



Language as raw material, scripts as tools and conversations as product: effects of linguistic production on job categories in outsourced call centres

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The article shows how linguistic criteria have become central when defining job categories in the outsourced call centre sector in Spain. Language occupies a central role in the production processes of informational capitalism: in call centres, language functions as the raw material, scripts as tools and conversations as a product. Yet the ways in which linguistic production affects key elements of job categories have received little attention. Drawing on in-depth interviews in the call centre sector, the analysis of scripts and collective agreements, this article shows how trade unions and workers are pushing to adapt Fordist arguments based on job autonomy to informational production, arguing that job categories may depend on linguistic autonomy from the scripts during the labour process.

Keywords: call centres, job categories, linguistic standardisation, language skills, employment conditions, monitoring.

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Introduction

We ask what specific sorts of labour management struggles occur concerning the role of language work in the call centre labour process in an economy (Spain) with coordinated bargaining between management and labour. To do this requires two steps. First, we characterise the skills demand inherent to the linguistic content of work in representative outsourced call centres. Second, we examine how debates over the precise nature of labour design and process control enter into skill-based job classification negotiations. Struggle revolves around how to classify (and therefore how to recognise

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and how to pay) workers concerning the locus of control of linguistic performance. This case is important in several ways regarding the current socio-technical organisation of call centres. First, it delineates main issues in the design of a work content centred on language skills, an important but understudied domain. Second, it extends a classic question in the social science of work—deskilling versus skill retention and development—into an important new sector with specific technological developments, call centres, that are part of the wider development of informational capitalism.

The importance of language skills in informational capitalism has been emphasised in recent decades (Castells, 1996; Kelly-Holmes and Mautner, 2010; Duchêne and Heller, 2011; Koller, 2017; Holborow, 2018). In this context, language as an embodied asset is a form of labour power subject to monitoring and assessment and, therefore, *potentially* objectivised through standardisation, frequently by means of scripts and protocols (Urciuoli and LaDousa, 2013). At the same time, workers (commonly immigrants) can individually use language capitalisation to achieve better positions for themselves (Rojo, 2013).

At companies, standardisation (ideally) involves identical communication formulas based on scripts and protocols for all conversations, while linguistic autonomy refers to the ability of workers to create their own approaches, choosing and adapting content according to the customer, increasing interactivity within specific parameters of professional knowledge (Cameron, 2000; Boutet, 2012). Paradoxically, there are analyses that show to what extent standardised scripts become a tool that can help teleoperators to prevent labour abuse and develop by their own ways to manage in a flexible way these tools (Woydack and Lockwood, 2017). Despite the importance of language standardisation in these new forms of production, its relations with occupational systems are relatively unexplored.

The task of classification and design of call centres have attracted the most attention to control mechanisms over the workforce. Most research has considered call centre as a *sui generis* phenomenon, with a 'new socio-technical system for the production and delivery of information'. Contrary, we situate call centres not as a *rara avis*, but subject to industrial relations forces that makes job categories (and more generally employment conditions) for teleoperators as language workers an object of bargaining and not merely a business prerogative (see Russell, 2008: 196).

Our main research question is: How is the linguistic character of work a central concern of the struggle to define job categories by employers and trade unions in collective agreements? To address this, we ask what language skills are part of production at call centres? And how are these skills considered in collective bargaining and, eventually, recognised in job classification schemes? Following our fieldwork in Spanish outsourced call centres, our argument is that linguistic criteria, conceptualised as the degree of linguistic autonomy an employee is granted, have become a stratifying mechanism of job classification. This is important because this type of classification based on language skills goes beyond formal education, the type of product sold by companies or the type of service subcontracted by public bodies.

Fieldwork was carried out in the outsourced or third-party call centre industry for several reasons. First, language plays a key role in its production processes and products: language as raw material; *scripts* as tools; and conversations as a product. Second, the sector is important to the extent that it can absorb other activities and transform on-site jobs into call centre activities under standardisation schemes, which we can refer to as callcenterisation processes (these include technologies applied to work organisation, the transferability of workers, vertical disintegration and privatisation) (Huws, 2001; Van den Broek, 2008). Third, callcenterisation includes specific negotiations and the struggle between agents for the control and recognition of linguistic performance within the 'inescapable problematic' of the indeterminacy of labour in service encounters (Holtgrewe, 2001; Taylor and Moore, 2014: 3). This indeterminacy is related to occupational recognition and is observable through the institutionalisation of occupational categories for call centre workers in Spain—as in other coordinated industrial systems such as the Netherlands (Gallie, 2011). This system includes linguistic autonomy as a criterion for defining occupational categories which exemplifies the

adaptation of social partners, employers and workers to a new informational labour process where benefits depend on valorising information.

First, we review the concepts of linguistic standardisation and autonomy within a framework of informational capitalism, and we discuss how these concepts are dealt with by systems of industrial relations. Second, we present the qualitative methodology of the study, consisting essentially of in-depth interviews and documentary analysis. Third, we describe how occupational categories in Spain have been institutionalised according to linguistic autonomy in the workplace. Fourth and fifth, we present the main relations between occupational categories, scripts (conceived as tools) and skills. Sixth, we contextualise the labour processes within the occupational classification that creates job categories based on language. We conclude the paper by presenting the implications of the research.

Language skills in the call centre sector

The role of language in social construction of qualifications/skills in call centres is a cornerstone in our analysis of job classifications and linguistic production. According to Attewell (1990), skill can be synonymous of competence, but evoking images of expertise, mastery and excellence. Distinguishing between language skills as a common (or human) ability or as a professional proficiency can become a field for struggle in labour relations. As Flubacher *et al.* (2018: 4) point out 'language can be considered as two different forms of skills: as belonging to 'soft skills', when communicative competences are at stake (in this case, often labelled as 'communicative skills')—or as belonging to 'hard skills', when a certain level of language competence is demanded for a certain position'. This struggle is crucial in the call centres we studied.

Job categories of language workers at call centres are not merely a business prerogative. Recognition for linguistic work depends on labour processes involving 'distinctive' tensions and hybrids (Batt and Moynihan, 2002) among discretion and tight-control, volume and value, and quality and quantity (Holtgrewe, 2001; Holtgrewe and Kerst, 2002; Taylor and Bain, 2005: 263; Wood *et al.*, 2006). Models of control are affected by the introduction of new technologies, within a socio-economic context of outsourcing and international competition, and taylorisation of white collar information work (Taylor and Bain, 1999; Callaghan and Thompson, 2001). They also are conditioned by the autonomy of workers and continuous bargaining to reduce resistance and increase co-operation (Russell, 2008:197–198).

In spite of these distinctive call centre conditions, it is commonly observed that call centres have flat organisational designs with few opportunities for progression within the operation. This element becomes a challenge for an important aspect of the logic inherent in hierarchical and bureaucratic modes of control (Russell, 2008: 200). Debates about skills at call centres include the difficulties of extrapolating old industrial deskilling schemes (Thompson *et al.*, 2004) and the increase of new types of semi-skilled workers for infoservice work (Russell, 2006). There are not only differences with classic industrial work, but also relevant differences with face-to-face service work, where some authors have found that call centre workers occupy positions that require less skill and less control over work pace and work decision-making (Zapf *et al.*, 2003).

Taksa (1992) goes further into the cultural and ideological dimension of Taylorism, in which conception and execution are clearly divided by minimising horizontal communication and reducing workers' supportive culture, and describes how the supportive culture and social networks among workers help them to cope with overwork and emotional exhaustion, and also how in this context supervisors give tacit support to absenteeism to improve worker well-being (see Korczynski, 2002; Deery *et al.*, 2010). This culture can be productive from the perspective of employers given the existence of correlations between knowledge sharing and performance (Batt and Moynihan, 2002). Regarding debates on limits to Taylorism and deskilling (Gorjup *et al.*, 2008) and (Martí-Audi, 2013) are good examples of how new skills are recruited and promoted within companies searching for quality and satisfaction of customers. Debates on

commonalities and divergences across call centres, in example about police call centre/rooms (Glucksmann, 2004; Taylor and Bain, 2007), raise questions of how both generic and specific language skills become key elements to understand occupational stratification within the sector. The crucial point is that the call centre work literature will benefit from close attention to the complex, controverted line between linguistic design and linguistic autonomy in this sector. So, to what extent we can talk about *language skills*?

Evidence on language skills standardisation and its limits

Internationalisation and informationalism have led to increased interest in managing language across sectors. First, the international division of labour involves a greater need to manage multilingualism. Corporate language policies include linguistic flexibility by means of multilingual employees (Alarcón and Heyman, 2013), linguistic authenticity and accent management to ensure customer satisfaction in a context of 'off-shoring of voice services' (Taylor and Bain, 2005: 262; Poster, 2007; Nath, 2011; Eustace, 2012). Second, informationalism makes it more important for companies to manage language in their production processes, as opposed to Taylorist–Fordist models, where talking on assembly lines can be regarded as counter-productive (Cohen, 2009: 26). The centrality of language in the service economy has increased the managerial interest in professional discourses and forms of communication (Leidner, 1993). As a result of these processes, businesses move between the search for Taylorist standardisation in the use of language and the value of emotions, authenticity and identity in a context of product saturation and increased competition (Hochschild, 1983; Heller, 2010; Butler, 2014).

Critically, we know that language is commodified and recruited across occupations and sectors, but exactly *how* language is objectivised and contributes to productivity within firms remains a 'black box' (Grin, *et al.*, 2010). In spite of the 'black box' of language productivity, service work is frequently controlled by standardising conversations. Standardisation includes prosody (accent, tone and intonation) and voice quality, the way speech acts should be performed, the choice of address terms and greetings for clients, the consistent use of certain politeness formulae, and scripts and protocols (Cameron, 2000: 324).

Agents' discourses are restricted in three ways: (1) scripts (which must be followed point by point), (2) protocols (for conducting decision-making), and (3) response time. Work is done on the basis of diagnostic procedures that enable employees to respond quickly without possessing any particular technical know-how. This model makes it possible to recruit the workforce for their personal rather than their formal qualities (Boutet, 2012: 209; Holborow, 2018). Nevertheless, standardisation is not suited to unpredictable and complex queries and verbal distractions of customer, and skills other than traditional formal qualifications are needed (for example, social abilities, commitments and *habitus*) (Holtgrewe and Kerst, 2002: 6). Empirically, there is evidence to show that the level of standardisation of conversations in call centres varies significantly between workstations, companies and sectors (Gorjup *et al.*, 2008; UNISON, 2012) and also across periods of time (Moss *et al.*, 2008). For example, according to De Grip *et al.* (2005:17), in the Netherlands, scripts were not used at all in 27 per cent of the call centres analysed and were mandatory in only 25 per cent.

Previous analysis of how language skills are valued (and paid) within Western call centre companies shows that language skills involve only rudimentary screening for languages (Holborow, 2018: 524–525). Moreover, in those cases in which multilingual competences are highly valued (multilingual call centres), there is a lack of payment pluses for this 'capital'. Duchêne (2009) shows in his analysis of touristic Swiss call centres how multilingual agents are not paid any compensation for their multilingual skills. As we will see in our analysis below, evaluation of language skills is often done by role playing, considering a wide range and nonstandardised number of competences. Beyond the west, Mirchandani (2004: 367) in her studies on Indian call centres

indicates lack of reward for highly sophisticated English competences. As Holborow cites, Indian call centre workers are part of a 'global auction' aimed to drive down wages, not to increase them (Brown and Lauder, 2009). Classification and valuation of language autonomy as a job skill, then, are poorly developed in many call centres.

Scripts as language tools at call centres

Linguistic standardisation in call centres aims to separate conception (entextualisation through scripts) and execution (recontextualisation through language skills to embedded social registers) (Woydack and Rampton, 2015). From the critical perspective, the downgrading and division of labour that accompanies Taylorist standardisation is not regarded as an attempt to improve efficiency, but as a management strategy to break down specialised knowledge into simple and routine tasks, into low-skilled jobs which allow greater control of the production process. The new content of language work involves new forms of control and exploitation, and old and new types of conflict and negotiation flare up (Brophy, 2011: 415). In an informational economy in which surplus origin derives from code objectification (Pasquinelli, 2014), language becomes not only an indicator of employability, but when conceived as a nonrewardable talent—not a technical skill—a marker of workers' exploitability (Alarcón and Heyman, 2013).

Scripts highlight the tension between the routine standardisation of knowledge and the system of control over professional discourse, and the need for more autonomous and self-regulated skilled employees, who autonomously implement their knowledge (Roberts, 2011: 89). Nevertheless, promotion based on skills is difficult in a sector based on flat organisations (Sieben and de Grip, 2004; Gorjup *et al.*, 2008; Holman, 2013). These tensions are resolved differently in coordinated and liberal economies, and in in-house and outsourced call centres. Institutional factors have proved to be highly explanatory: in countries with coordinated economies, call centres have higher levels of job security and promotion opportunities than those in liberal economies (Batt *et al.*, 2009; Doellgast *et al.*, 2009). These differences are observable in terms of job discretion. The proportion of call centres with low job discretion in liberal market economies is 49 per cent, as opposed to 29 per cent in coordinated economies and 34 per cent in recently industrialised ones. Job discretion is lower in subcontractors and higher in professional centres than in mass-market centres (Holman *et al.*, 2007).

The vicious circle of increasing training and qualifications and the high level of turnover has led to detailed occupational categories being stipulated in some coordinated economies. In the Dutch call centres agreement [Collectieve Arbeidsovereenkomst Facilitaire Callcenters in Nederland 2010–2012], the criteria for defining occupational categories are closely linked to the employees' autonomy from the script and protocols. It stipulates five occupational categories with different wage levels, where each occupational category entails a salary increase of approximately 3 per cent. In the French case, according to 7th article of the 'Avenant du 20 juin 2002 relatif aux salariés des centers d'appels non integres', the criteria for defining professional categories include the management of dialogue times, the linguistic complexity (speaking, writing) of the transactions and the pauses between calls. The case of Spain has important similarities and is examined below.

These models contrast with that of the United States, where the criteria are determined by private associations such as the COPC-2000 CSP Standard. Standards aside (measurement metrics for response rate, success rates, call volume, etc.), 'Line Staff' are all identified as belonging to a single homogenising occupational category: *Customer Service Representative (CSR)*. Even '*Technical Support Representatives*' are explicitly stated to be interchangeable with CSRs, as well as all the line staff that handle end-user contacts. There is no reference to scripts, and the management has discretionary power over linguistic management. Nevertheless, companies create their own ladders in an attempt to better produce and create internal markets for promotion where discretion in the interaction with customers plays a role (Moss *et al.*, 2008).

Methodology

Information in the context of the project funded by Ministerio de Educación y Ciencia of the Government of Spain (FFI2012-03937) was gathered in an attempt to describe practices and competing discourses on workers' autonomy regarding the script as an indicator of a linguistically codified labour process and their consequences for job recognition. We collected evidence from three big subcontractors' call centres platforms (300–800 workers), two small independent platforms (10–30 workers) (working mainly for telecommunications, banking, insurance and public administrations) and five on-site public services (gender violence, general emergencies, health emergencies). They were located in Catalonia, Madrid and Galicia. During 2013 and 2014, we conducted 68 in-depth interviews with managers, supervisors, trainers and operators and with social partners (5 with trade union representatives and 2 with representatives of the employers' organisation).

Given differences between big and small companies, and public and private that our research has carried out in multiple call centre settings, the results presented in this article are limited to three specific platforms within the larger corporations of Spain, those with more than 10,000 employees. This selection was necessary because labour processes were different across workstations (inbound/outbound; selling/information/technical support; telephone/mail/internet) and not all workstations were covered by the third-party collective agreement (among the ones that were not are gender violence helplines and small call centres, which deserve to be studied separately).

All the platforms of these, three companies were located in Galicia (see in next section data on this call centres at this region), in platforms ranging from 300 to 800 employees. The observed ratio of operators to coordinators was about 1/15, according to ACE reports (2016). Workstations in studied platforms ranged between 95 and 322, meaning that more than one teleoperator is allocated to the same workstation in different shifts, 8 hours being the more common situation, but also we find partial contracts. Detailed information of this organisation of workers and workstations is available online in ACE reports (different years).

These platforms in Galicia provide services that can be classified largely as outbound mass-market services designed for the domestic market, very similar in this respect to the domestic markets located on the peripheries of the United States (Alarcón and Heyman, 2013). However, since their work for third parties is organised in several campaigns simultaneously—contracts for one specific service during an established amount of time that may last from one week to several months—the duration of the calls and the detail of the scripts for the conversations were much more heterogeneous than the literature tends to suggest. To analyse this complexity, we combined qualitative content analysis looking for commonalities in discourses with quantitative analysis of script contents. Detailed evidence is limited to one of the workstations where workers work under the category of 'teleoperator', dedicated to outbound-selling at one large call centre (11 interviews). We compared their labour process with that of two workstations where workers were recognised as 'telephone managers': emergencies (on-site, in a public setting) (8 interviews) and technical support (platform) (5 interviews). Also, interviews with two trainers, 3 managers and representatives of trade unions and business employers stated above are considered. We focused on their associated tools and skills in order to determine how linguistic autonomy is recognised as an occupation and paid for.

During the fieldwork, we collected scripts and training manuals, as well as collective agreements, internal reports of the sector and judicial rulings (56 were detected that contained the words 'telephone manager', of which 18 were about disputes on occupational recognition). Different interview scripts were produced based on the job of those interviewed. The information collected was systematically organised and structured with particular attention paid to the agreements and disagreements between employers and workers (11 families of codes and 65 main codes). Information showed the main agreements among groups of participants and controversies between workers/trade unions and managers/business associations.

The information was codified and organised with qualitative data analysis software, which allowed us to carry out content analysis with a greater focus on items (families and codes) of a relatively large amount of data, rather than on specific biographies of workers within the sector. We conducted documentary analysis—systematised reading, content classification and analysis in relation of the families of codes above—of: (1) the five collective agreements for the sector signed in from 1999 to 2012), (2) two company agreements for the application of the category of manager, (3) five judicial rulings on individual and collective disputes concerning the relationship between linguistic standardisation and occupational categories, and (4) conversation scripts, protocols and training documents relating to 10 different campaigns compiled during the field-work. We complemented the main qualitative analysis with basic quantitative measures of 22 scripts (see below). We observed means and standard deviations of the interview scripts' contents and aimed to assess degrees of standardisation and autonomy levels regarding each relevant script. This process was done by classifying scripts' contents in the following main categories as suggested by previous literature: (1) pre-established dialogue, (2) information about product service, (3) style, and (4) arguments system operators and codes. In addition, the research used secondary sources such as trade union journals and reports by employers' organisations, as well as legal repositories to locate rulings in Spain (Wolters Kluwer and General Council of the Judiciary).

The Spanish case: occupational categories for frontline operators

In Spain, there are around 183 companies providing call centre services to third parties with a total of 72,000 employees, twice the number of just ten years ago. These call centres are highly polarised: 163 small- and medium-sized enterprises account for approximately 10,000 employees, while the 20 largest companies (the only ones belonging to the Employers' Association) have 62,000 workers (twice the 1999 figure) (ACE, ; Martí-Audí *et al.*, 2013) and 72,525 in 2016 (ACE,), being one of the more dynamic sectors of the economy. According to ACE, they mostly provide inbound services (67.3 per cent of turnover) and workstations are on third-party platforms (94.4 per cent) rather than on-site locations. Platforms and workstations in Galicia started their activities in the middle 90s increasing quickly the number of employees; now this is the region with the highest number of platforms (13 out of 20) and work stations (4,493) of the leading call centres in Spain. In fact, due to relative high level of unemployment in Galicia, this region has been a pole of attraction for call centres, and for most workers in our sample, the call centre is considered as their only or primary job opportunity.

The first 'Contact Centre Agreement' which regulates employment relations was signed in 1999 by major trade unions and the 20 largest companies of the sector. Four more agreements with minor changes have since been signed, the last in 2017. According to the employers' organisation, this agreement was an attempt to bring order to a fast-growing new industry in the 1990s and limit unfair competition between the bigger companies. The companies operated under very different collective agreements—still common among SMEs (Shire *et al.*, 2009)—and the work councils belonged to different sectors (e.g. the Transport and Communications Federations). One manager said 'When there was a strike you could see truck drivers, with their trucks, blocking the entrance to the call centre. Imagine, trucks!'. Large companies shared a common understanding and agreed on how firms compete with one another in those areas of the production process that will be standardised (in Spain, stability rates, occupational categories, wage premiums) versus those areas that can be manipulated by managers.

According to union representatives, the agreement originated from the need to ensure minimum employment conditions. The growing competition between companies was passed on directly to workers in terms of precarious employment and low wages. The introduction of trade unions into call centres in Spain was made possible by the characteristics of the sector, which are similar to those of Fordist industrial production: they are large workplaces with more than 50 employees—and often more than 500—and as such, they are obliged under Spanish labour law to hold trade union

elections and to have works councils. The organisational model of the sector was regulated by segmenting the workforce into 'structural staff' and 'operations staff'. By institutionalising this dualisation, the operations staff were also rationalised and provided with some stability (a minimum of 30 per cent in 2002 and 40 per cent in 2012), including better salaries and greater protection against layoffs than in other service sector agreements (Shire *et al.*, 2009).

The Collective Agreement classifies workers in direct contact with the public under the main categories of 'teleoperators', who become 'specialist teleoperators' after one year of experience in the same department and company (19.2 per cent and 46.3 per cent of employees, with monthly base wages of 934.72 and 977.57 euros, full-time, in 2012) and 'telephone managers' (20.8 per cent, 1,033 euros). Other operational categories are coordinators (5.9 per cent, 1,071 euros), supervisors, quality and training staff (1.8 per cent between 1,127 and 1,181 euros). Structural staff account for 6 per cent (i.e. a project leader's base wage is 26,187 euros per year) (ACE, 2012).

According to Article 38 of the Collective Agreement, the category of telephone manager is assigned under the following conditions:

1. Outbound sales with (...) the use of complex arguments without a pre-established dialogue (...), except when addressing customers who are already clients (...);
2. Technological support (...) outside systematized procedures (...);
3. Professional support (...) for complex incidents that cannot be resolved automatically by following a systematized script;
4. Management of defaults (...) when the worker manages and negotiates the debt (...)
5. Management of invoicing problems. The operator (....) identifies and distinguishes the customer's problem, outside the systematized procedures.

According to this list, if operators wish to become telephone 'managers' (a Spanish word for a better job category than teleoperator, not manager as it is commonly used in English), they must comply with two key conditions: (1) they must occupy a specific place within a technical division of work, based on a product service to be delivered: sales, technological support, etc., and (2) there must be a degree of objectification of the labour process, observable through tools (scripts, pre-established dialogues) and skills. What are the empirical foundations within firms' labour processes of these two sides of a token?

From 'campaigns' to scripts

The workload of the third-party call centres studied during our fieldwork was dependent on outsourced 'campaigns' and each campaign involves reorganisation of workstations, number of workers assigned to each campaign and new scripts. Campaigns lasted weeks or months (over a period of 10 years workers have taken part in more than 30 campaigns, typically in selling) and mid-term campaigns, from 6 months to 4 years in technical assistance and emergencies. Work was divided up among structure staff (6 per cent) (management, administration and technical systems) and operational staff (94 per cent) ('execution' platforms) (ACE, 2013). Operators were assigned to workstations with specific labour process and to a campaign with specific scripts. They were recruited for the campaign or assigned from other workstations or other companies (subrogation of service). Experienced workers were given one or two days of training per campaign while new workers were given two weeks.

Each campaign required several actors to take part in defining the scripts and the work content: (1) 'contractors' defined the terms of service; (2) call centre structure staff were responsible for assessment and control (production, quality, productivity, absenteeism), defined and coordinated a technical division of labour, adapted the on-screen operations and the internal protocols of the campaign, recruited workers and formally designed the script with the supervision of the contractor; (3) formally, operational staff were the direct executors of the scripts, while

coordinators, supervisors and trainers did the daily and weekly assessment and control as well as workers' reskilling. According to the structure staff, scripts were drafted top-down, but operational staff took part in both entextualisation and re-contextualisation processes (see Woydack and Rampton, 2015).

We observed that training managers, supervisors and coordinators formed a bridge between operators and structure staff when designing, testing, implementing and revising problems with the scripts. These workers had considerable experience—they started in their companies as operators—in how scripts were handled by workers and played a significant role in standardisation; that is, objectivising workers' knowledge into scripts. But this participation in entextualisation cannot be understood only in terms of workers' deskilling or code objectification by companies. For example, to protect the emotional well-being of workers, potential problems with customers during the dialogue were planned for and protocols drawn up (i.e. situations in which workers were shouted at or insulted by clients). The phrase 'protocols are laid down but they are reasonable' (Supervisor) reflects a system of consent with scripts and solidarity among operational staff (they have similar wages and job insecurity, and they are in locations other than the offices of structure staff).

Scripts and protocols as tools

Given that our interest lies in understanding language content of work within occupations, a first way to approach this question is by analysing tools of teleoperators, tools that are intrinsically linguistic: scripts. Below there is documentary detailed analysis of these tools in order to better understand struggles surrounding claims for new job occupations.

Campaign scripts of 'teleoperators': limits to standardisation

A close analysis of scripts from an outbound workstation selling telecommunication products shows the presence and limitations of linguistic standardisation in ways that inform our subsequent analysis. During the last 6 years, the workers—ranging from 20 to 200—in one department of a flagship call centre have taken part in 22 campaigns and 22 scripts. The scripts had a minimum of 2 pages and a maximum of 18 (ranging from 170 words to 3,839, although the most common scripts had between 300 and 900 words). The calls related to these scripts were generally quite short, ranging from 3.5 to 10 minutes in most cases, and controlled by surveys (samples), time and number of sales by coordinators and supervisors. Breaks were defined by the Collective Agreement (5 minutes per hour). Script content is shown below:

Pre-established dialogue. This section makes up 10.5 per cent of the total number of words in the script, ranging from 0 words to 551. It consists essentially of the initial greeting, and the final farewell as well as some legal clauses. On average, it took no more than 40–60 seconds (132.73 words; SD: 135.72) to read this section. The mean length of the shorter scripts was between 3.5 minutes (experienced workers) and 5 minutes (new workers) and as long as 30 minutes for the longer ones. Outside the script, the training manuals contain other pre-established dialogues about software or application faults, justification of waiting times, and prank calls.

Information about product service. The main bulk of the script consists of information about the product service (39.02 per cent, 0; 1,490; mean: 493.09; SD: 426.57). It includes the technical characteristics of the product, special discounts, etc. Moreover, the workers had at their disposal several additional sources of information, mainly the same brochures as the customers.

Style. Style is only mentioned occasionally in the scripts. It was only present in 9 of the scripts studied, with no more than 80 words, and very simple instructions (0.91 per cent; ranging from 0 to 80 words; mean: 11.55; SD: 21.73). The information collected was similar to that cited by Cameron (2012: 13): Workers were advised to smile, use intonation expressively to project emotion/attitude, listen actively, establish a rapport/demonstrate empathy. Critically, rather than trying to establish a 'company style' or manage accents (notwithstanding the various regional languages, these are workstations of Spanish workers for Spanish consumers) the scripts and the training manuals of these operators make brief references to 'selling techniques' handbooks:

Take care with the tone of all calls. Personalise every one of them and never make the mistake of sounding mechanical.

(Scripts 6 and 9)

Take the call as naturally as possible and pay attention to all the details.

(Script 10)

Arguments. The 'Selling arguments' include information about coping with objections and trying to convince and persuade customers. They accounted for 9.34 per cent of the whole script (ranging from 0 to 1,284; mean: 118.09; SD: 296.64), and there were usually no more than 3/4 arguments. The 'arguments' were never pre-established dialogue, but direct instructions for the operator. This limited number of 'arguments' was rarely appropriate to all the responses from clients and workers needed to create their own arguments if they were to achieve the expected goals. They generated their own mechanisms to cope with the limited formal information, used their own approaches and routines during hundreds of daily calls, and discussed and shared them with other workers, coordinators and training personnel, creating informal systems of shared arguments outside the script.

1) Point out the most important characteristics of the terminal and if the client asks for further information, give more advantages; 2) If the client expresses lack of confidence, say that [the company] is interested in improving satisfaction (...) Mention that [the company] is making a special effort to improve satisfaction.

(Script 9)

System operators and codes. System-technical instructions accounted for 29.1 per cent of the scripts (ranging from 0 to 1,892; mean 357.68; SD: 530.61). Final system codes: end of call, transfers to other workstations, etc., were 1.47 per cent (0–130 words; mean: 18.55; SD: 31.07); linguistic diversity codes (basically instructions about transfers to linguistic services) (1.01 per cent; from 0 to 143; mean: 12.73; SD: 36.45). Finally, other system checks made up 9.11 per cent of the script (0–650 words: mean 115.09; SD: 171.64). These codes were specifically designed for each campaign and script.

In spite of the script, the conversations should be as natural as possible. Teleoperators should adapt them to their own characteristics so their social skills are necessary. Importantly, workers have an 'operationalized labour process, but customers don't', and the operator has to mediate between these dual logics of standardisation and autonomy (Russell, 2008). Tensions arise if the operator does not have enough autonomy to deal with the indeterminacy of a conversation.

There is a contradiction between putting your argument forward and reaching the objectives, the number of calls and respecting the script.... There's a contradiction between the script and the timings.... You have to try out 3,000 things in a call that you have to make in less than 6 minutes so although things may be in your favour you never reach your goal.... You have to be polite without interrupting the client so you're doing something that isn't in the protocol. But you can't interrupt and be polite.

(Teleoperator)

The call ends with a code assignment (customer refuses, accepts, call back at another time). If the customer accepts the offer, the call is generally transferred to another station where the virtual contract is 'orally signed'. This transfer is important in job classification. Managers (structure staff) use different arguments (interpretable within the Collective Agreement) not to recognise the category of telephone manager: 'they don't close the sale, it is transferred', or the sale is a product extension of a previous purchased service ('not a new customer').

We thought that practically 80% of all the work in Spain belongs to the category of manager. So ... because we couldn't agree ... the employers' association agreed to contract an external consultant to review each category. This external consultant said that the categories were just fine as they were so we still couldn't agree because practically 80% of all the sales in Spain are being made by people contracted as teleoperators not as telephone managers.

(Union representative)

Analysis of scripts shows the limitations of linguistic standardisation and the many ways that autonomy enters into the linguistic production process.

The Telephone 'managers': a new job category

For people who work in emergencies and technical support, the labour process is highly protocolised and the discretion acknowledged by companies involves making choices within decision trees. In these workstations, only the initial greeting and the final farewell are prescripted dialogue (about 30–50 words). In emergencies, the operator's work consists of identifying, in less than two minutes, the caller's name, location and 'incident'. Operators navigate within 8 branches and there are a total of 487 possible final codes, while speaking to people who are in situations of anxiety and real danger. Once the incident has been identified, the call is transferred to one of the public services and the resources required to deal with the emergency are automatically activated (that is to say, an ambulance, a police patrol or a fire engine is sent). Operators are free to formulate the questions they feel are necessary to reach these final codes and activate the relevant operational procedure.

In technical assistance for Internet connection (ADSL lines), all the information is shown on the screen as a decision tree. The operator follows the decision tree to interact with the customer until the problem has been solved, with a considerable amount of formal discretion, but without autonomy. Nevertheless, we observed a high level of autonomy (not just choosing among alternatives, but acting with authority and freedom in decision-making). Operators know the tricks in the system and use them with the tacit support of coordinators and supervisors:

I need to tell them: 'In your next call make sure that your modem is out of order. It will be replaced within three days. I mean it should be shut down or not working before you call'. But I can't say that explicitly.

(Telephone Manager).

In all workstations, deviations from protocols were regarded as necessary and agreed to by all the agents involved in the organisation. There was implicit agreement between supervisors and teleoperators that the script and sequence trees can be 'lightened' if by so doing the quantitative goals set by the company (number of sales, waiting and service times and calls received) can be achieved. Teleoperators are not

reprimanded if they improve their daily or weekly performance by skipping steps in the protocols and scripts. Winiecki (2004) has documented these 'tricks' and how the labour organisation system allows or even encourages them. In the workstations, we studied, what counted for coordinators and supervisors more than the final output of each worker was the final output of their sections. Therefore, supervisors prefer not to use the wide range of possibilities at their disposal to monitor calls and maintain the informal relations with operators (Lankshear *et al.*, 2001).

Interviewee: Many people achieve the objectives that are set by skipping steps in the operating procedure... (...) that's the contradiction. If you achieve the objectives, it's because you're doing something that isn't in the operating procedure.

(Telephone manager).

While linguistic standardisation was formal policy, the realities of linguistic production required many roles for linguistic autonomy. That became a key point of contestation over job classifications.

Workstations, skills and new (and contested) job categories

Deskilling and reskilling had important nuances in language work in the call centres studied. Deskilling was initiated at a discursive level at the very beginning of the recruitment process in all workstations, with the tacit assumption that the formal qualifications that workers brought to companies when they were hired were not useful for job performance.

Recruitment manager: Do you think that your degree (Business Administration) will be useful in the day-to-day work in the credit cards department? Worker: No... well, you have a basis, but the important thing is to learn by doing... (...) Recruitment manager: That is the right answer!

(Dramatisation of conversation made by the teleoperator)

Given the difficulty of objectivising social codes, we observed a 'we recruit attitude' approach designed to identify social skills (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002), but with no importance at all being given to formal qualifications. Skills needed in the recontextualisation process were not acknowledged or rewarded. Moreover, some social skills were regarded as too politically incorrect to be included in any formal instruction. This was the case of gendered talk (i.e. men are associated to technical assistance and women to nonaggressive selling) and national accent. Group dynamics were part of the training-assessment process. Training experts in the emergency service clearly stated: 'There is no training in social skills. We can't change people!' Role play was used to assess their attitudes and behaviour:

Do they have the strength of character for crisis situations? Can they deal with people who are anxious, who shout at them down the phone? This is how we decide who stays.

(Trainer)

Reskilling was primarily oriented towards internal computer-based systems. When managers were asked about training in social skills, the most common answer was: 'Except for training in some rules of etiquette, there is no training in social skills'. The lack of pre-established dialogue and the limited number of arguments in the scripts are indicators that the information about job performance cannot be reduced to a card, and information does not flow in the same way as in the classic Taylorist firm. We observed a general 'bias towards social competences' (Durbin, 2006) in which the meaning and content of the division between conception and execution were reframed, and executors took active participation in the design of scripts. Speaking was not only allowed among workers, but encouraged as an alternative to reskilling. They needed to speak so that they could share knowledge about new technologies, customers, and how to

solve new problems in short-term campaigns. The creation of shared arguments and scripts allowed horizontal and supportive communication. In the platforms, there was teamwork among identical workstations, group counselling through daily informative talks from coordinators, and weekly meetings with supervisors. Training courses and informal meetings during the hourly breaks enabled workers to share knowledge about how to cope with the workload. This situation depicted a call centre reality in Spain that does very little to isolate workers (Del Bono, 2000). Therefore, both reskilling and production were achieved through a combination of formal and informal practices.

Union strategies have aimed to facilitate careers for conversation workers in flat organisations and construct a type of informational production worker with working conditions that are comparable to those of the industrial worker (job security, nonsupplemental wages, bonuses, professional recognition and upward career paths, due to either length of service or qualifications). Although linguistic autonomy had been agreed upon as a criterion for assigning categories and an agreement had been signed, it remained a source of conflict. The unions argued that most of the work that was not outsourced to countries with lower wage levels fell under the category of manager, because the scripts frequently were minimal. The trade unions thus preferred a criterion for constructing job categories that was more suited to the patterns of informational production. The unions believed that autonomy was exercised when an employee deviated from the script and used arguments based on their own training, experience and professional knowledge: 'The difference between a teleoperator and a telephone manager is simply that they deal with complex problems that are not automated'

By contrast, the employers' organisation argued that autonomy was linked to specific functions within the technical division of labour (sales, technical management, collecting unpaid bills). In response to union arguments, they argued that after nearly 15 years of collective agreement, robotisation had reduced the need for teleoperators to limit themselves to a script. As a result, trade unions and employers have quite different criteria for applying the category of manager.

Both teleoperators and telephone managers analyse responses, coordinate dialogues, and make technical adaptations on the basis of their social background (identifying the caller's age, gender, education level, etc.) and experience in the service. Employees used a variety of social skills, not objectified in the scripts, during the conversation. In the opinion of the workers interviewed, these working conditions should mean that they occupied the category of telephone manager. The employers' organisation, which was aware of this contradiction in the discourse on mechanisation and worker autonomy, argued that no workers simply read sentences: 'Everyone has to interpret, discuss and solve problems'. According to a representative of the employers' organisation, the 'prior appointment with the Tax Office is similar to this [a Taylorized conversation word for word], but it is part of an increasingly smaller workload'. Precisely for this reason, the unions increasingly used the criterion of linguistic autonomy when claiming the category of telephone manager for a growing number of employees.

Conclusion

Language as a form of capital has been extensively debated in academic literature in recent decades, involving serious criticism where only some languages and some forms of language have economic value in the markets (Duchêne, 2016). Collective movements around language have been studied basically under political forms linked to nationalism or language policies. However, Rojo (2013) and Flubacher *et al.* (2018) speak about capitalisation movements around language with workers and enterprises gaining market positions. Collective capitalisation movements made by workers and trade unions of language skills is a new field of debate for the literature on sociology of language and industrial relations.

Our main question was how is the linguistic content of work a central concern of the struggle to define job categories by employers and trade unions in collective agreements? We observed debates among workers and capital in Spain on how to interpret a third-party collective agreement that created two job categories for frontline operators: those following scripts and decision trees, and those who exercise autonomy. After a detailed analysis of work organisation, we detected two conflicting interpretations of these categories in service encounters. The first interpretation, put forward by managers, is based on the technical division of labour and regards complex services as tasks that can be measured through workstation outputs, time and revenues, where surplus is based on the purely mechanical flow of calls.. Language work is viewed as unproblematic, natural and mainly unskilled. The second one, put forward by unions and workers, reappropriates discourses on professionalism and work organisation (Holtgrewe, 2001) by focusing on the limits of simplification of a linguistically intense labour process. They concentrate on the workers' skill-based role in code objectification (Pasquinelli, 2014). Surplus, in their view, depends precisely on the complex properties of language and language-mediated interaction. Under the last approach, language becomes a rewardable technical skill, and not merely an innate talent or social attribute (Heller, 2010). Therefore, it is not a *rara avis* in industrial bargaining, but skill-centred negotiation.

In our theoretical framework, we have interpreted these struggles as addressing key characteristics of call centre production (language as raw material, scripts as tools and conversations as products). This is a topic of considerable importance, because an increasing range of activities—from selling a product to provision of health services or university education—may be transformed into telephone or computer mediated production from a call centre workstation (a process we call callcenterisation). In this context, labour bargaining merges aspects of the traditional socio-technical division of labour, including consideration of traditional hierarchies and professions, with the new ways in which they can be objectivised through protocols and scripts in the call centres. Hard and soft considerations of language skills are put at stake in new job classification systems. Consequently, to consolidate theoretical generalisation of our explained production of job categories around language objectivisation in a context of callcenterisation, future research should investigate to what extent this contestation takes place across sectors and countries.

In our analysis, we have gone beyond the importance of communication skills and 'sounding right' in recruitment and training practices (Callaghan and Thompson, 2002; Butler, 2014). By focusing on the labour process and occupations based on language skills ('building professional careers for conversational workers', according to trade unions), we have shown that the occupations of workers in flat organisations who are in direct contact with customers are stratified. This stratification is not merely a technical division of labour nor an internal hierarchy (team leader, coordinator); rather, it allows new paths of occupational recognition within the informational economy that implies rethinking classical models of hierarchical technical control.

The centrality of language in professional classification systems raises important paradoxes. On the one hand, the creation of job categories at call centres based on linguistic standardisation and autonomy creates opportunities for promotion and professional identity. Language is therefore not only a key aspect in the productivity of the new economy, but contributes to the construction of employee subjectivity. In spite of the difficulties of call centre workers to identify themselves as such because of the high turnover and variability of the work content (Huws, 2001), and in contrast to the findings of Seidman (2008) and Sallaz (2010), the workers in our fieldwork were aware of the professional categories acknowledged by the collective agreement. On the other hand, a collective agreement based on linguistic standardisation and autonomy for professional classification may subsume in only two job categories many other occupations and employment conditions—as part of a process of callcenterisation of industrial relations. As more and more jobs involve the use of scripts and protocols, all governed by the collective agreement, the debates on professional categories, promotion and salary based on linguistic standardisation and autonomy are becoming more

important. Given that third-party call centres provide clients with services with different degrees of discretion (Taylor *et al.*, 2002: 137), and that discretion can be understood as a synonym for adapting to the style and speech of the customer (Eustace, 2012), autonomy from the script become a potential arena for struggle. In this context, language powerfully structures the negotiation of employment conditions.

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