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Text trajectories in a multilingual call centre: The linguistic ethnography of a calling script

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Text trajectories in a multilingual call centre: The linguistic ethnography of a calling script

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Abstract

Call centres have been widely criticised as standardized workplaces, and the imposition of calling scripts is often characterised as dehumanizing and deskilling. But these accounts lack close analysis of how scripts are *actually* produced, taken up and used by call centre workers, and they are generally locked into dualistic analyses of control and resistance. In contrast, this paper combines long-term ethnography with trans-contextual analysis of the production, circulation and uptake of calling scripts. This reveals a good deal of collective and individual agency in processes of text-adaptation, and produces a rather more nuanced picture of work in a call centre.

1. Introduction

It is common practice in companies and institutions for employees to receive electronic or paper texts from their colleagues or superiors, and they are then expected to carry out the instructions carried in these texts, or to refer to them in their workplace tasks (Anderson 2004; Smith 2001). In many institutions, providing employees with texts is seen as unproblematic, but in call centres, this is more controversial and has been criticised by researchers for deskilling the workers, dehumanising them, and taking away their agency (e.g. Mirchandani 2004:359, 2012:86-87; Cameron 2000a:91-125; Belt et al. 2002:22; Sonntag 2009:12; Heller 2010:109; Roy 2000:271; Alarcón & Heyman 2013:18). In this paper, we interrogate this view, and suggest that the discussion of calling scripts has been limited by dualistic analyses of control and resistance, as well as by the lack of close analysis of how these scripts are produced, taken up and used by call centre workers ('agents'). The production, circulation and uptake of texts is central to approaches such as Dorothy Smith's institutional ethnography and Silverstein & Urban's 1996 theory of transposition, but these have never been applied in call centres. By adopting these approaches in this study, the paper challenges some of the most common assumptions about the call centre as a workplace, and seeks to generate a different understanding of agency and resistance, issues that are hotly debated in the call centre literature.

The first part of the paper shows how the binary of control and resistance has dominated previous call centre research, and led to static and one-dimensional understanding of scripts and their use. After that, it draws on Woydack's ethnographic research, involving four years of participant observation in a multilingual outbound call centre in London, and it describes the trajectory of a script, beginning with its initial conception in the contractual negotiation between clients and the call centre's corporate management, following its transition into the space where calls are made, and ending in the scripts appropriation and enactment by agents. At each point, the analysis attends closely both to the constraints governing the use of the script and the adaptations to it introduced at different levels of the organisation. In its conclusion, the paper draws out the significance of its methods and descriptions for our understanding of call centres as sites of work-oriented interaction between staff at different levels, and it suggests that the discussion of resistance and deskilling in call centres has been characterised by a good deal of reductive oversimplification.

2. The literature on call centres and scripts

Research on call centres has been conducted in many disciplines, including sociolinguistics, linguistic anthropology, sociology and management studies, but several shared themes have emerged.[1]

The first has been a lack of access and opportunity to conduct observational or ethnographic research:

> "[a]t the time of my research there had recently been a number of critical press reports about working conditions in British call centres, and some managers were wary of my approaches. Often they were eager to show me their centres, which they felt had been unfairly criticised, but reluctant to let me talk to their staff unchaperoned, and insistent on approving what I wrote in advance of publication (a condition I was not prepared to consider)" (Cameron 2000a:184).
>
> "Given sensitivities regarding the issues of conflict which emerged, it proved impossible both to conduct formal interviews with management or to gain access to the organisation for the purpose of observation" (Bain and Taylor 2000:8).

There are some studies involving fieldwork inside call centres, but long-term ethnographic studies of call centres are rather hard to find. Houlihan (2003) from Management Studies took on the role of Customer Service Representative and conducted undisclosed participant observation for most of her research, Brannan's fieldwork lasted 13 months (2005) and Roy's lasted four (2000). But Duchêne's (2009) fieldwork lasted 10 days, and in other publications, the duration of participant observation is unspecified (e.g. Alarcón and Heyman 2013).

The second widely shared feature is a critical view both of 'scripts' and call centres, drawing attention to their 'Taylorist' methods. These are methods similar to those originally developed by Frederick Taylor for manufacturing at the turn of the 20th century, but in call centres, the standardisation is achieved through scripts rather than the assembly belt. The scripts are seen as standardising and controlling speech, and

> "are carefully structured to *manage* the [agent's phone] transaction in the most efficient way, not only to achieve organisational targets, and also to present a branded corporate persona… [At the same time,] such scripting is designed to achieve process goals of sequencing, clarity, rapport building, and branding, and task goals that include information gathering, information giving, information accuracy, and sales". (Houlihan 2003:150)

'Scripted Taylorism' is also seen as problematic. Scripts are imposed "top-down" (Cameron 2008: 143) and are coupled to high tech monitoring which records the calls and every click that agents make on their computers, and this has been compared Foucault's panopticon (cf. Bain and Taylor 2000; Taylor and Bain 1999). It is also often reported that agents are forced to recite the script in a smiley voice (cf. e.g. Cameron 2000b:334; Tomalin 2010:182), with monitoring to ensure that they meet the prescribed standards. In this context of surveillance and top-down standardisation, Mirchandani suggests that "call centre workers (…) experience scripts as de-skilling, repetitive, and tedious" (2012:87), and Cameron characterises call centres as a "deskilling and disempowering workplace" (2000a: 124). Scripts are said to create "assembly lines in the head" (Taylor and Bain 2000; cf. Mankekar and Gupta 2014:24), and to turn workers into robots, oppressively reducing their capacity to solve problems and make decisions on their own (cf. e.g. Korczynski 2002:43; Ritzer 1998: 64).

More generally, call centres are often thought of as the epitome of the standardised workplace, and they have a bad reputation as "communication factories" (Cameron 2000a: 93), "electronic panopticons" (Bain and Taylor 2000:5) and "the new sweatshops" (Fernie and Metcalf 1998: 1). In fact the literature on call centres fits with a wider pattern in research on workplace standardization in general. In a recent review article, Timmermans and Epstein (2010) note that although 'standards' have always had a positive meaning, there is a long history in social theory dating back to Marx and Weber that sees standardisation as negative, leading to dehumanisation, homogeneity and deskilling.

[1] There is also a good deal of interdisciplinary cross-referencing.

Against this background, researchers have been tempted to seek out workers who make changes to the workplace script, celebrating this as a heroic individual resistance (cf Leidner 1993:5), and in another extensive account of the service sector, Mumby (2005) notes how frequently resistance is only ever explored in a dualistic framework of resistance and control.

The central contention in this paper is that call centre research has substantially over-simplified the relationship between workers and scripts, and this reflects the lack of long-term linguistic ethnography. Admittedly, Houlihan's ethnography describes a subversive ritual that agents call the 'banana game', in which they vie with each other to see how many times they can get the word 'banana' into a call, unspotted by the customer (2003:137). But the script remains otherwise complete, and the agents still follow it. Comparably, Cameron notes how her interview informants "reported taking liberties with their scripts and ignoring instructions to smile" (2000a:113), but there is no detail on how scripts are changed. In what follows, we show that scripts are far less static and inflexible, and that call centre workers are a lot less drilled or subservient than they have been portrayed in the research literature. We do so by attending to the ways in which scripts are adapted and annotated as they travel along the call centre's organisational structure, with staff displaying agency – the ability to "act otherwise" (Giddens 1984:14) – at key points throughout.

3. Methodology and field-site

As already noted, Dorothy Smith locates texts at the heart of the workplace, and she recommends "trac[ing] sequences of action through the institutional paths" (Smith 2001:160). As Farrell notes from the perspective of literacy studies, Smith's approach tends to treat texts as relatively static, overlooking the different ways in which they themselves may be changed and recontextualised in their trajectory across an organisation (2009:191). But this can be addressed through the perspective on 'transposition' developed in linguistic anthropology (Bauman & Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996; Blommaert 2005; Wortham 2005; Barber 2007). In research on 'transposition', texts are considered to be transportable 'projectiles' that travel across contexts, and special attention is given to 'entextualisation' and 'recontextualisation'. Entextualisation refers the process of selecting, designing and inscribing forms and meanings in a text that is intended to travel forwards into other settings, and recontextualisation refers to the ways in which these forms and meanings are construed, adapted and altered in the process of interpretation by the text's recipients. In what follows, we describe the chain of events in which a calling script is first produced/entextualised and then recontextualised, tracing its stage by stage transformation as it moves from the management upstairs into the call centre itself, relayed across several briefings to agents on the phone. In doing so, we explore the authority of the script and the orientation of its recipients (Bauman 1996), issues that are crucial to the way in which call centres are normally characterised in the research literature.

The case-study in this paper focuses on 'CallCentral' (not its real name), which is one of many outbound multilingual call centres located in London and the South East. CallCentral makes calls on behalf of external clients in any language requested in any country in the world, and usually at least 20 different languages are being used at any one time. The work ranges from customer service to marketing, and it is usually IT-related. There is an internal hierarchy, and the corporate management is informally referred to as 'upstairs', with the call centre itself being 'downstairs'. Downstairs, there are on average 60 seats and about six call centre managers. Woydack worked downstairs in the call centre for four years, conducting participant observation for three years as part of her PhD. She also interviewed over sixty staff, including downstairs call centre managers (3), team leaders (6), and current and former agents.

Scripts formed a central link between upstairs and downstairs, and they were also crucial to training. CallCentral had a very high turnover of staff, with almost twenty new agents starting every week. There were constant staff shortages, and most of the agents knew very little about IT, the focus of most of the CallCentral's business. Scripts outlined what agents had to say, and they allowed quantitative and qualitative monitoring of their work, feeding into the compilation of statistics.

From conception to use, scripts went through three main stages, each reflecting a different level of CallCentral's organisational hierarchy. The first stage would involve the client, the corporate management, and the call centre manager in the production of what we will call the 'master script' for a particular campaign. In the second stage, team leaders would adapt the master script and use it to train agents and brief them on the campaign it related to. In the final stage, agents would translate the master script into other languages and work with it on the phone. In what follows, we describe each of these stages, and to facilitate the exposition, we contextualise them in a campaign very similar to those that usually drive the production, adaptation and enactment of scripts. For effective anonymisation, this campaign has to be fictive in part, but the sales brief in Table 1 is highly typical for the work at CallCentral.

Table 1: Sales brief for the campaign described in what follows

Client Name:	'Best Internet Security (BIS)'
Target for the campaign:	4,000 engagement leads in total across the UK, France, Germany *[engagement leads = information on company and contact details]*
Size of companies to be targeted:	50-1,000 employees
Industries to be targeted:	All
Target audience:	All IT professionals
Timeframe:	1 month but with weekly delivery of engagement leads
Possible Collaterals [*items the client wants the call centre to send to the targets]*	These should be emailed to the targeted audience (all IT professionals): 1 e-book on best practices for IT security 1 report on IT compliance 1 whitepaper/ report (SBP – Safe Browsing Policy) to be basis of agent's script

We can begin with the first phase of the script's career, exploring what happens once 'BIS' has contacted the call centre about the campaign they would like to run. Woydack never actually attended any of the events that constitute this phase, so in the next section we rely on the accounts given by call-centre managers downstairs, who played a key role in this phase. We address the questions: How is the script composed? What is included, left out or amended during the meetings and for what reasons? What are the participants' orientations towards the script?

4. The first stage: The production of a master script

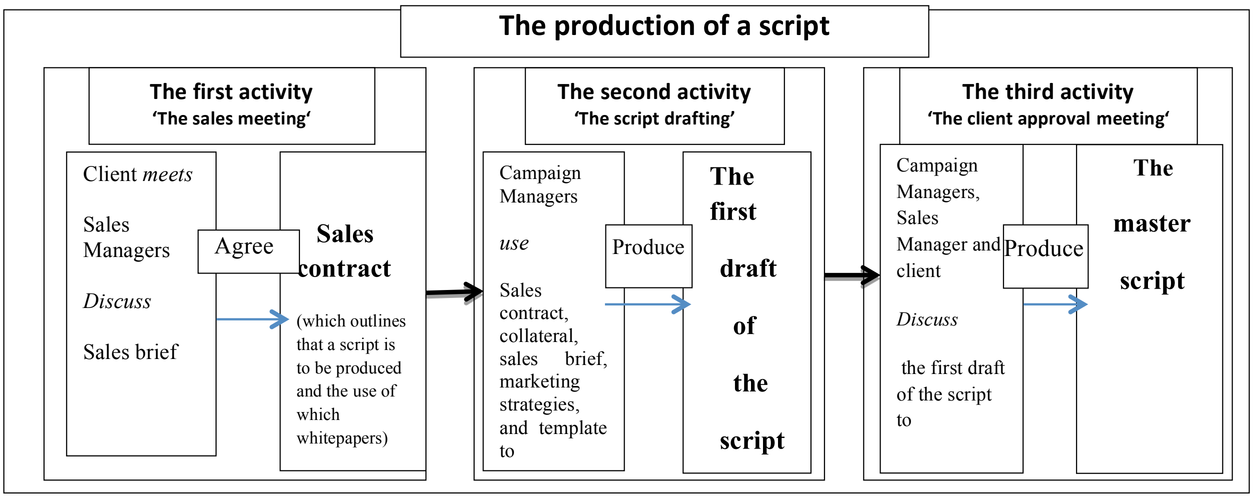
The first stage in the 'life' of a script upstairs is dominated by certain contractual expectations. For the company management, the script is a particular product that is sold to the client, and once the client has bought it, the company management believes in the client's right to transparency and accountability. The client should be able to influence future proceedings, and their demands should be placed at the centre of the campaigning process. The script serves as the primary device for achieving transparency and accountability, and three elements in the contract enable the client to influence the script's production and later use.

First, the script has to be based on 'collaterals' – items for the call centre to send to the targets – chosen by the client. In the illustrative 'BIS' campaign, the key item is a 'whitepaper' on SBP (Safe Browsing Policy), so this should feature prominently in the campaign master script. Second, the contract allows the client the final say on the master script. And third, the company management upstairs provides the client with contractual assurance that call centre agents will follow the script word for word without individual variation. All of this is written into the contract, and among the control measures that seek to safeguard this, there are two sets of statistics.

To generate these statistics, the managers downstairs in the call centre work out (a) how long each agent's call should take, based on the time it would take to read the client-approved script word for word, (b) how many leads agents can be expected to achieve per day, and (c) what the outcomes of the calls could be. Once the agents start using the script, they should log every call on the computer, and dial report statistics are then generated which measure the computer's record of their performance against their managers' predictions. Among other resources, these dial reports allow the call centre management downstairs to monitor agents' productivity. So if, for example, it has been estimated that the client's script takes 3 minutes to read but an agent has logged a call that lasted only one minute as successful, the agent can't have been following the script word for word. These dial reports aren't themselves shared directly either with the client or with management upstairs, but they represent a quick way for the management downstairs to check whether agents have followed the script. The data from these dial reports are then summarised, analysed in bar charts and sent to the client, and from time to time, this prompts the client to ask for redrafts of the script if they are not happy with the campaign's progress and results so far. So contractual agreement on agents' fidelity to the master script matters to the client and the upstairs management because it allows for the production of statistics which show how the campaign is progressing, and demonstrates that CallCentral is committed to fulfilling the client's demands even after the script has been produced and approved.

With this account of how client and upstairs management understand the organisational role of the master script in place, we can now turn to three activities involved in its initial production. The first is the sales meeting, where the client and the company's sales person agree on the sales contract and the broad contours of the script. The second, the initial drafting of the script, involves a call centre manager from downstairs writing a first version of the script, working to notes from the sales meeting. In the third, the client approval meeting, the script is finalised between the client, sales and call centre managers. This is summarised in Figure 1 and can be detailed as follows.

Figure 1: The production of a master script



***Step 1: The sales meeting**:* For the initial sales meeting, the client brings a sales brief, summarising their wishes and priorities for the campaign. Table 2 below lists and explains the main contractual issues that are addressed at this meeting, and apart from the sales brief itself, each element comes with its own price tag, feeding into the overall cost of the campaign. The client will bring a range of collaterals that might be emailed out to support the service or sale that she/he wants to promote, and he/she will then decide with the company's sales person which to focus on. At the end of the meeting, all agreements reached will be summarised in a sales contract that is signed by the two parties, and once this has happened, a call centre manager from downstairs can start drafting the script. As it is unlikely that the latter will have been present during the sales meeting, the client's sales brief, the sales contract and the agreed collateral(s) are an important reference point in the next stage.

Table 2: List of contractual terms discussed and agreed on as part of the sales meeting [2]

1) **Sales brief**: A summary of the client's needs and wishes which gives a preliminary view of the type of leads, lead criteria and the collaterals
2) **Leads:** An indicator that the agent has successfully contacted the desired person within the particular company and managed to obtain all the required information
   a) ***Type:*** The call centre distinguishes between three types of leads:
      Engagement leads: Agents do not need to obtain any information apart from contact details and company details (company size, industry, address)
      BANT leads: Agents need to ask several (profiling) questions regarding a potential project plus they need to obtain contact details and company details (company size, industry, address)
      Nurturing leads: Agents need to ask a long list of very specific detailed technical questions regarding a potential project, issues and needs, plus they need to obtain contact details and company details (company size, industry, address)

   b) ***Criteria**:* The lead criteria specify
      - which questions agents need to ask
      - which company size, industry and job titles are to be targeted.

      The Questions, company size, job titles and industry should be listed on the script

   c) ***Quantity and deadlines**:* There will be a discussion of how many leads need to be generated and by when. The call centre will predict how many leads they can generate, the staff they will need to employ and the cost of those, and it will charge the client accordingly.

3) ***Collaterals:*** This is the information e.g. a whitepaper, reports, webinar that the client wants the call centre to send to the target audience. It is the "bait", so to speak, to attract the interest of the person called.

4) ***Script:*** It will be agreed that the call centre produces a script based on the client's sales brief, collaterals and details of the sales contract.

5) ***Dial rates:*** Statistical information based on the call outcomes logged by agents after each call. It is useful information for the client to understand how the script (campaign and company) is perceived by the target audience. The numbers of how many dials agents should make per day will have to be decided during the meeting.

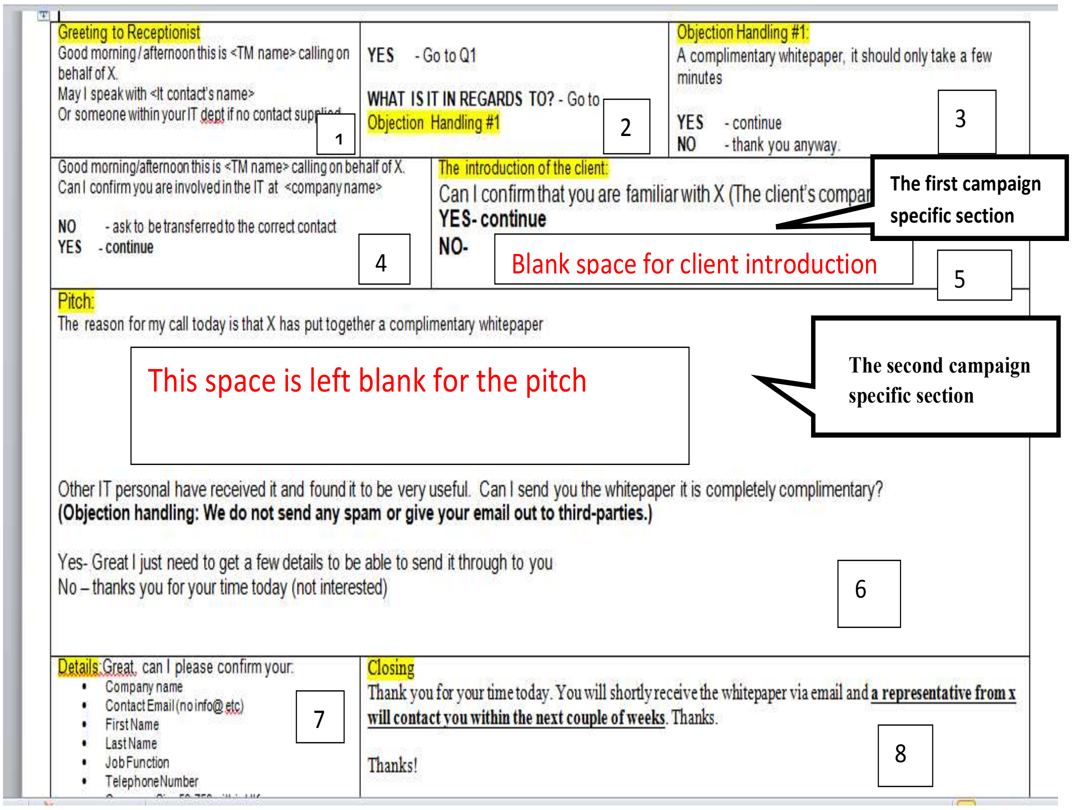
Step 2: Drafting the script: To draft the master calling script, call centre managers fill in the blank sections of a pre-set template.[3] The template is illustrated in Document 1, and its completion for the BIS campaign is shown in Document 2. In both, there are eight fields/textboxes,[4] and the first three are intended to address the receptionist or other person who first picks up the call. Textbox 1 involves a greeting, introduction and request to speak to the relevant contact person within the organisation being phoned, and boxes 2 and 3 cover the possibility that the initial recipient might query the call ('objection handling'). In Textbox 4, agents introduce themselves, and check that they are now through to the desired contact person, and in Textbox 5, the agent tells the contact person about the client on behalf of whom he/she is calling. 6 contains 'the pitch', the centrepiece of the script, and this is followed by confirmation of details (7) and the closing (8). On the template, Textboxes 5 and 6 are left blank, and these are the parts that the call centre manager composes, referring back to the material generated in the sales meeting.

[2] These categories are not institution specific but are part of the normal sales vocabulary for call centres. These contractual terms have been summarised on the basis of information that was available to Woydack in the form of briefs and interviews with the call centre managers.
[3] The script is always initially produced in English and with the English market in mind and afterwards translated into the other languages.
[4] Although there are eight textboxes only seven have headings and are considered separate sections.

Table 3: Textboxes on the script and their source

Title of each textbox of the script	Source
The introduction to the receptionist	Template
Objection Handling	Template
Introduction to the contact	Template
Introduction of the client	Sales brief, corporate website, info provided by the company.
Pitch	Template, collateral (e.g. whitepaper), sales agreement, sales brief
Details	Template, Sales brief, sales agreement contract
Closing	Template

Document 1: The template for scripts


Greeting to Receptionist
Good morning / afternoon this is <TM name> calling on behalf of X.
May I speak with <It contact's name>
Or someone within your IT dept if no contact supplied
1

YES - Go to Q1
WHAT IS IT IN REGARDS TO? - Go to Objection Handling #1
2

Objection Handling #1:
A complimentary whitepaper, it should only take a few minutes
YES - continue
NO - thank you anyway.
3

Good morning/afternoon this is <TM name> calling on behalf of X.
Can I confirm you are involved in the IT at <company name>
NO - ask to be transferred to the correct contact
YES - continue
4

The introduction of the client:
Can I confirm that you are familiar with X (The client's compan
YES- continue
NO-
Blank space for client introduction
5

The first campaign specific section

Pitch:
The reason for my call today is that X has put together a complimentary whitepaper
This space is left blank for the pitch

The second campaign specific section

Other IT personal have received it and found it to be very useful. Can I send you the whitepaper it is completely complimentary?
(Objection handling: We do not send any spam or give your email out to third-parties.)

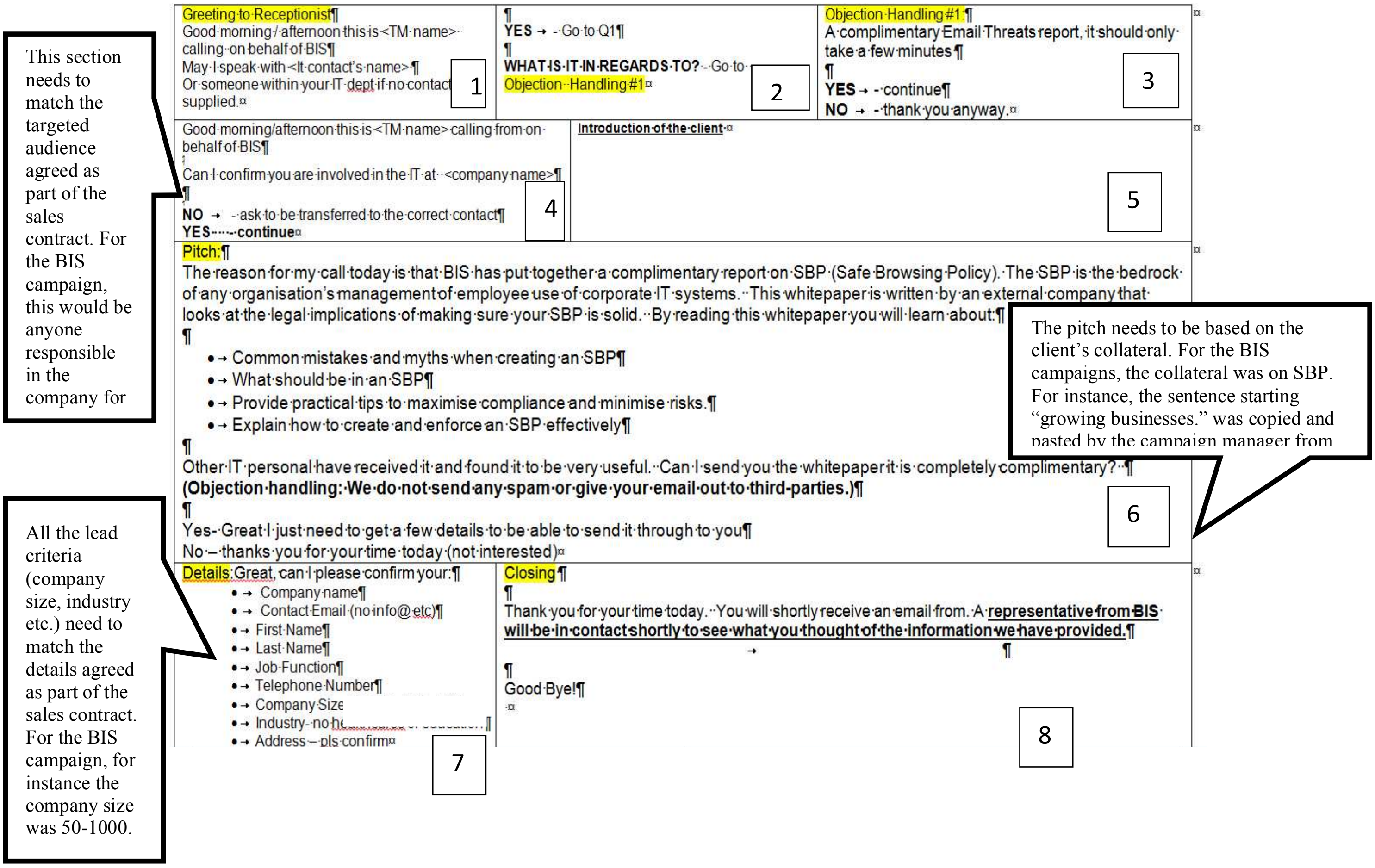
Yes- Great I just need to get a few details to be able to send it through to you
No – thanks you for your time today (not interested)
6

Details: Great, can I please confirm your:
- Company name
- Contact Email (no info@ etc)
- First Name
- Last Name
- Job Function
- Telephone Number
7

Closing
Thank you for your time today. You will shortly receive the whitepaper via email and **a representative from x will contact you within the next couple of weeks**. Thanks.

Thanks!
8

Document 2: The template completed for the BIS campaign



In doing so, call centre managers follow strategies that are broadly consistent with those advocated in textbooks on business talk. In interview, Woydack was told that that the first and most important step is to identify the main points of the contract and the collaterals. This entails explaining what the collaterals are about and highlighting their benefits to the potential recipient, and it matches the advice in e.g. *Leiskar's Basic Business Communication* (2001) and Mike Brooks' best-selling *The Ultimate Book of Phone Scripts* (2010). But call centre managers face significant challenges in the composition process. First, they normally haven't been present at the sales meeting, and haven't heard all the details. And second, the documents emerging from the sales meeting – the sales contracts, sales brief and collaterals – give no recognition to the fact that as they travel, texts may have to be reinterpreted further down the line. As a result, in interview call centre managers described these materials as too impractical to be implemented, even though they knew well that contractually, the most important thing was to produce a written script that pleased the client.

Extract 1
"When we write the script we need to think about the client as well so the client wants to see something in the script that someone on the phone might not necessarily want to hear." (*Laura, call centre manager*)

Extract 2
"Personally I think scripts are essential to the business, but that doesn't mean forcing agents to read word by word, which I consider a very bad industry practice. Each individual has their own way of delivering a message and the whole idea of a script is to set guidelines around what needs to be said and asked. That's why I like calling them 'Call Guides' instead. (…) We need to make sure all relevant questions are asked in a professional manner and for that reason, a flow is devised in the script to help them stay on track." (*Anwar, call centre manager*)

Step 3: The client approval meeting: Prior to this meeting, the client is sent the draft script produced by the call centre manager, and this leads to discussion, with the client's views on what's best normally prevailing over the call centre manager's doubts about its practicability. The outcome is the master script, which the client then expects agents to read out word for word. But call centre managers like Laura know that once the script travels further along the system, this won't be possible or necessary:

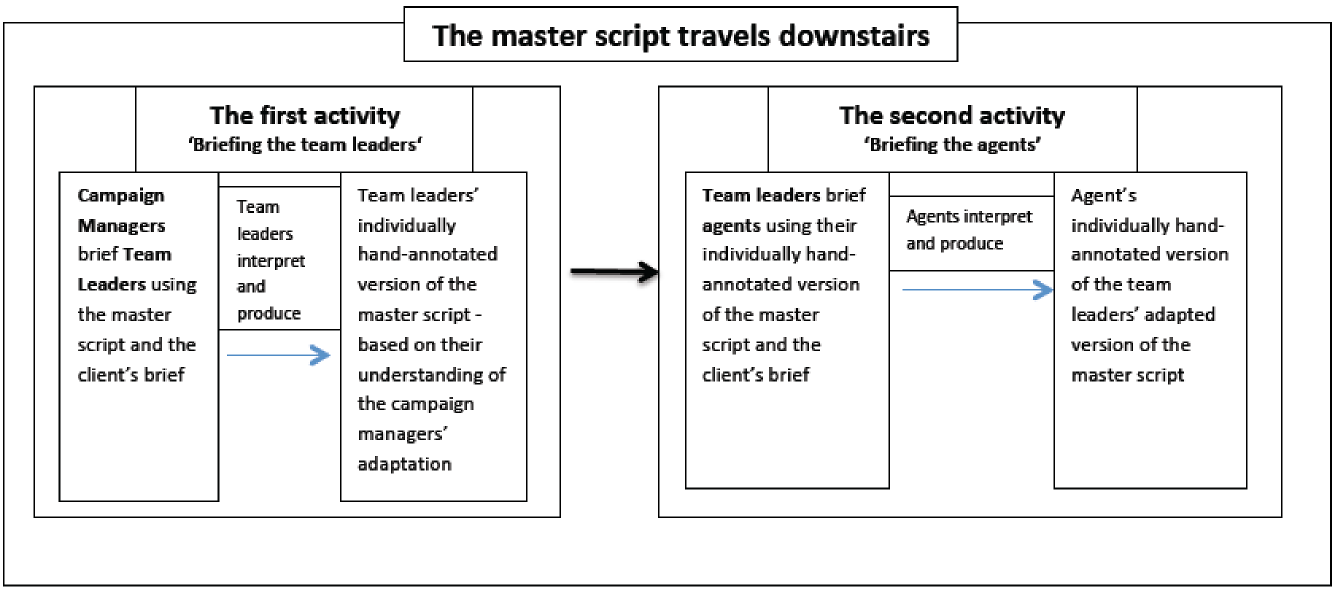
Extract 3
"You don't need to read it, you can just make it yours, you can just change and see it's… like maybe, if you are the target audience, maybe talking to you in a conversation you don't say something *((from the script))* because the conversation just flows in a different way and with me it's different so I expect them to… not to follow it completely word by word. (…) So I expect agents to *((change the script))*… because one of the most important things for me is to sound colloquial." (*Laura, call centre manager*)

So what happens when the script moves into the call centre downstairs?

5. The second stage: Adapting the master script in its transition downstairs

The master script is designed to regulate and co-ordinate 'courses of actions' in the call centre itself, but we have already seen that its initial production has been marked by different expectations among the three main parties so far, with call centre managers anticipating textual transformations not countenanced by either the client or the company management. Empirical observation supports the view of the call centre managers, and in this section we describe the process of text adaptation in terms of the activities that introduce the script to new users, the attitudes of participants, and changes to the script itself (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: The master script travels downstairs



But before doing so, it is important to elaborate a little more on monitoring and its effects.

Living with monitoring from management upstairs**:** The Operations Manager, the call centre's big boss based upstairs, expects call centre managers and the team leaders just below them in the hierarchy to ensure, first, that agents read the master script word by word and interpret it as the client intended, and second, that the regulation and co-ordination of agents' activities downstairs is in line with the set procedure. To achieve this, team leaders are supposed to monitor agents' performance to see that they meet their targets and generate the statistics. Team leaders themselves don't object to monitoring *per se*, but they do criticise it for being impersonal, inflexible and insensitive to individual variability and the particular pressures at certain times. Indeed, interventions by the Operations Manager are quite often seen as unfairly based on unrealistic expectations, but for the most part, call centre managers and team leaders manage this gap between what's possible and what's expected, confident in the knowledge that upstairs can't actually listen to agents' calling as this only happens downstairs (see Field notes 1 and 2).

Field note 1: Visits by the Operations Manager

The Operations Manager came downstairs from time to time. He often also came to talk to me as he was my direct line manager since I was responsible for the quality of the campaigns. Prior to my first one-to-one meeting with him, Jenny had warned me that whenever I dealt with him, I needed to remember that he had no idea what was going on in the call centre or what working on the phone involved. He spends all his day looking at numbers and estimating things. At the same time, it is his job to try to lower costs and bring up the call centre's revenue.] These are the notes I took of one of my meetings with him:
That day, the Operations Manager came downstairs to have a chat with me in one of the meeting rooms about targets at the end of the quarter. I was very proud of what we as a group of team leaders had achieved that quarter, as we were in all campaigns on or above target, but without having put too much pressure on agents. However, looking over the results for that day, he pointed at the performance of one of the star performers called Sonia. For that day, she had already hit her target of 15 leads a day (she had made 17 leads at that point). He then asked me the rhetorical question of how I would double her performance today, if I were the Operations Manager. To my horror, he then ordered me to go up to her (it was 4 p.m.) and tell her that she should try to hit 30 leads in the next hour; otherwise she would not get her incentive. After the meeting, I talked to Ada about what had happened. She was rather upset and angry. We agreed that I would talk about it to Jenny, as the most powerful person downstairs. Jenny told me to ignore him and just do my thing. She would talk to him to ensure that he would never bother me again. She is very happy with me and the job I do, that is all that matters. She told me that everybody just ignores him as he is incompetent and I should do the same.

Field note 2: The Operations Manager's view of monitoring

After lunch I received a message telling me to come to the panic room for a meeting. Jenny and the Operations Manager were there looking at statistics. The Operations Manager was complaining to Jenny that agents on the BIS campaign (at that moment the biggest campaign in the call centre) had neither made enough calls nor leads. He also asked me why the lead and dial results were so low given that reading the script on the phone lasts only two and a half minutes. With such a short script, he claimed agents could make many more calls than they did. He ordered me to make sure that my fellow team leaders enforced the dial rates. Given that it was the team leaders' job to report back to the management every afternoon, he got annoyed how no one upstairs had been alerted to the problems on the BIS campaign. He seemed to blame me (and my fellow team leaders) for this lack of communication and the subsequent poor results. He looked me deep in the eye and told me with a serious voice that it was essential that the team leaders and I needed to report back to our call centre managers in the future. I apologised and promised to do so (although of course everything had been reported back to the call centre managers and Jenny knew that). Jenny did not say anything, but it was clear to me that her strategy was, as she had done before, to blame the poor results on "unsackable" (difficult to replace) team leaders to ensure that none of the agents were being fired by the operations manager. The real reason for the lack of results was the poor data, which included many invalid numbers, making it impossible for agents to have a high dial or lead rate, and she did not share this with the Operations Manager as she said he would not understand it anyway.

Crucially, the pressure of unrealistic monitoring can mean that the master script has to be pared down:

Field note 3: The impact of monitoring on the master script at the end of the quarter

> So far it had not been a very stressful day and the atmosphere in the call centre was very relaxed. The team leaders thought everyone was on track when it came to targets. During lunch, the entire call centre management goes upstairs for a meeting that lasts two hours. Once they come back downstairs, Jenny calls all the substitute team leaders, team leaders who help out, to the panic room. Following the panic room meeting, the substitute team leaders walked around the call centre with a piece of paper, reprimanding specific agents, all on UK engagement campaigns, such as the BIS campaign, that they needed to make more dials as upstairs had increased the dial rates again (to 250 dials instead of 200). Jenny also shouted some names across the call centre who according to the dial sheet, were not doing well, while swearing about sales upstairs. There was some confusion downstairs among the team leaders about what the actual new targets were with everyone saying something else. Agents also panicked. They complained that the targets were impossible and if the dial rates are so high, they would have to leave out a lot of sentences from the master script and only stick to the skeleton. At one point, Ada came to the bubble room to talk to me about how we were going to handle the even more unrealistic targets and the fact that agents have started leaving out huge chunks from the script, with calls being too short now. We agree on what needs to be mentioned and what can be left out. As Ada says, no one can expect agents to talk to for long on the phone with such high targets. We then get all the agents involved to the panic room and de-brief them.

But even in more routine circumstances, the master script needs to be adapted, and we can see this happening at the initial briefings given first to the team leaders and then to the agents.

Step 4: Briefing the team leaders: The briefing of team leaders by call centre managers is generally very short as team leaders are assumed to be proficient already in the use of master scripts. At the outset of the briefing they are handed a printed copy of the typed master script together with the client's brief, which lists all the targets and any useful background information (the team leaders are themselves required to bring a pad along for any other notes they need to take, though they often write on the master script instead). The call centre managers first cover the client's brief, and after this, there is reading of the master script. Team leaders underline words or sentences in the script that they or the call centre managers consider important, and they also hand-annotate the script with key words mentioned by the call centre manager or with personal observations. So at the end of the briefing, each team leader has a copy of the master script with individual hand-annotations, and they now consider this their own, subsequently storing it in their pidgeon-holes to ensure that it doesn't get thrown away. So the script is no longer just the master script that was sold to the client. In addition, during the briefing, call centre managers generally draw attention to either one or two strategies that become relevant as the script moves closer to actual use: (a) *personalising* the script, while sticking to the basic elements ('the eight sections' in Documents 1 & 2); and (b) being *consultative* with the person on the other end of the phone if it is a high- rather than low-end campaign, involving Nurturing or BANT rather than just Engagement leads (Table 2). The consultative approach entails good listening; the scripts are long, with many questions and a great deal of information; and it is only agents who are considered 'good' at personalisation and fluent in the language of the target market that are trained in this approach. As the BIS campaign described in this paper is low-end, we will not dwell on this (though see Woydack 2013:231-34), but we can take a closer look personalisation in the next section, focusing on the briefing of the agents.

Step 5: Briefing the agents: In our illustrative 'BIS' campaign, the four team leaders Stuart, Sirri, Ada and Barbara brief the agents in the panic room, using their own annotated versions of the master script as a personal resource. At the beginning, every agent is handed a copy of the client's brief and the typed BIS master script, and it is often stressed that agents cannot modify or reproduce the printed text and typed format of the master script itself. All the scripts have price tags, calculated on the number, depth and detail of the questions they contain, and if any 'typed questions' are added to a bespoke master script that has already been agreed, the client would have to pay extra. So any adaptation suggested by the team leaders will have to be either just remembered or hand-annotated on the script or another piece of paper, remaining invisible upstairs.

Field note 4: Changes to the typed master script allowed downstairs

> Following a number of crisis meetings after an important client sent back leads, I asked Jenny [the most senior call centre manager] whether we could not simply add a number of questions to the master script to ensure that agents asked them and that the leads were indeed leads. It had emerged that agents did not ask any follow up questions as "they were not on the script". Jenny replied that we can't do that as the script came from the client and upstairs, we can't change it. Moreover, the client has not paid for those questions. Instead, she suggested me to write those additional questions on a separate hand-out, which I could print and distribute to give to agents. I did as she told me.

The briefing itself provides the agents with an overview of the client (via the client's brief), and the entire master script is then read out to them. According to Siiri and Ada, agents are reminded of its eight basic elements and they are told which points to emphasise with call-recipients: the reasons for the call, who it is that they are targeting, and the benefits of the material that they want to send out. All four team leaders said they explained its script's function to the agents in a range of ways, describing it as "as a guideline" (Ada), as having "parameters which are not set in stone" (Stuart), as being "a good bible with good and flexible rules" (Siiri), and as "a standard with some leeway around it" (Barbara). With a new script, agents are advised to make any hand-written changes before they actually started to make calls, although they are also allowed to make adjustments in the light of experience once the calling has started.

Like all team leaders, Stuart, Sirri, Ada and Barbara still work the lines themselves, and in terms of personalisation, they said that they shared their own strategies with other agents, performing solo versions of the master script during the briefings. Siiri said that she writes her own script on a blank piece of paper by hand; Ada mentioned "reshuffling the words" to make it sound really like her; and Stuart reported that he made all the changes to the script in his head. So personalisation's impact on the master script is likely to be varied, and during interview, three of these team leaders were asked to enact the longer of the two campaign specific sections of the BIS script. Tables 4, 5 and 6 compare Ada, Barbara and Siiri's performances with the script they were working to:

Table 4: Ada's enactment of the BIS master script

	'THE BIS MASTER SCRIPT' PITCH	ADA'S BIS MASTER SCRIPT PITCH	
S.1	The reason for my call today is that TAS, formerly known as BIS has put together a complimentary report on SBD (Safe Browsing Policy.)	Now the reason for my call today is that BIS has put together a complimentary report on SBD *which, as* **you** know, is Safe Browsing Policy.	**Introductory sentences of the pitch (S.0-S.2)** → Explaining the reason for the call
S.2	The SBD is the bedrock of any organisation's management of employee use of corporate IT systems.	∅	
S.3	This whitepaper is written by an external company that look at the legal implications of making sure your SBD is solid.	Now this report was written by an external company *that* looks at the legal implications of making sure your SBD is solid.	**Main body of the pitch (S.3 S.4)** → Provide information about the email
S.4	By reading this whitepaper you will learn about: • Common mistakes and myths when creating an SBD • What should be in an SBD • Provide practical tips to maximise compliance and minimise risks • Explain how to create and enforce an SBD effectively	*And* by reading this report **you** learn about so many things like*:* • common mistakes and myths when creating an SBD • *and* what should be in an SBD, provide practical tips to maximise compliance and minimise risks • explain how to create and enforce an SBD effectively.	
S.5	Other IT Personal have received it and found it to be very useful.	Now **we**'ve sent this report to IT professionals across the country; most of them have found it very useful.	**Conclusion of the pitch (S.5-S.7)** → Convince person to accept email
S.6	Can I send you the whitepaper it is completely complimentary?	Like **I** said it's complimentary information.	
S.7		**I** would like to send this piece of information to **you** as well *if* that's okay.	

Table 5: Barbara's enactment of the BIS master script

	'THE BIS MASTER SCRIPT' PITCH	BARBARA'S BIS MASTER SCRIPT PITCH
S.0		Hi.
S.1	The reason for my call today is that TAS, formerly known as BIS has put together a complimentary report on SBD (Safe Browsing Policy.)	The reason for my call today is that I was looking to send across a complimentary resource kit to **you** as a one-off email on behalf of BIS, which is now known as X.
S.2	The SBD is the bedrock of any organisation's management of employee use of corporate IT systems.	The resource kit is a report, it's a complimentary report which is on Safe Browsing Policy and, as **you** know, the Safe Browsing Policy is the bedrock of any organisation's management of employee user corporate IT systems.
S.3	This whitepaper is written by an external company that look at the legal implications of making sure your SBD is solid.	Ø
S.4	By reading this whitepaper you will learn about: • Common mistakes and myths when creating an SBD • What should be in an SBD • Provide practical tips to maximise compliance and minimise risks • Explain how to create and enforce an SBD effectively	This resource kit is looking at: • some of the common mistakes made in creating an SBD, • what should be in an SBD • practical tips to maximise compliance and minimise risks • and how to enforce and create an SBD effectively.
S.5	Other IT Personal have received it and found it to be very useful.	**We**'re sending it across to IT professionals across the country and they've found it useful;
S.6	Can I send you the whitepaper it is completely complimentary?	Would it be okay if **I** send a copy, a copy across to **yourself**?

Introductory sentences of the pitch (S.0-S.2) → Convince person to accept

Main body of the pitch (S.3-S.4) → Provide information about the email

Conclusion of the pitch (S.5-S.6) → Convince person to accept

Table 6: Siiri's enactment of the BIS master script

	'THE BIS MASTER SCRIPT PITCH'	SIIRI'S BIS MASTER SCRIPT PITCH
S.1	The reason for my call today is that TAS, formerly known as BIS, has put together a complimentary report on SBD (Safe Browsing Policy.)	The reason for my call today is that BIS have put together a complimentary report on SBD.
S.2	The SBD is the bedrock of any organisation's management of employee use of corporate IT systems.	Ø
S.3	This whitepaper is written by an external company that look at the legal implications of making sure your SBD is solid.	The report was written by an external company that looks at legal implications of making sure your SBD is solid.
S.4	By reading this whitepaper you will learn about: • Common mistakes and myths when creating an SBD • What should be in an SBD • Provide practical tips to maximise compliance and minimise risks • Explain how to create and enforce an SBD effectively	Ø
S.5	Other IT Personal have received it and found it to be very useful.	I'm sending it out to all kinds of IT decision makers
S.6		I thought maybe you would be interested as well.
S.7	Can I send you the whitepaper it is completely complimentary?	If it's okay I can send it to you.

Introductory sentences of the pitch (S.1-S.2) → Explain the reason for call

Main body of the pitch (S.3-S.4) → Provide information about the email

Conclusion of the pitch (S.5-S.7) → Convince person to accept email

Key:
Ø= omission from original text
Other font= very deviant

Drawing on Johnstone's 2003 study of "the linguistic individual in an American public opinion survey", we can suggest that personalisation of the master script happens across at least two axes: the discourse-syntactic and the interactional. As Johnstone (2003:280) suggests, these changes not only appear to make the script "easier to understand by ear", but also to enhance "the individuality of the speaker". For example, in the transcripts of Ada and Barbara in Tables 5 and 6, the subordinate and coordinate conjunctions that they themselves add are marked in italics, and the subordinate and co-ordinate clauses they introduce make the pitch sound less dense and easier to process. For personability, Table 7 shows how all three team leaders substantially increased the number of 1st and 2nd person pronouns presented in the master scripts.

Table 7: The use of personal pronouns (personability axis)

Master script	Ada	Siiri	Barbara
1x *I* (in S.6)	2x *I* (in S. 6 and S.7)	3x *I* (in S.5, S.6 and S.7)	2x *I (*in S.1*)*
2x *you* (in S.4 and S.6)	3x *you* (in S. 1, S. 4 and S.7)	2x *you* (in S.6 and S.7)	2x *you (*in S.1, S.2*)*
	1x *we* (in S.5)	-------	1x *we (*in S.5*)*
			1x t*hey (*in S.5)
			1x *yourself (*in S. 6*)*
Total: 3	**Total: 6**	**Total: 5**	**Total: 7**

So as the master script moves downstairs, it is received by senior call centre staff who are sceptical of corporate management's 'purist' stance on its use, who try to mitigate the impact of monitoring, who recognise that campaign targets and its verbatim reproduction are often at odds, and who are explicit with more junior staff about the need to personalise the script. Call centre managers and team leaders are aware of the commercial calculations that underpin the script, respect its basic structure, and recognise that, for example, the closing phrase used to complete a call (section 8 in Documents 1 and 2) is required for legal reasons. But they think of the script as a skeleton to be fleshed out/adjusted according to the situation.

What happens in its appropriation by the agents who actually make the calls?

6. The third stage: The script's appropriation and enactment by agents

The third and final stage of a script's career involves a number of additional oral and/or written changes, and here it is not only rehearsed, tested and used by countless agents, but also often translated into other languages. But before describing these practices, it is necessary once again to refer to another aspect of the production and accountability system: data logging.

Data logging: Although its form and significance varies with the types of campaign, all phone calls should lead to agents' recording information on the centre's database, and some of this is fed back to the client. If the client thinks that the data being generated is inadequate, they may either ask for a new script or cancel the whole campaign, but the quality of this feedback and the integrity of the database matters to the company as well. First, the database is used by the company's other sites and divisions worldwide, and if an agent accidentally deletes some valuable data, this may have an effect on other parts of its operation. Second, it is more cost-efficient for the company to have agents keep the database clean and up-to-date than to buy expensive new lists of contacts from elsewhere. Third, the database is one of the company's prime assets, *inter alia* featuring during the initial sales meeting. So a good deal of time is spent training new agents how to maintain the integrity of database, and calling agents understand its importance, especially if they have worked at the company for a little while.

Even so, for agents there is a tension between data logging, the master script and dial rates.

> **Extract 4**
> "On the one hand, you have the pressure to make calls and on the other to follow the script, make long calls and do data entry. So I wonder what the price-value relationship is. But I can see a discrepancy between pressure and achievement. (…) I can tell from what I hear the other agents say on the phone, that the script and quality suffer a lot under the pressure." (*Christina, current agent*)

The script is designed to complement the data logging, and if agents don't ask all its questions, the information they obtain and record in their 'lead remarks' may have less value. But updating the database is slow and can mean that agents lose time that they need to spend on the phone to meet target dial rates. But if they prioritise dial rates or time on the phone and don't update the database properly, poor data soon makes it more difficult and time consuming for agents themselves to get through to the right people to pitch their script. So they come to see accurate data logging as valuable for their own work, even though its demands need to be juggled against other considerations:

With this important aspect of agents' work drawn into view, we can return to the illustrative BIS campaign trajectory, resuming our story at the point where agents leave their briefing by team leaders, equipped with the script that they have now individually hand-annotated.

Step 6: Translating and personalising the master script before putting it to use: Most campaigns are aimed not only at the UK but also at other countries, like Germany and France. So the master script needs to be translated, and because of the costs involved in hiring a specialised language agency, CallCentral usually asks agents to do the translation themselves. This they do either individually or as a group (depending on the circumstances of the campaigns and the moment in the quarter), and occasionally, clients also ask to see translated scripts.

Field note 5: Translating scripts.

> Around twenty new callers were hired for a new campaign. The campaign was supposed to run in twenty different markets. Thus, nineteen scripts had to be translated. Every agent was given a script template [with the script's eight sections] and told to translate the English master script. Once they had done so, it would be printed for them. However, the issue was that agents did not necessarily know how to translate the master script with its complex IT vocabulary. For instance, there was a Somali agent, who had lived for some time in Norway and was supposed to translate a script into Norwegian as a native speaker. But, he told me that he could not to translate the script as he did not know the vocabulary. His solution was to use Google Translator and copy and paste the different sentences into the template. But in the past, there had been many complaints about agents who had done this. Other agents said that the translations were so poor that they had to re-translate the entire script, which also raised the issue of how agents who clearly did not speak the language could make any translations. The new German agent equally struggled. He told me, in German, that he had no idea how to translate words like "network convergence" or "network integrity". Additionally, he was also rather upset that he was even asked to do this. In his words, he was not hired for this and that they should pay a language agency for this. My response was to tell him to try his best.
> A Polish girl who knew some Russian also struggled with translating a script into Russian. She was rather afraid to translate the script telling me that she did not know the language that well nor was she sure of how to translate the cultural norms and politeness formulas.
> In the meantime, Jenny asked me why everyone was taking so long. I told her that several agents were struggling with translating the technical vocabulary. She looked at me angrily and pointed out that all the new callers are native speakers hired through expensive language agencies. So, there should not be any

problem. Twenty minutes later, the German agent still had no idea how to translate the script. I told him not to worry that I would make the translation for him.

The issues identified in this vignette, including the problems associated with cultural norms and technical terms, were often mentioned by the agents that Woydack interviewed, and indeed some agents said that having to re-translate scripts that had already been translated was a frequent occurrence.

All of the agents interviewed also thought that it was natural to personalise the script before starting to use it on the phone, and this could be done either on an extra piece of paper or by scribbling on the master script itself.

Extract 5
"I always underline words [in the script]; I think a lot of people do that." (*Michael, current agent*)

Extract 6
"The first thing I do [before calling] is I will just write my own speech." (*Rabeya, current agent*)

Extract 7
"[When I was given a new campaign script] I changed the wording of the script. So it was the same message but with different words but I did write down my own script and I had it in front of me with the original script." (*Marta, former agent*)

Extract 8
"I read the script and pick up the words, the key words, and then I put kind of my words on it. (…) I interpret the script. (…) I'll rewrite the script on a spare piece of paper." (*Miguel, current agent*)

Step 7: Experimenting in search of the perfect version, and beyond: Most of agents interviewed agreed that even though they had partly redrafted the master script in advance of its use, it wasn't yet perfect and different versions needed to be tried out in practice. According to Kadeem for example:

Extract 9
"I change it [the script] a little bit just to see what the reaction is (…). So I'll get sort of like in a way feedback. So if they understand it fully or they want me to explain again, so I'll just change a few things around. I mean that's it, feedback's very important on how to improve scripts all the time. Feedback from yourself and from another person. You have to obviously get to know the reaction to it. So obviously you have to sort of like get the right script, get the like pitch (…) so they understand it. (…) You could say a 'work in progress'." (*Kadeem, current agent*)

In fact only three of the 50+ agents that Woydack interviewed said that once they'd found the 'right script', they would repeat it in every call. But these interviewees had only recently joined the call centre and they hadn't yet been trained in the consultative approach. Although a lot of agents stressed that none of their modifications would affect the basic content of the master script, most of them said that they would continue to rework the script even after they had found the right version.

Extract 10
"the script I think is like the tiny wheels in the bicycle (…) these wheels that you put when you are learning how to ride a bicycle. (…) you need to know when to let it go, you know, the script. (…) it's even like a love letter. If you read a love letter to someone, it sounds silly, so you need to maybe read a little bit, take part of them, and then make a speech about that (…). I think scripts are good because it gives you like a base (…) like a ground where to be (…) don't go a lot like out of here." (*Miguel, current agent*)

The pressure of high dial rates was obviously one factor, but agents' accounts drew attention to a range of different influences. Monotony could be one of them:

Extract 11
"So after a while if you have been at a campaign for long enough you do find yourself just saying it and that's when I think it gets the worst as you will just be saying it monotonously you will be just like blabla but you just will be used to it not from the script but you're reading it like from your head you will follow the same sort of pattern (…). So I do like to try to switch (it) off every so often and keep it like you're entertained and happy (…) you will have to play it around like make a little joke with the IT Manager here and there." (*David, current agent*)

Extract 12
"It would be too boring to always say exactly the same thing. I need a bit of change from time to time." (*Daniela, current agent*)

But learning from other agents was another:

Extract 13
"If you can't get any leads you will sit listening to other people. Some people can get a lot of leads, then just listen to them (…) how they start chat with people, and you copy them (…) in your way." (*Tina, current agent*)

Indeed, team leaders sometimes encouraged this by placing new agents next to experienced ones:

Extract 14
"I remember that they put me next to Juan. And I remember that when I read my script for the first time I noticed that I couldn't use that, you know, as a script just to follow because it didn't sound natural. And when I was listening to him it sounded really different. So then was when I understood that I had to make my own script. I remember then I went to my house and rewrite my own script. And, yeah, and then I did that with all my scripts from then." (*Miguel, current agent*)

Sometimes during a campaign, there were debriefings,[5] and these could be a source of revisions:

Extract 15
"During the campaign debriefings it is sometimes asked whether anyone has a trick or (…) feedback I collected what the other people's reaction are, what sounds good or with what people engage and don't respond to and then I will integrate this into my script." (*Charlotte, current agent*)

Agents sometimes said they sought to be creatively distinctive:

[5] Generally, the majority of agents said they would like to have more debriefings as they found them very useful.

Extract 16
"it's about understanding the script and being able to go adlib, so just freestyling you've got to make it interesting for them (…), and…You've just got to understand it and not every one person's the same; there's not one standard format for everyone." "you have to be colourful with the scripts. You've got to use like the kind of poetic language that give you (…) and you've got to make it interesting." (*Alex, current agent*)

Extract 17
"you have to try and make your script unique (…) You're more selling yourself." (*David, current agent*)

Several agents, including those who didn't work on high end campaigns, said that they needed to bring in cultural knowledge of the specific countries or regions they were calling, but they emphasised that these strategies weren't universal and that you didn't need to be a native speaker of the language you were using:

Extract 18
"I think different countries need different approaches." (*Alex, current agent)*

Extract 19
"Having seen people achieve results from all different genders, all different backgrounds and all different ages, I think now possibly from pure practical experience, maybe [nativeness] is not as important." (*Stuart, senior team leader*)

Extract 20
"[Nativeness does not matter] I think it's just to do with being a natural speaker, that helps. I'm not talking about being a good public speaker because you are behind a phone, but certain people is good at words, simply good at words, (…) there are so many ways to express something that sometimes you put things in such a way that sounds better and sounds more appealing." (*Miguel, current agent*)

Indeed, calling scripts could help with language learning:

Extract 21
"Well I used a lot of these scripts for one reason and one reason only because, when I started, obviously my level of English was so low…" (*Claudia, former team leader*)

Extract 22
"[The script] has been very helpful, especially for me who doesn't… I mean I understand a lot of German but I can't get the main grammar perfect. I mean, you know, I'm very communicative, you know, I'm just talking blah-blah-blah-blah-blah but as you know I know I say lots… make loads of mistakes and people are laughing at the end of the line but, you know, still I get the message, you know, the message is going through and I think the script has been very helpful for me, yes, of course it has been well written. (…) I'm improving my German which is something that I really like (…) Maybe I have to do more German experience [calling in German] that I can, you know, have some reference, I can have the German experience in London. I think if you speak German you have loads of possibilities (…) you have possibilities in London and it's just a bigger market isn't it than if you only speak Swedish." (*Linnea, current agent*)

At the same time, knowledge of sociolinguistic stereotypes was useful:

Extract 23
"[Calling France] if I see like they're so strict I know they like to laugh about Belgium, they say you're Belgian so… because I have so many jokes about Belgian, so I will break this coldness and saying, you know, I'm from Belgium (…) like that's how I lead." (*Yasmin, current agent*)

Extract 24
"You just say, 'I'm calling from London,' [when calling Portugal] they'll do anything. They'll transfer me to a person's house just 'cause I'm calling from London." (*Alex, current agent)*

Extract 25
"The reason I got quite, quite easily the leads [in Finland] was because I come from East Finland, we have a funny dialect, so whenever I was pitching them I was actually pitching in my dialect from East Finland and ((*laughs*)) they found it really funny. They were like really listening 'cause they want to understand what I'm saying. And they were like… it's people who come from East Finland are usually really friendly and laid back and if they contact someone from West or South they're like 'Wow'!." (*Piia, former team leader*)

Extract 26
"I keep to the English accent, because I think that I've got quite a, you know, naturally reasonably well spoken accent. (…) because I'm quite like a classically middle class person, put their hands up and say it. That's why I think it works, because they don't usually get calls from people with that kind of voice, if you know what I mean, but I think that's why it works – especially for events. Because for events it sounds like, oh wow, god, it sounds like maybe Tony Blair's invited me along or something. So, you know, it works. The Hugh Grant thing seems to pull [it] off." (*Tom, current agent*)

And gender and sexuality were also useful resources:

Extract 27
"If you call as a woman to men, men will listen to women. It's just that gender thing. I don't care, you know, what country you're from, it's the same. It's the same in Finland and it's the same in the UK." (*Siiri, substitute team leader*)

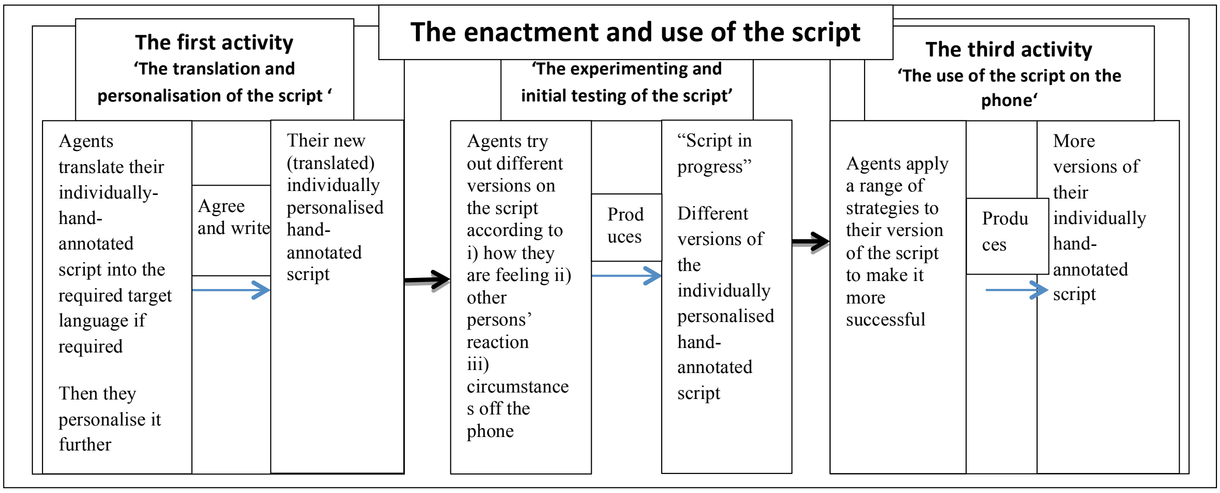
Extract 28
"I think gender makes a difference. I think it's easier for girls (…) because (…) I think maybe 90% of the IT managers are men." (*Sonia, current agent*)

Extract 29
"One flirts with men. Flirting makes life a lot easier. If you realise that it might work, then by all means use that strategy." (*Vanessa, current agent*)

Figure 3 summarises this third major stage in the trajectory of master script – its appropriation and enactment by agents. For most of them, the script is a 'work in progress', and they make a wide range of different phonological, lexico-grammatical, pragmatic and sociolinguistic adjustments in line with a plurality of influences off and on the phone. The script's skeleton structure constrains these alterations and they are monitored by the statistics and the data logging, but downstairs, there is more emphasis on producing a record – a lead remark or data entry – after every call than on following the client's script verbatim. The agents are encouraged to personalise their text, to use the consultative approach in higher end campaigns, to develop other strategies to meet their targets and to collect and disseminate information for their campaign. Upstairs, the master script is a product that the company sells to the client, but downstairs it is a tool that collectively and/or sequentially, the call centre managers, team leaders and agents each refashion in pursuit of the data and publicity that they are paid to gather and to spread.

We should now turn to the theoretical and methodological significance of all this, starting with the latter.

Figure 3: The appropriation and enactment of the script



7. Discussion

Methodologically, as far as we know, this study is the first to focus on the trajectory of scripts within a call centre. As outlined in Section 2, the majority of studies treat scripts as inflexible, standardised, top-down instruments which control calling agents' conduct, and in doing so, such studies reproduce the ideals of the corporate managers 'upstairs'. In contrast, a trajectories perspective is very close to how scripts are conceptualised among the staff downstairs in the call centre, and when compared with the interview and questionnaire methods that have dominated research on these workplaces, transpositional/trans-contextual analysis has also drawn attention to types of staff participant that non-ethnographic studies have tended to overlook. Whereas many other studies have focused exclusively on call agents at the end of the chain, our account has also given a prominent place to call centre managers and team leaders, and we have seen that they have a substantial influence on the production and interpretation of call centre scripts (as well as on a great many other proceedings downstairs). And as we have shown, rather than simply being 'supervisors' who are part of the system (Taylor 1998:5; Fernie & Metcalf 1998; Cameron 2000:117), team leaders and middle managers have the capacity to diverge from the courses of action specified by their line managers. In fact, the description of text trajectories shows that in real time, *all* these participants – agents, team leaders and call centre managers – display agency and the capacity to 'act otherwise' when they recontextualise the script, and the 'backstage activities' (O'Reilly 2009:114) that we have observed throw new light on the themes of resistance and deskilling that have featured so prominently in call centre research.

Traditionally, analysis has interpreted agents' deviation from their calling scripts as resistance, but the descriptions in this paper provide several reasons for questioning this, especially if resistance is understood as self-consciously 'disruptive behaviour' (Ackroyd and Thompson 1999; Cameron 2000a; Bain & Taylor 2000). First, most calling agents are not only unaware of their corporate managers' contractual agreement with clients but are also regularly *trained* to modify the script themselves within a set of well-established procedures and guidelines (Second stage, Step 5 'Briefing the agents'). There are of course many points on which people working in the call centre disagree with the master script arriving from upstairs, but rather than illustrating a simple two-party logic of management control and (individual) worker resistance, deviation from the original text emerges downstairs in a sustained, well-recognised and collective process of re-crafting (second & third stages, Steps 4-7). So it is with some justification that agents express the conviction that their oral and hand-written alterations of the script are permitted, and that they believe they are doing their job properly when they reword the text while holding to the script's key points. Following on from this, second, agents' efforts to change the script are a sign of commitment to the work. They employ a great variety of strategies to improve the script, sometimes helping each other to do so, and it would be difficult to reconcile 'resistance' with the feeling of agents that they 'own' the script they work with, repeatedly attested in phrases like "make the script your own". Agents are certainly not uncritical of their working conditions, but it is inflexible, mandatory and unrealistic *targets* that they complain about. What they ask for are lower targets, which would allow them to cover all the script's referential content on the phone and complete their data entry properly.

Recast in this light, the script emerges as workplace tool rather than an instrument of oppressive subordination, and there are good grounds for agreeing when Leidner suggests that "rather than assuming that workers who do not resist routines are either miserable or duped, it would seem more fruitful to consider whether there are circumstances in which routines, even imposed routines, can be useful to workers" (1993:5; see also Cook-Gumperz 2001:123). Ethnography shows that in the circumstances downstairs at CallCentral, workers treat the script as a useful tool that they can refashion, and this in turn throws into question the common claim that scripts are deskilling (Belt et al. 2002:22; Stanworth 2000:29; also Ritzer 1998:64). In interview, none of the agents or team leaders complained about the existence of scripts, and most described them as helpful or beneficial, making it possible for them to work in an IT call centre even though they didn't have any technical training, or to work in a language in which they weren't really fluent (third stage, Step 7). In a number of their accounts, it sounded as though they quite enjoyed refashioning the script. Indeed within the call centre more generally, improvement in the use of scripts was officially recognized, and agents could only move on to high-end campaigns using the consultative approach to pursue BANT or Nurturing leads when they had become proficient in low-end campaigns focusing on Engagement leads which only required personalisation.

CallCentral certainly wasn't an ideal or easy place to work, and although scripts were not the principal source of stress there, agents certainly did mention struggling with monotony and repetition. They sought to overcome this by varying and re-personalising their scripts, and this is broadly in line with the findings in anthropological and sociological ethnographies which describe workers' lived experience within Fordist production regimes and Taylorised assembly lines (Timmermans and Epstein 2010: 83). Of course nowadays, "there is widespread agreement that the dominance of Fordism, especially in the most advanced industrial capitalist societies, has come to end, [and] with it the security of standard work" (Edgell 2006:100). In post-Fordist workplaces where there is less standardisation and more team work, there is said to be there is less resistance and absenteeism from workers, together with higher productivity and work satisfaction (cf. Edgell 2006:85-87). We do not seek to assess the truth of broad claims like these, but long-term participant observation makes the demonization of call centres as 21^{st} century sweatshops (Hudson 2011) look simplistic (Woydack 2014). Similarly, the linguistic ethnography of text trajectories points to complex processes of agentive engagement that conflict with the stereotype of scripts as impersonal and dehumanising instruments of control.

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