# The Exchange of Interpersonal Meaning
# in Call Centre Conversations

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## Abstract

*Recently, offshore outsourcing has become an integral part of many multinational companies. One back office role which has been outsourced to Asia is the English customer service call centre. The means of communication between the two parties, the Customer Service Representative (CSR) and customer, is only through telephonic verbal conversation. Gestures, body language and other resources usually encountered in a face-to-face service encounter are absent. The interpersonal relationship developed through the verbal exchange becomes extremely important. To understand the construction of interpersonal meanings, we employ analyses of Appraisal and Voice Quality.*

*In this study, 100 English telephone conversations (approximately 52,600 words) have been collected from the Philippines and transcribed in Hong Kong during 2005 to 2007. From these data a sample of problematic conversations between the Filipino CSR and American customers have been extracted, and analysed for interpersonal meaning; the findings are discussed in the present paper. In particular, in this paper I will focus on interpersonal meaning, and specifically Appraisal in what appears to be communication problems. The findings from this study will support the training and services offered by this developing in-dustry.[1]*

## 1. Background

The call centre industry is a significant new type of customer service work and is rapidly increasing in size of the range of sectors and number of employees within the industry (Datamonitor 1998). In the last 15 years, 3.3 million U.S. service industry jobs and $136 billion in wages have been outsourced to Asian countries such as India, China and the Philippines (O'Neill 2003). The Philippines will continue to be the dominant offshore player with a market potential of $110 Billion in 2010 (Sanez 2007). At the same time, this industry also faces many challenges. In the press we often hear of problems related to call centre operations. Devoid of gesture and eye contact, the Customer Service Representative (CSR) and customer communicate with each other only through telephonic verbal conversation. Hence, the interpersonal relationship construed through the verbal exchanges is critical to the success of the call.

Various studies have been conducted focussing on business and management research into call centres, including customer relationship management, recruitment criteria, job design

and motivation methods, division of labour and emotional labour (cf. ACTU Call Centre unions Group 2001; Arzbabacher et al. 2000; Irish 2000; Knights & McCabe 2003; Broek 2004). Very little attention has been paid to linguistic analyses of these calls (Adolph et al 2004; Cameron 2000a and 2000b; Forey & Lockwood 2007). The small number of studies discussing call centre communication do not tend to analyse the authentic call centre sound files. It is difficult to base the study on the actual sound file due to the sensitive nature of many of the calls. However, linguistic researchers should pay attention to not only what is said but also how it is voiced which is important.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In this paper, I draw on aspects of social semiotic theories to explore the interpersonal development of call centre discourse through an analysis of the semantics of both verbiage and sound. Three of the major theoretical understandings informing my study are those of Appraisal theory (Martin & White 2005), Graduation network (Hood 2006) and the semantics of voice quality (van Leeuwen 1999).

Appraisal is a resource for negotiating solidarity (Martin & White 2005). Appraisal theory allows the analyst to evaluate attitudinal meanings in texts in a systemic way. Affect, Judgement and Appreciation are three main categories of the Appraisal system for expressing and negotiating attitudes (Martin & Rose 2007: 28).
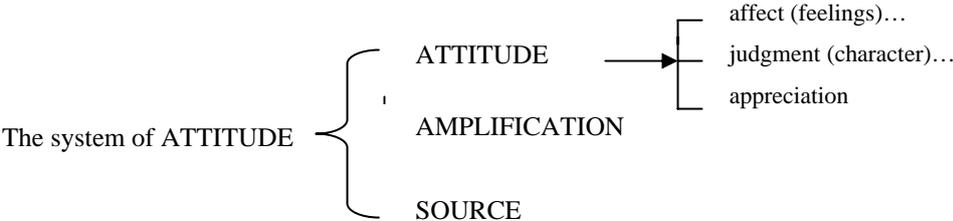


Figure 1: The system of ATTITUDE (Martin & Rose 2007: 28)

In the present study, Appraisal theory is applied to understand the different attitudes and interpersonal language employed in call centre interactions through lexico-grammatical choices. As Affect, Judgement and Appreciation are all gradable resources, we can grade them up or down according to how strongly we feel about people and things. The grading of meanings is represented in Appraisal theory as Graduation. There are two main areas of

Graduation, i.e. *Force* and *Focus* (Martin & Rose 2007). Examples of Force are *many times* and *almost a month*. The other area of Graduation, Focus, includes *probably* and *may*.

Graduation framework developed by Martin and White (2005) relates to Engagement and Hood (2004 and 2006) investigates Graduation with respect to Attitude (see Fig. 2). Hood (2006) extends the realm of Focus to apply not just to the Focus of entities (as in Martin & White 2005) but as also including the focusing of process meanings and propositional meaning. A process meaning can be focused in term of 'Fulfillment' and interpreted as positive or negative completion, e.g. *I tried to talk to you* (meaning less than Fulfillment). A proposition can be graded in Focus through resourced modulation as Fulfillment: realization, for example, *just possible that* and *very possible that.*
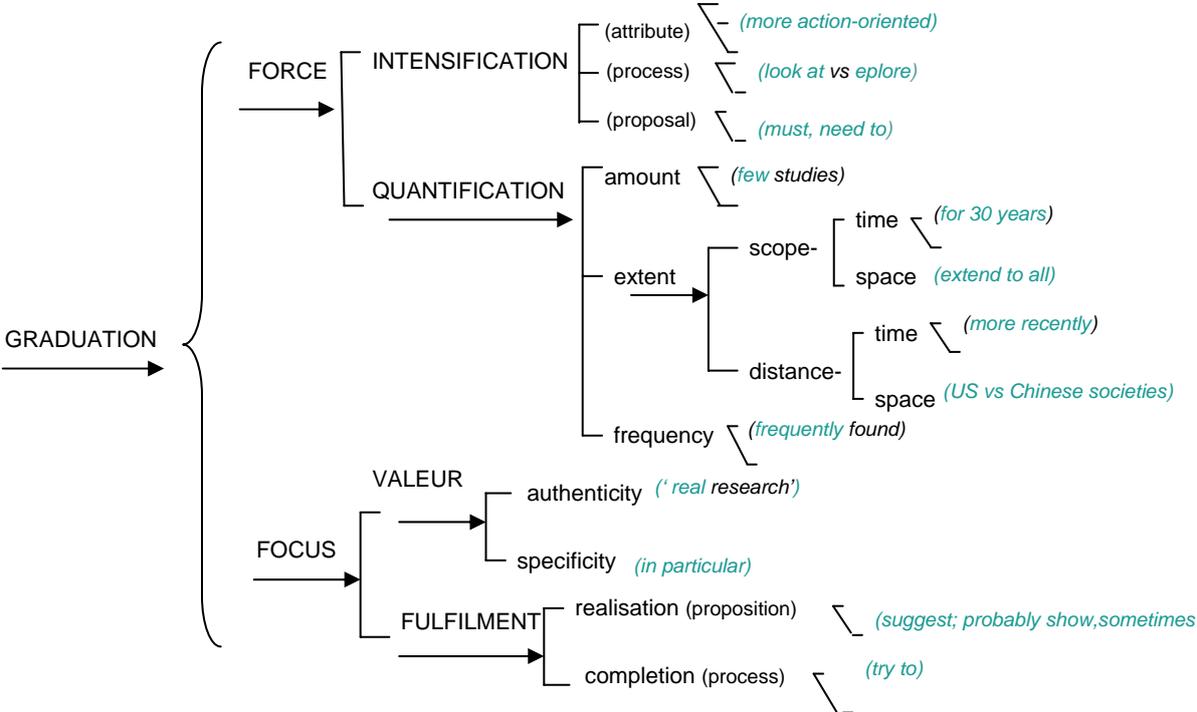


Figure 2: Network of options in Graduation showing instances of the grading of experiential meaning (Hood 2006: 39)

Most studies drawing on Appraisal focus on verbiage, i.e., the study of attitudinal meaning in the texts. It is clearly very important to study the discourse, not only for what is said, i.e. to study the verbiage, but also in terms of the sound quality, i.e., how the verbiage presented in sound. Martin and White (2005: 37) state that Force as a Graduation resource "can be realized through intensification, comparative and superlative morphology, repetition, and various graphological and phononlogical features". Call centre conversation is an

exchange of voices between customer and CSR from two distant areas through an electronic device. Only through the study of both the verbiage and sound quality are we able to generate a clearer overview of how the call centre discourse is constructed and how the interpersonal is developed. Both verbiage and voice quality are used to some extent to construe emotional and attitudinal recognition. In this regards, I combine the verbiage, emotion conveyed by words, with sounds from voice quality, emotion carried by sounds.

Following a systemic functional approach, van Leeuwen (1999) investigated – and proposed a model for – the analysis of sound quality and timbre. He considers aspects of the materiality of sound as meaning-making semantic resources. "Sound quality 'affects' us and is able to create meaning potentials" (van Leeuwen 1999: 127). Key features of voice quality identified include i) tension; ii) loudness; iii) pitch register (high/low); iv) roughness; v) breathiness; vi) vibrato and vii) nasality (see Figure 3).
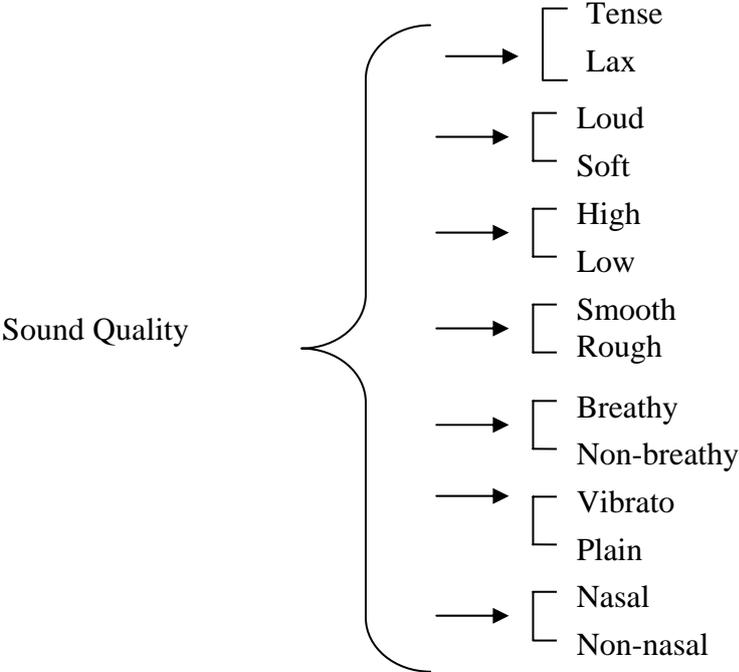


Figure 3: Systems network of voice quality (van Leeuwen 2007: 151)


## 3. Data and Method

This paper examines the attitudinal profile and voice quality in the calls. I have chosen to examine in depth the logogentic development of meaning in a small collection of calls from an insurance company in the Philippines from 100 texts in the Call Centre Communication Research at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. This present study does not undertake a quantitative approach, for example a corpus study. It will focus on examples of Graduation,

one of the categories in Appraisal analysis, and features of voice quality in call centre conversations. The current study aims to investigate how sound quality and verbiage relate to the attitudinal profile of the discourse and how these two aspects construct the prosodies leading to interpersonal meaning and communication breakdowns in call centre discourse.

## 4. Findings: Graduation Analysis

The Graduation items are frequently located in the call centre discourse conversations. By employing Hood's (2006) network of options in Graduation, the Graduation items can be classified into five classes named Intensity (Force), Quantity (Force), Enhancement (Force), Valuer (Focus) and Fulfillment (Focus) which are listed in the following table:

| Graduation category (Force/Focus) | Subcategories | Examples in the texts |
|---|---|---|
| Force | Intensity | *again, still, just, ever, anything, anybody, else, have to/had to, shouldn't, need to, must, already, etc.* |
| | Quantity | *every month, over a week ago, for five weeks ago, specific date, in the past, today, tones of, every time, right now, by now, now, recent, for many times, only, actually, not the first time, several years now, one moment, one billing cycle, something, the last time, etc.* |
| | Enhancement | *frequently, increased, immediately, etc.* |
| Focus | Valuer | *here, your anniversary date, etc.* |
| | Fulfillment | *authorized/authorization, actually, let me explain, seems, can, may, guess, probably, would, might, etc.* |

Table 1: Graduation examples in call centre texts

When I examined the Graduation resources in terms of how they function in the discourse in the transcribed texts, it is apparent that customers frequently employ Graduation as Force to express meanings of Intensity and Quantity when they describe the situation or complain about problems. Their examples of Intensity include *again, still, ever, anybody, shouldn't, must,* etc. and the instances of Quantity to create the extent, proximity in time and space are *over a week ago, in the past, tones of, every time, recent, many times*, *many years* and so on.

However, when I further studied the Graduation items of CSR, it showed another picture. CSRs frequently employ Graduation items (Focus) to minimize dimension of intensity and quantity created by the customers in order to solve the problems. The choices of Focus lexical items used were e.g. *actually, let me explain, seems, can, may, probably, would.* In addition, the CSR also employs quantity (Force) including *one moment, it is the last time, send you by now, immediately* for diminishing the Graduation level created by the customers.



**Intensify (Force)**: *again, just, still, ever, anybody, shouldn't, must*
**Quantity (Force)**: *over a week ago, in the past, tones of, every time, recent, many times, many years*

**Fulfillment (Focus)**: *actually, let me explain, seems, can, may, probably, would*
**Quantity (Focus)**: *one moment, it is the last time, send you by now, immediately*
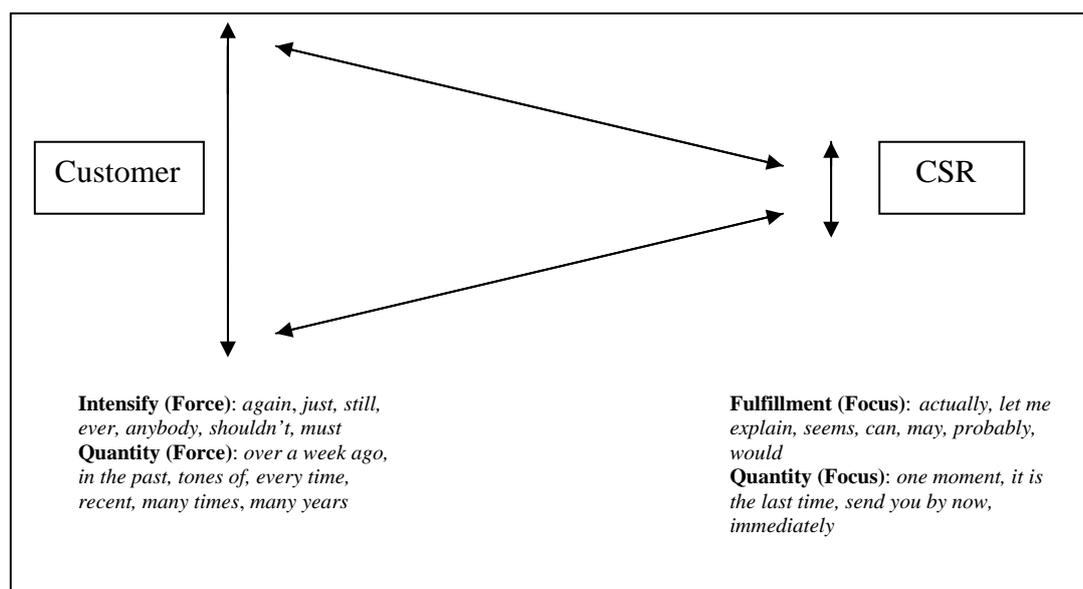
Figure 4: The use of Graduation resources Force and Focus in call centre discourse between customer and CSR

To judge from Figure. 4 customers tend to construe higher Graduation level or exaggerate the degree of their disappointments by using the Intensity and Quantity resources. The CSR, however, works another way (shown by the arrows in the figure). This phenomenon may be due to different underlining motivations and goals of the interaction.

The work of the CSR is always restricted in terms of time limits of handling each call. This affects their interactions with the customers. Deery et al. (2002) states that these interactions require a high workload. In most telephone call centres there is a constant effort to increase the number of calls taken per employee, i.e. to reduce the average handling time (AHT) and reduce both customer call time and wrap-up time (Taylor 1998; Taylor & Bain 1999). However, in opposition to these efforts in calls which have some complication, the customers often up-scale the degree of the seriousness for complaining and thus increase the

AHT. The CSR thus has to down-scale the Graduation level, to accomplish the tasks and to meet the expected target AHT for the call.

These findings, based on Hood's (2006) work in Graduation and support findings outlined by Hood and Forey (forthcoming). Thus in both my research and others, it seems that the scaling for Force and Focus in call centre interactions which provide space for the negotiation between CSR and customers needs further investigation. However, to look at the interpersonal features of the call and the emotional profile of the talk, it is useful to extend the analysis to beyond just the verbiage. In this paper I suggest that the phonological feature of voice quality plays a key role in the construction of the interpersonal. An analysis of different aspects of voice quality which can be used to identify resources employed by the different speakers, and how voice quality works in the interaction and the discourse will be explored further.

## 5. Findings: Voice Quality Features

I identified voice quality features in relation to the examples in the texts and then discussed how they function in the data. There are five examples of voice qualities features including

1) speed associated with loudness

2) length associated with tension

3) soft voice graded by repetition

4) plain voice for grading down the gratitude

5) breathiness in call centre work

Please note that all the voice qualities featured in this analysis refer to the relative shift in the conversation. In the present study, relative shift is the term used to designate when a voice changes to a particular degree when compared with the remaining conversation.

The purpose of voice quality analysis is not to make a dictionary for voice, but allows us to understand how voice quality features help to exchange interpersonal meaning within a particular context, so as to understand the interpersonal development in the call centre work. In the following tables, C stands for consumer, R refers to CSR. Voice quality features are marked in bold and Graduation items are categorized by underlining.

## 5.1 Speed associated with loudness

In the call centre discourse, speed differences are frequently noted between CSRs and customers. Loudness and softness are most crucially associated with social distance (van Leeuwen 1999). Loud voice carries furthest and claims most territory. As shown in Table 2, lines 175 and 176 provide examples of faster speed and loudness found in the data.

| Examples in the Transcription 001 | Voice Quality (Bold) | Graduation Category (Underlined) |
|---|---|---|
| 169. C1: because I **asked**, do I **need** to sign the form, do I | Nasal,Loud,Tense | + Force (Intensity) |
| **170.**     **need** to write a letter and the lady I **spoke with,** | High,Tense, Fast | + Focus (Fulfillment |
| 171.     her name is Kelt | | |
| **172. R1: Mm hm** | | |
| 173. C1: **they know**, she <u>would do</u> it for me and **that's all** | Soft, low | |
| 174. R1: That's right (attitude) what you <u>need to</u> do [is | Loud | + Force (Quantity) |
| 175. C1:                                    **[what** | | + Force (Intensity) |
| **176.     happens what happens if you guys draw money** | | |
| 177.     **out** <u>again</u>? With the, that's unacceptable  (attitude) | Faster, Loud | + Force (Intensity) |
| 178. R1: We **won't draw** <u>any</u> money out, maam, <u>now</u> that | Loud, Tense | + Force (Intensity) |
| 179.     your request is <u>already</u> placed on the system | | + Force (Quantity) |
| | | + Force (Quantity) |

Table 2: Graduation and Voice quality analysis: Faster speed and loudness

In line 174, when the CSR (R1) is describing the action which the customer (C1) needs to take, customer (C1) interrupts at line 175, by saying "what happens what happens if you guys draw money out" in faster speed and loud. In the call centre data, I observe that faster speed is often associated with loudness and this association functions to obtain the speakership. In the above example, when the customer speaks fast and loud, the CSR immediately gives up her spearkership in line 174. The customer is very keen to occupy the speakership and claim more territory. This comes across as a sense of aggression. It is also an Engagement resource in the Appraisal analysis that expands the space by closing down the other voice.

## 5.2 Length associated with tense

Word length refers to the longer pronounciation of a word than usual, for instance, "I-have-tell-my-agent-already". Tension occurs when you tense the muscles of your throat, the voice becomes higher, shaper and brighter. The sound that results from tensing is not only tense, it

also means tense and makes tense (van Leeuwen 1999). Table 3, lines 17 to 21, illustrates some examples of length and tension found in the data.

| Examples in the Transcription 002 | Voice Quality (Bold) | Graduation Category (Underlined) |
|---|---|---|
| 16. R2: The policy **has lapsed**, Elle? | Loud and high | |
| 17. C2: Yes, but (Engagement: concession) I **was-not-aware** of it. And I | Tense and increase in length | |
| 18.      **got-this-notice** <u>yesterday</u>, | Tense and increase in length | +Force (Quantity) |
| 19.      and is **there-*anyway***, what is that I have to do? I, I had this a <u>long</u> | Tense and increase in length | + Force (Intensity) |
| 20.      time and **I-was-not-aware-that** I have to pay <u>anymore</u> money on | Tense and increase in length | + Force (Intensity) |
| 21.      it? | | |

Table 3: Graduation and Voice Quality analysis: Length associated with tense

When the tension is associated with an increase in length, for example, "I-was-not-aware-that I have to pay any more money on it" in line 20, this can be coloured in the context in which this voice quality is used to create tension and to create the meaning of a defensive and self-protective attitude. As a result, this statement has graded up tension and increase in length in relation to Graduation.

### 5.3  Soft voice graded by repetition (Grade up)

In the call centre data, it is possible to identify softness features in the arguments, as shown in lines 46 and 47, in Table 4.

| Examples in the Transcription 001 | Voice Quality (Bold) | Graduation Category (Underlined) |
|---|---|---|
| 44. R1: [**but you** *already,* was informed, you were informed about the | Loud | + Counter expectancy |
| 45.      premium renewal [ <u>*last October*</u> | | + Force (Quantity) |
| 46. C1:                    [**No**, **I haven't signed *anything***, **no I** | Soft | + Force (Intensity) |
| 47.      **haven't signed *anything***, **I haven't say *anything***, except | Soft | + Force (Intensity) |
| 48.      (concession) I received the letter | | |

Table 4: Graduation and Voice quality analysis: Soft voice graded by repetition

There is a common perception that when customers complain, they only shout, speak loudly or use a high pitch. However, this is not always true. They can employ other resources to express their frustration and disagreement, for instance, employing soft sound qualities. The loud and soft voice qualities work differently. If the conversation becomes overheated, 'hot anger' is created. For instance in line 44, the CSR (R1) speaks loudly to the customer in order to create a counter expectancy, i.e. "but you already, was informed you". However, the customer (C1) chooses to employ the softness instead of loudness in her turns to continue to express her anger but in a different way which I have termed 'cold anger'. In the data, C1 is a female speaker. Sometimes, when females speak softly when they are disappointed or angry, it can be interpreted as 'cold anger' which sounds even more terrible and powerful than if they were expressing their emotion directly through loudness.

Another resource which is important for interpreting the interpersonal meaning construed in the short text above is repetition. Martin and White (2005) mention that intensification, as one resource of Force, can be realized via repetition or repeating of the same lexical item, for example, "it's hot hot hot", "we laughed and laughed and laughed", or by the assembling of lists of terms which are closely related semantically. For instance, in Table 4 line 46-47, the customer (C1) repeats, "No, I haven't signed anything, no I haven't signed anything, I haven't say anything". Obviously, levels are accumulated and longer turns have been created. This kind of repetition of same lexical words or similar meaning can be categorized into Force Intensity in call centre conversations.

In the data, I investigated when softness is combined with repetition, this combination helps to construe a particular kind of interpersonal meaning which impacts the interaction and the result is cold anger. This combination also helps to upgrade the level of inscribed attitude or implicit attitude for the speakers in relation to the Graduation resources in the Appraisal analysis.


**5.4 Plain voice for grading down the gratitude**

Plain refers to sound that are unwavering, not trembling and unmoved (van Leeuwen 1999). However, when customer uses plain voice to say *thank you* in call centre interactions, it is used to grade down the satisfaction level. In the Table 5, the customer uses plain voice to say *thank you very much* to the CSR in line 165 at the end of the interaction.

| Examples in the Transcription 005 | Voice Quality (Bold) | Graduation Category (Underlined) |
|---|---|---|
| 158: C5: This is not right, **hahaha**, he's <u>just</u> going through a divorce? And | Laugh | +Force (Intensity) |
| 158.     <u>here</u> has no money, em, <u>now</u> **who's supposed to pay this taxes?** | Fast | + Focus (Valuer) + Force (Quantity) + Force (Valuer) |
| 159.     My husband <u>here</u>? | | |
| 160: R5: **(breathy)** ok, hold on <u>just</u> a second. [10 seconds] ok maam I | Breathy | + Force (Intensity) |
| 161.     did verify that one in and since Carl is the owner Central he | | |
| **162.**     is the owner I mean **he will be the one who's going to shoulder** | Slower and plain | + Force (Intensity) |
| 163.     **the taxes**. **Carl is the owner so he** <u>should</u> **be the who's one** | Slower and plain | |
| 164.     **going** to pay for the taxes | Slower and soft | |
| [9 seconds] | | |
| **165.** C5: **thank you** <u>very much</u> | Plain | + Force (Intensity) |
| 166. R5: you are welcome, maam. | | |

Table 5: Graduation and Voice quality analysis: Plain voice for grading down the appreciation

Originally, gratitude should carry positive interpersonal meaning. However, in the above example, the meaning potential of this gratitude is superficial and less sincere. In fact, it is another way for the customers to show they are still disappointed and dissatisfied. This analysis reveals that when plain voice combines with appreciation, the level of positive inscribed attitude between speakers will be graded down. This resource encounters the Intensity of Force in the Graduation system. Through an analysis of the data of both in verbiage and voice quality, we can generate a deeper understanding of the inscribed attitude, far more than if we only examine the interpersonal meaning of the verbiage.

### 5.5 Breathiness in call centre discourse

Breathiness is a voice quality resource that can be frequently noticed in the call centre interactions. The breathiness in the following example refers to sign or air voice only.

| Examples in the Transcription 005 | Voice Quality (Bold) | Graduation Category (Underlined) |
|---|---|---|
| 95: C1: [**you will withdraw my money of the end of <u>next month</u>?** | Loud and High | +Force (Intensity) |
| 96: R1: Yup, no **money will be withdrawn. They have stopped that** <u>already</u>. | Loud and Tense | + Force (Intensity) |
| 97.      We won't get <u>any</u> further premium **anymore**. <u>What I'm trying to</u> | Loud, Tense and slower speed | + Force (Intensity) |
| 98.      <u>say is that</u> the payment that you have paid for March, <u>85 dollars 66</u> | | + Focus (Fulfilment) + Force (Quantity) |
| 99.      <u>cents</u> that has made you paid up to <u>April 10</u> [..] <u>now</u> you will be | | |
| 100.      covered] | | |
| 101. C1:    my] old policy policy | | |
| 102: R1: Yes, you <u>now</u> you will be [covered | | + Focus (Valuer) |
| 103: C1:                       [until April 10, right? | | |
| 104: R1: That's right, you will be covered even after <u>April 10 until May</u> | | + Force (Quantity) |
| 105: C1: So my expiration would be on [May 10 | | |
| 106: R1:                    [May 10 | | |
| 107: C1: Yes, and <u>no</u> **more** payment? | High, Loud, Tense | + Force (Intensity) |
| 108: R1: No more payment but if you receive bill, <u>just</u> disregard the bill | | + Force (Intensity) |
| 109: C1: But is the, 85 dollars is covered until April 10 | | |
| 110: R1: until May 10, yes maam | | |
| 111: C1: until May 10? | | |
| 112: R1: yes, it's a 30-day grace from <u>April 10 up to May</u> | | + Force (Intensity) |
| 113: C1: OK | | |
| 114: R1: OK? | Loud | |
| 115: C1: And ar and no more withdraw from my [account | Breathy Increase in length, | + Force (Intensity) |
| 116: R1: (deep breath)             [**there- will-be-no-more** | very slow, soft | |
| 117: C1: in March, in April and May, [right | | |
| 118: R1:               [that's right | | |

Table 6: Graduation and Voice quality analysis: Breathiness

The concern of this text is that the customer (C1) is very eager to know whether the company will continue to draw money from her bank account or not. She asks several times in the text through different forms of questions, e.g. in Line 95, "you will withdraw my money of the end of next month?" In line 107, "Yes, and no more payment?" Finally in line 115, she asks

for the third time, "and ar and no more withdraw from my account?", the CSR (R1) feels frustrated and languid. She takes a deep breath afterwards in line 116, and says "there will be no more payment".

Breathiness in this example acts as letting off steam and releasing pressure and stress. It is also an alternative for building up anger for the CSR. When there is an unsolved problem, pressure and intensity will build up. In a normal situation, the tension can be released through verbiage which carries attitudinal meaning like 'you are troublesome and awful or you're driving me mad'. However, due to emotional labour (c.f. Hochschild 1979 and 1983; Shuler & Sypher 2000; Tracy 2000), the CSRs are professionals who need to manage and restrict personal emotions. Thus, they choose to release the tension through breathiness which carries inscribed meaning.

## 6. Conclusions

A CSR is often required to sustain high levels of interpersonal interaction with the customer (Deery et al. 2002; Hopper 1992), but to do so only through resources of voice quality, that is without other visual modes of interaction. In this study, I investigate how voice quality and verbiage relate to the attitudinal profile of the discourse by identifying the voice quality features in the data, illustrating how they function in the attitudinal work and further interpreting their meaning potentials with reference to the Graduation and Engagement networks of Appraisal in particular contexts. The findings from the data provide evidence that the interpersonal meaning is not only made through verbiage but also voice quality. If we only consider the verbiage without paying attention to the sound, the interpersonal meaning the customer and the CSR exchanged will not be comprehensive. In this paper, I have only started to combine the theories of Appraisal analysis (Martin & White 2005), and the extension of the Graduation category outlined by Hood (2006) and the SFL approach to voice quality as introduced by van Leeuwan (1999). However, a great deal more work needs to be carried out to further provide a more robust theoretical framework for dealing with voice quality.

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**Note**
[1] This study is based on a Departmental Research project called Call Centre Communication Research (CCCR) of the Department of English at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University.
Link: http://www.engl.polyu.edu.hk/call_centre/default.html.

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