned in the essays. Agents discuss, for instance, juggling time zones and evoke Bakthinian chronotopes (depiction of place, time and personhood) in relation to the workday (see Nielsen, this volume). A second theme is intercultural communication. Ever since call centers have been offshored to other locations, including foreign countries, successful and unsuccessful intercultural communication have been a focus of research, with agents, customers and companies singling out accents and communicative competence as reasons for dissatisfaction with (offshored) call center agents (cf. Friginal, this issue). In this issue, intercultural communication is not only understood to be related to agents speaking to interlocutors in other countries, but also applies to speaking to individuals from different social classes, occupations and work cultures. Related to this is the assessment of communication. Building on the previous theme of intercultural communication, the third theme is that of assessing and improving communication on the phone through agent training to overcome perceived miscommunication. Since it is difficult to retrain agent’s interlocutors, agents themselves have been at the receiving end of attempts to fix or prevent communication breakdowns by trainers, managers and consultants (cf. Friginal, Lockwood, and Nielsen, this issue). The fourth theme is the notion of professionalism and what it takes to sound like a professional. In the
collection of essays for this issue, researchers find that the ideal of ‘sounding professional’ or ‘being professional’ on the phone is evoked by agents, managers and trainers alike. Professional, in this case, appears to refer to saying the right thing at the right time, managing the pragmatics of conversations correctly. It also evokes the notion of ‘passing’ in a performance, meaning agents are interculturally fluent in the various discourses and pragmatics of the conversational culture they are using on the phone. Ideally an agent strives to insure that it is not apparent to their interlocutor on the phone that they are located in another country or not a first language speaker of the call recipient’s first language. Learning to ‘speak as a professional’ by working in a call center recognizes verbal skills as symbolic capital in the Bourdieuan sense and extends this to a notion of professional capital (see Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2011; and cf. Nielsen, Friginal, Lockwood, Tovar, this issue). Yet, with all of the prescriptions from scripts to call guides, attempts to retrain agent’s verbal skills and the blaming culture of call centers that faults employees if a conversation breaks down (Frical, this issue), agents may not always want to comply. In fact, the final theme is that of resistance and creative compliance. Acknowledging that both resistance and creative compliance can be subtle, articles in this issue describe how agents attempt to avoid or bend the rules they face in the call center with a view to enhanced phone performances (cf. Orthaber and Tovar, this issue).

This issue makes three primary contributions. The first one is that the five essays provide an update of the most important current issues in call center research in view of major technical and societal changes since the early 2000s. The second contribution is that the authors address important strands in call center research that have developed since the turn of millennium. These are significant issues in call center interactions and include web chat, agent stigmatization, agent resistance, agent training and the impact of Covid-19. The essays provide a forum where developments are critically reviewed and future areas of research explored. The third contribution is that this issue centers on the agent and their agency. As noticed elsewhere (e.g., Tovar, 2020; Woydack, 2019) agents tend to have been stigmatized or overlooked in previous research and have been awarded little agency. The papers in this collection draw on a wide range of methods that have been found to be effective in examining different aspects of call centers in previous sociolinguistic research, such as ethnography, interviews, conversation analysis and corpus linguistics. The research discussed in this special issue draws on a wide range of locations worldwide – from India and the Philippines, the two most important offshoring locations (BPO), to the UK, USA and Slovenia. Research presented includes onshore as well as offshore call centers, and inbound call centers receiving calls as well as outbound call centers initiating contacts with
customers. Three articles (Orthaber, Lockwood, Friginal, this issue) examine what is being said by agents on the phone or on stage as they sometimes think of it, while Nielsen and Tovar also examine what agents say about their work.

All kinds of call centers were the focus of intense study in the first decades of the early 2000s. They were relatively new then, but have since increased exponentially worldwide. Moreover, call centers’ particularities, such as the centrality of spoken language beyond face-to-face encounters even in comparison with other service sector jobs, and the practices of offshoring and outsourcing, leading frequently to linguistic and intercultural misunderstandings, have attracted considerable interest by sociolinguists. However, they have also attracted interest from the public and the media, as well as researchers across a wide range of disciplines, including sociologists, anthropologists, business scholars, organizational psychologists and linguists. In the midst of this attention, their rise has not been uncontested. In fact, the rise of call centers has inspired critical research in a number of disciplines, most notably, perhaps, linguistics. Some of the topics investigated by linguists have been scripting, (en)textualization, standardization, commodification and metadiscursive regimes (Heller, 2003, 2010; Cameron, 2000a, 2008; Hultgren and Cameron, 2010; Woydack and Rampton, 2016; Hultgren, 2017; Woydack, 2019; Woydack and Lockwood, 2021), multilingualism and cross-cultural pragmatics (Duchêne, 2009; Márquez-Reiter, 2011; Alarcón and Heyman, 2013; Orthaber and Márquez Reiter, 2016; Hultgren, 2019), gender (Cameron, 2000b; Forey, 2013; Hultgren, 2017), accent neutralization (Cowie, 2007), language learning (Woydack and Lockwood, 2020), cultural identity (Poster, 2007; Mirchandani, 2012), conversation analysis (Baker, Emmison, and Firth, 2005) and politeness (Hultgren, 2011; Archer and Jagodziński, 2014). Some have taken applied perspectives with views to improving call center interactions (Lockwood and Forey, 2007; Friginal, 2009; Lockwood, 2012). There is a tendency toward agreement among the many researchers that call center work is low-status work with poor societal recognition, often appearing invisible, as it relies on the ephemeral process of speech (Tovar, 2020). One paper in this issue explores how agents deal with this low-status work and general stigmatization (Tovar, this issue).

There is a basic tension that runs through call center work. Call center agents face conflicting mandates to process calls quickly while providing personalized customer service. This tension needs to be managed linguistically and especially, in the case of offshore call centers, may be exacerbated by virtue of the fact that the interaction must traverse national, linguistic and cultural borders. These tensions continue to challenge call center employees. This issue explores how agents manage this intrinsic tension e.g., by working from home, using chat and/or editing while rehearsing generic scripted material.
2 Structure of this issue

The issue begins with a paper by Kristina Nielsen (‘Call center timespace and working from home: Enregistering global professionals during the Covid-19 pandemic in India’) in which she assesses the impact on agents of working from home during the Covid-19 pandemic in India. Drawing on interviews, she suggests that agents who once benefitted from being socialized with regard to the best-spoken register for work and how to talk like a professional suffered from the loss of work community engagement. In addition, with agents working from home, the separation of global call centers and domestic life that used to characterize call center work was no longer clear and employment-related activities easily penetrated home life. Nielsen examines this conflation of time and space using Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope (depiction of place, time and personhood) arguing that the essential separation of work and domestic life is no longer given and the agent’s life instead embodies a clash of home and work, leading to a range of challenges.

The second paper by Jane Lockwood (‘The design of a webchat assessment framework for contact centres in Asia’) focuses on written webchats in China, India and the Philippines operated by agents replying in English in synchronous chats. The article examines the precise nature of these webchats and how webchat, as opposed to voice, is now appraised and approved in the call centers of those countries. The webchat assessment framework Lockwood proposes is modelled on BUPLAS, a spoken and written assessment framework Lockwood originally developed for voice assessment. BUPLAS focuses on interpersonal and textual criteria to assess the efficacy of both spoken and written communication. Drawing on BUPLAS, Lockwood incorporates the findings of ten client-based case studies of diagnostic assessments of webchat which she undertook as an external consultant to call centers to develop a new BUPLAS webchat assessment framework. The latter is meant to diagnose and appraise an agent’s webchat communicative competence. It is similar to the voice BUPLAS model in that it is an assessment tool that can be used by stakeholders in call centers (e.g., managers) themselves not just trained linguist or external assessors. In a Covid-19 time, with many agents working from home, managers can benefit from a research and linguistic based framework for assessing and improving agents’ performances as well as appraising and coaching them.

Similar to Lockwood’s contribution, the third paper by Eric Friginal (‘I’m sorry, my what? Understanding caller clarification sequences in outsourced call center interactions’) explores the assessment of agents’ performances and how these can be improved, but this time the focus is on voice in Filipino call centers.
Friginal draws from a corpus of transactions using mixed methods. He addresses caller clarification sequences used in response to follow-up questions, requests, or statements by callers to call center agents. Typically arising in interactions where agents misspeak or fail to present information clearly, these sequences are considered avoidable by the call center industry and the author if information is conveyed effectively. While assessing the implications for training agents using his framework of caller clarification sequences, he also considers the wider sociolinguistic situations Filipino agents face while talking to international callers. Engagements on the phone can be characterized by impoliteness, gender biases, hostility, power imbalances and the disadvantage of speaking a variety of English that differs from the speech of a customer. These negative qualities in the phone interactions often strain agents who may find creative ways to steer conversations to avoid opportunities for prejudice and power discrimination to arise while still communicating the essential information.

The fourth paper by Johanna Tovar (‘Rethinking call centers: From stigma to productive experience’) further explores the strain on agents from working in a call center. Using long-term ethnography and interviews she examines how call center work is stigmatized and how this affects agents working in a multilingual call center in the UK. Applying Goffman’s notion of stigma, she analyzes how agents experience, manage and resist stigma in call centers and how stigmatization of call center agents could be reduced. She also addresses the benefits to employees of call centers as they improve their English and communicative competence during cross-cultural conversations.

While Tovar uses interviews to highlight agents’ resistance, Sara Orthaber’s paper (‘“Silence is not always golden”: Withholding a response in customer service interactions’) examines resistance and passive compliance in call center interactions in a Slovenian call center using turn-by-turn micro-analysis of service conversation. Interlocutors reactions to silence are tracked and the diversity of functions silence may play in interactions are considered, with a view to developing more conscious attention to the potential roles of silence in oral engagements and creating reflective awareness of the advantages and potential disadvantages of silence especially in phone interactions.

Although authors do not always explicitly mention the word resistance, all papers in this special issue reveal instances of subtle resistance or as I have termed it ‘creative compliance’ by agents. As discussed in Woydack (2019), resistance is a very broad term and does not allow for subtle nuances to be recognized. Lockwood for instance describes how agents create and share templates of responses to webchat questions. This is not officially sanctioned, but tolerated by
the management. And Tovar shows how team leaders and agents collaborate in creatively enhancing scripted material, again a process not officially sanctioned by management, but one that greatly improves phone interactions.

Ideas of Bakhtin’s chronotope and Goffman’s notion of stigma, even though specifically mentioned in only two papers, also reoccur as themes in other papers. For instance, Friginal writes about time–space compression and how this affects phone calls and has led to a new register. Lockwood describes how agents struggle to replace the casual register appropriate with their friends with a more professional register for their business calls. Agents’ experience plays into all of this, with their awareness of the stigma of working at a call center and their attempts to escape it. Drawing on concepts such as stigma and chronotopes can better explain why agents resist constraints of the work environment, what motivates them and how their experience of call center work and coaching could be improved. Overall, this is one area where more research is needed.

This issue thus highlights many facets of call centers in a variety of contexts and the agency of those who, despite being guided by scripts and practices constraining their time on the phone or in webchats, find creative solutions to the conundrums of intercultural engagements within the limitations of non-face-to-face communication and the demands of efficiency. Agents typically improve their performances over time, becoming increasingly fluent in second or third languages and communicative conventions, and prepare themselves for many additional professional opportunities in the larger societies in which they are working. The call centers themselves are increasingly sophisticated about the need for training to professionalize their staff and improve (potentially intercultural and non-first language) communications to the benefit of their clients and ultimately their agents as well.

This issue has also opened up new venues for research. Worth further investigation are chatbots and messaging which can be explored through ethnographic methods, the impact of Covid and working from home and the application of concepts such as stigma and chronotopes to improve agents coaching, work day and overall experience of the job. With the majority of research on call centers being done in English-speaking countries, it would also be interesting to research how offshoring in other countries works, e.g. in French, German, Russian, Arabic or Italian or minority languages such as Slovenian. Understanding the call center context for intercultural communication may not only improve the work environment and performances of agents but will also bear on the challenges of intercultural communication in contexts of face-to-face encounters by offering insights for hypothesis testing in such settings as they become increasingly commonplace around the globe.
About the author

Johanna Tovar is Assistant Professor at WU Vienna (Vienna University of Economics and Business), Austria. She has done ethnographic fieldwork in a variety of workplaces, including call centers in Europe and Asia, pertaining to issues such as migration, standardization, text trajectories, invisible work, resistance and compliance. She is the author of *Linguistic ethnography of a multilingual call center* (2019), and co-edited *The research companion to language and country branding* (2020).

References


(Received and accepted 2nd November 2021)