

THE CONVERSATION

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Offshore call centre work is breeding a new colonialism

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Call centre workers in India. ILO in Asia and the Pacific, CC BY-NC-ND

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The outsourcing of call-centre work to developing countries by Western companies has become a huge business. For many, it represents a positive force of globalisation, bringing not only cost benefits to the West but also employment and career opportunities to the developing world.

There is, however, a darker side to this. Call-centre work is generally exploitative and puts employees through long and unsocial hours under constant surveillance, not to mention the abuse and racism that employees often experience on the phone. Employees also suffer from losing – at last in part – their identity in an attempt to pass for Westerners.

The study that colleagues and I recently carried out revealed an ever darker side to offshore call centres. We conducted research in two such organisations in the city of Noida in India where we investigated how employees were affected by their work environments and, in particular, the English speaking expected of them. Published in the *Journal of International Business Studies*, our study found that call-centre work creates quasi-colonial relations between the West and the rest.

The English language plays a key role in this because it helps to turn a segment of the local workforce into “comprador” supervisors, like the compradors of old who acted as intermediaries between the colonisers and the colonised. And this creates the kind of language-based hierarchies of power and privilege that existed in colonial times.

Comprador managers

The ways in which employees are trained in English and then evaluated, rewarded and promoted based on their language performance helps to produce a new class of indigenous corporate supervisors who very much resemble those they serve – in their language, attitudes and practises. The sad irony is that these local managers maintain the exploitative, oppressive and talent-wasting conditions of call centres without direct input from Western clients.

In this sense, they resemble the local administrative elites who climbed up the ranks in colonial times by working for the colonists. In other words, they have become compradors, acting as local middlemen between Western clients and a cheap workforce in the developing world.

Hierarchy of power and privilege

Along with the importance of learning “pure” English comes a subtle hierarchy of power and privilege similar to that which existed in colonial times. Anglo-American clients reside at the top – they basically dictate the terms of engagement and impose “pure” English as the norm.

Below them are the compradors who earn their place first by going through English-medium schools and then by meeting the expectations of their clients. As dictated by their superiors, they maintain cheap labour conditions inside the call centres and arduously work to deliver the “pure” English experience.

At the bottom of the hierarchy are those whose English remains “tainted” by mother-tongue influences. They end up doing the donkey work under conditions of extreme surveillance and with little hope for career advancement. Thus, as in colonial times, the English language helps to separate the West from the rest and to subordinate the latter to the former.

Resistance

But this kind of domination also generates some resistance. While clients ask for “pure” English they put in very little effort to make this actually happen. In the end, their need for cheap labour is much higher than the luxury of being served in “pure” English.

In turn, call-centre workers also resist the client demand for “pure” English. Although they see English as a ticket to a more comfortable life, they also feel oppressed by it. Speaking English often feels unnatural and constraining to them – a bit like a straitjacket. In fact, as a way of resistance, they often switch to Hindi or a hybrid form of English whenever possible.

The fact that their English remains “tainted” by mother tongue influences sends an important and strong signal that they won't be fully dominated, that they will always deviate from the norm of “pure” English no matter how much time and effort is put into it. Western companies (and their customers) can complain to the compradors and bark at the call-centre workers as much as they like, but pure English will remain an ideal, not a reality, because it is ultimately not a native language.

And, ultimately, this system serves to maintain unequal relations between the West and the rest, to recreate a relationship that has a lot in common with colonial relations between European empires and their colonies in the past. In the short-term, the least that could be done is to scrap the idea of “pure” English and the related notion of “tainted” English. If English is to be the global *lingua franca*, then, it’s time to accept the fact that it comes in many varieties and sounds.

So there is more to offshore call centres than simply economic growth or exploitation, nasty working conditions and the demise of local culture. These businesses and their clients are playing a role in dividing the West from the rest – through the subtle dictation of “pure” English, all the while shooting themselves in the foot.

And, with the rise of emerging economies including India, as well as China, it will be interesting to see if this remains the case in the future. Could the resurgence of India even turn the tables on the West, making “tainted” English the superior form?

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