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In *Neutral Accent: How Language, Labor, and Life Become Global*, the phrase “neutral accent” is used partly referentially and partly metaphorically as the author gives an account of how differences – linguistic, cultural, temporal, and gender-related – are disregarded in the functioning of the call centers in Gurgaon, India. The author brings to light the deleterious effects of a lack of attention to accent variations and presents these effects as an argument against what he terms “indifference to difference” (p.116). The first chapter describes Gurgaon’s remarkable change from a small town to a striking symbol of India’s “development story.” Of significance to the development of Gurgaon, in particular, notes the author, is that Gurgaon has become a global city by design and not by a gradual process of evolution. The rapid growth of the call center industry and, in particular, the placing of the call centers within specially created Special Economic Zones (SEZs), which are not bound by many of the rules controlling the national economy, has facilitated unchecked growth. This growth has resulted in dramatic increases in real-estate prices, the rapid development of malls and gated communities, and enclaves of affluence. A less visible consequence, says the author, has been the formation of spheres in Gurgaon populated by individuals whose accents, identities, and cultures have been “neutralized”—*i.e.*, modified to be more palatable to their English speaking customers.

In chapter two, the author describes how he learns first-hand about the job of being a call center represented by becoming employed in a call center himself. His observation proceeds through the training and interacts with his colleagues. Call center employees, he learns, are trained in the vocabulary, pronunciation, and geography of the country they are calling. Certain aspects of the job such as learning how to make a sale over the phone and acquiring knowledge of the relevant rules and terminology specific to the customer’s location, he finds, reveal a striking disconnect between the employees and their immediate surroundings. According to the author’s observation, the job also involves skills and knowledge that would be of little use in other sectors, and the author suggests that many of the employees may have found themselves at the call center after not succeeding in other sectors. Finally, he describes a lack of honesty in the hiring process on the part of the employers, as promised salaries are adjusted against transportation and cafeteria charges.

Chapter three is about the learning – linguistic and to some extent, cultural – involved in the transformation of an ordinary person into a call center worker. This transformation involves the process of ‘ironing out’ the regional particulars of the employees’ pronunciation, a process the author calls “neutralization.” The author explains that there are two common perceptions among the employers and the trainers about a “neutral” English accent. The first presumption is that the employees must be trained in standard Indian English (p. 3), which is considered intelligible to speakers of all varieties of English; secondly, it is understood that what sounds “neutral” to one audience will not appear so to another; in other words, an employee trained in one variation of English, say British English, cannot be employed in a processing center catering to American English speaking customers. The author points to differences in lexical stress as most commonly causing issues of intelligibility between caller and call recipient. He explains that stark differences in pronunciation between standard Indian English and some of the native Indian dialects of English arise from features of lexical stress, as learners sometimes teach themselves English by transliterating words from Hindi. Finally, says the author, there is also considerable

cultural learning on the part of call center trainees, which constitutes internalizing certain desirable cultural practices that are used while making calls. Practices like employees changing their names – from Sanjay to Sam and Radha to Ruth – seems to improve communication with overseas customers.

Chapter four looks at the changing notions of identities brought about by a world connected by electronic networks. Such networks have made it much easier to communicate across distant regions; however, technological connectedness has also produced undesirable realities like identity theft. In technologically advanced nations like the US, credit rating has become an important indicator of one's financial capabilities and FICO scores are better determinants of individuals' liquidity than factors such as social networks and ethnicity. As technological algorithms begin to dominate the financial lives and work schedules of global citizens, says the author, humans are increasingly becoming the denizens of a system governed by "algorithms." The seriousness of this scenario can be understood when we read that it is an algorithm-based software called "Dialer"—and not a call center agent—that puts calls through to customers. For the workers in the outsourcing industry, the neutralization of their sense of time—as a result of the impact of their nocturnal work hours on their sleep patterns—has created a stark contrast between employees' economic concerns and their biological realities.

Different troubling issues within social and physical domains pertaining to call center work are discussed in chapter five. Nocturnal work hours lead to social isolation, and the night shift is the last choice for most employees, though it seems to work well for the few who want to escape the sharp inquisitiveness of a society that is critical of some of their personal choices. The human body, designed to be active during the day, faces health problems when forced to work at the time it is supposed to be resting. Call center taxicabs, which constitute the major mode of transport themselves create risk as they rush employees to work at all hours of the night, as shift hours follow the time zones of the US, the UK, or Australia. Rules against night work that once protected workers – especially women – were overturned in order to benefit the call center industry. Paradoxically, an argument that supported this move was women's right to work the same hours as men. Studies show, however, that women's bodies are more negatively affected by such shift in work hours, and, as such, the author asserts that the argument for "neutrality" to gender is flawed because it does not take into account the differences between the bodies of men and women. Reminding the readers about the struggles of an earlier generation for shorter work hours, the author argues that current realities and the scientific understanding of the detrimental effects of nocturnal work should lead to serious activism advocating the abolition of night work.

In the epilogue, the author discusses the philosophical connections that underpin the three domains around which the book is organized – the economic, the social, and the physical/biological. He ends by highlighting a key idea in the book, namely the simultaneous events of integration and disintegration that mark the call center industry – global integration by the processes of neutralization and mimesis—the deliberate imitation of one group of people by another—and disintegration from local realities. It is not just the call center agent's identity that is changed, asserts the author; a new identity is also constructed for the customer by the algorithmic system that electronically keeps track of her economic life.

Although the author is largely successful arguing against neutralization of cultural and biological realities, it is slightly surprising that he omits the impact of caste, which is a key feature of Indian society. To give him the benefit of the doubt, one might note that sociologists have argued that a "casteless" class has recently emerged in India, a class that comprises the beneficiaries of privileges accrued over generations and, thus, can claim to be casteless

(Deshpande, 2013). The author perhaps indicates that the call center industry concerns this particular, “casteless” class of Indian society. Alternatively, it is possible that he has made a deliberate methodological choice not to discuss caste because including a discussion of caste might demand a complete reframing of the narrative and the argument presented in the text. It is also possible that the author considers caste to play no role in an industry premised upon a global language (*i.e.*, “neutralized” English), technologically determined customer identities, and the leveling of time zones and genders. Several interesting questions concerning the relationships between caste and urban life, caste and English, and caste in a global context, however, would likely have been revealed if caste were treated as one of the variables. Perhaps, however, those are topics for another book.

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