



# Localizing the transnational call center industry: Training creole speakers in Dominica to serve Pidgin speakers in Hawai‘i

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## Abstract

This study considers whether localized language training for call centers can fruitfully challenge the homogenizing principles of call center practices by examining a training program that aimed to familiarize offshore call center workers with Pidgin, the creole language that is widely spoken in Hawai‘i. Call center agents in Dominica were familiarized with key aspects of Pidgin relevant to call center work, including the expression of empathy in response to customer complaints. The analysis focuses on how we drew awareness to the pragmatics of Pidgin empathy through Pidgin contextualization cues in scenarios we devised. We then examine how the call center agents displayed their awareness of these cues in role plays. The agents readily demonstrated their understandings in talk about pragmatic differences during our instruction, but the role play interactions revealed the limits of their ability to deploy similar locally appropriate pragmatics due to the homogenizing confines of call center business practices.

Dis pepah try see local kine training for call centah can mek stuff bettah, cuz the way big company stay like make all da call centah same kine. We go look one training program we wen make for teach people no live Hawai‘i about Pidgin. Call centah workah in Dominica wen learn about Pidgin stuff can use you work call centah, like how for show feeling wen customah call for make huhu. Da analysis tawk

about how we wen get dem fo look how local people show feeling using small kine stuff. Den we stay tawk how da call center people wen show deir mana'o of dis small kine stuff wen dey make pretend fo be customah and call centah workah. Da call centah people wen quick show they akamai about dis wen dey wen tawk about how people ack diffrent but wen dey waz make pretend dey no can make same like Hawai'i people cuz da way all da call centah like mek ever-bady all same.

**KEYWORDS**

call centers, empathy, Hawai'i Creole, Pidgin, pragmatics, transnational work

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In this article, we examine a language awareness training program that we designed to familiarize offshore call center workers with Pidgin, the creole language of Hawai'i. Over the course of 1 month, we trained call center agents at 'Connex Call Center' in Dominica,<sup>1</sup> an island commonwealth nation south of Guadeloupe and north of Martinique, to better understand customers of 'Moana Cable' (all names are pseudonyms), a cable, internet, and phone service company located in Hawai'i. Moana Cable's CEO had requested that Connex, a third-party call center with headquarters in the southeast U.S., provide Pidgin awareness training to their call center agents, and we were the consultants who provided that training. The goal of the training was not to teach the Dominican agents to speak Pidgin, but rather, to familiarize them with Pidgin and to draw attention to how it differs from Mainstream U.S. English (MUSE, Lippi-Green, 1997) for the purpose of improving service call communication.

Previously, Moana Cable had worked with a call center in the Philippines to serve their customers, but Moana Cable was considering contracting with Connex due to a number of customer complaints about communication. While the specific details were not clearly conveyed to us due to many layers of confidentiality, we came to understand that Moana Cable's CEO strongly felt that to be successful in providing service to residents in Hawai'i, call center workers would need greater familiarity with Pidgin. At the time of the transition, Connex had been operating in several offshore contexts as a third-party call center for inbound calls for a range of companies, including cable and phone companies in the continental U.S. However, the negotiation of their new contract with Moana Cable was contingent upon their agents in Dominica undergoing a Pidgin awareness training program. As consultants to Connex, we agreed to design a training program based on our knowledge of Pidgin and our expertise in applied linguistics. While we were new to the world of language training for call centers, we started to plan pedagogical materials that would be informed by our understanding of existing research on call center discourse, yet which would also make a space for Pidgin interactional styles. We thus assembled a team of four people to design instructional materials for a 1-month training program to be conducted remotely for 3 weeks, with the final week taught in person.<sup>2</sup> While both the language training team and Moana Cable's offices were located in Hawai'i, we were never given the opportunity to interact with anyone at Moana Cable in Hawai'i over the course of the training. Rather, our role was

to provide training directly to call center agents in Dominica, who would, in turn, serve customers in Hawai'i upon completion of the training program (see Figure 1).

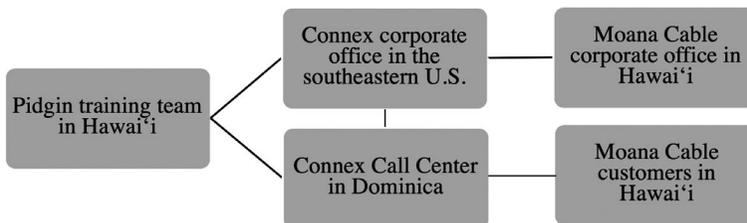
While a number of studies examine calls between agents and customers (Friginal, 2009; Hood & Forey, 2008; Hultgren, 2011, 2017a, 2017b), this article examines language awareness training in the context of transnational call center work. A key focus of our research is to consider whether our training created opportunities to reframe the value of creole languages in the transnational workplace and by challenging the homogenizing forces of call center work. On the face of it, the investment in localizing the call center work positioned Pidgin as a 'valuable' language, which challenged its long history of being stigmatized as a form of 'broken English' due to colonial legacies that valorized MUSE for socioeconomic mobility (Lippi-Green, 1997). Moreover, Moana Cable's acknowledgment that the call center agents would need special training to serve Hawai'i customers questioned the one-size-fits-all approach to customer service that dominates the call center industry.

In considering the impact of our training on call center practices, we examine how our attempts to localize call center industry interactions were taken up by the agents in our instruction. Drawing from two lessons during the training, we illustrate how we taught the expression of empathy in Pidgin, and we examine role play data as a means of assessing how the agents responded to our instruction. We acknowledge that from the outset, our efforts to offer localized language awareness training were at odds with the homogenized set of interactional practices that had already been put in place by the call center to ensure routinized, predictable and efficient interactions. As we will show, localization by definition requires moving away from scripted predictability, and our experience in offering the training revealed the challenges of doing so.

While this study is limited to the training itself, and since we were not authorized to engage in follow-up research based on actual calls, we cannot know what the outcome was in terms of how the call center agents actually communicated later with customers. Nonetheless, we consider the training itself to be an important site for researching the potential of localized language instruction in the context of a transnational work environment. By examining the linguistic backgrounds and interactions occurring at various levels between our team, the imagined potential customers in Hawai'i, and the Connex staff in Dominica, this study highlights the complexity of applied sociolinguistics research in transnational contexts within the environment of neoliberal capitalism.

## 2 | THE GLOBAL CALL CENTER SPEECH STYLE

By placing value on a marginalized language, our context turned the tables on the conventional approach of striving for a 'neutral' English accent (Cowie, 2007) or a globally shared call center interactional style (Cameron, 2000; Hultgren, 2011, 2017a, 2017b). The 'global call center speech style' (Hultgren, 2011) emanates from U.S. companies and call center policies targeting U.S. speakers,



**FIGURE 1** Diagram of relationships and locations among the language training team, call center agents, corporate offices, and the customers of Moana Cable

but the style has become standardized across the globe, including in languages other than English. The style shows common transactional and interactional features across contexts in both training manuals and actual calls in both onshore and offshore call centers, including the following (from Hultgren, 2011, 2017b):

- Greet the customer
- Acknowledge the reason for the call
- Engage in active listening through use of minimal feedback
- Show an understanding of the customer (paraphrase, summarize the complaint/issue)
- Avoid jargon
- Signpost (e.g. first, I will look up your account, and then I can see the problem)
- Express empathy
- Engage in small talk, personalize the interaction
- Use the customer's name to build rapport

While research has shown that these global call center style features are widely used, variation does occur. For example, among the prescribed interactional tools to build rapport such as the use of customer names, small talk, and empathy, onshore agents in Scotland have demonstrated a strong preference to use customer names as the main interactional strategy for rapport, most likely because of its efficiency (Hultgren, 2017b). Sociopragmatic differences can also produce variation in how agents comply with the global call center style. Agents in Denmark displayed far fewer greetings and did not inform their Danish customers that they would be put on hold before placing them on hold, as compared to British agents (Hultgren, 2011). Moreover, male agents did not comply with the call center's prescribed rules to the same extent as female agents in both Denmark and Scotland, though they expressed confidence in their ability to offer the right emotional response and engage customers positively (Hultgren, 2017a). Gender differences among agents also emerged in an offshore call center in the Philippines, where female agents were found to use more politeness and respect markers overall, including apologies, while male agents used 'sir' and 'ma'am' at a much higher frequency (Friginal, 2009).

While variation occurs, call center research on a whole shows that agents largely stick to their scripts, as they are closely monitored by their employers to maintain efficiency and productivity. Our limited access to Connex's call center manuals illustrated a strong presence of global call center style features as well. Moreover, the chief trainer from the U.S.-based corporate office expressed pride in how the agents in Dominica were able to 'pass' as Americans, given their familiarity with U.S. English accents. While the agents were not told to engage in *locational masking* (Mirchandani, 2004), several Dominican employees confirmed that they were taken as American by the callers and explained that their exposure to U.S.-based popular culture allowed them to 'sound American'. We also learned that some agents who had more noticeable Dominican English accents received accent neutralization training as a condition of their hire.

While many of the Dominican call center agents were deemed successful in communicating with continental U.S. customers in MUSE, the CEO's requirement that Connex arrange training about Pidgin shows the importance of sensitivity to interactional styles. The need for the training also points to the more widespread failure of transnational service industries like call centers to effectively serve a geographically, linguistically, and culturally diverse customer base. As Heller and Duchêne (2012 p. 12) state, 'linguistic taylorism in the new economy takes a number of forms and raises a number of issues related to the difficulty of applying a mode of regulation invented for physical and mechanical

labor to linguistic and cultural work'. In effect, the CEO was recognizing a need for localization of the global call center style.

### 3 | THE PROSPECT OF LOCALIZATION IN A HOMOGENIZING INDUSTRY

We viewed the training as an opportunity for Pidgin to be reframed as a language of value, rather than of stigma, but we were aware that the training was intended to increase the marketability (Heller, 2010, p. 108) of the cable company first and foremost. There has been a good deal of critique of such language work because of the homogenization, surveillance, and linguistic imperialism—usually through the use of English—that is involved (Cameron, 2000; Sonntag, 2009; Urciuoli, 2008). Of course, such sites also present opportunities for localization related to language by way of exploiting the symbolic value of the local for business purposes (Kubota, 2016; Seargeant, 2009). Both homogenization and localization exemplify the neoliberal treatment of language work for the purpose of profit, and ours is no different in that regard. Still, as scholars who have long advocated for the linguistic rights of Pidgin speakers, we were hopeful that the opportunity to carry out Pidgin language training might prove to be emancipatory in some regard.

Due to the location of the call center, the re-examination of the value of creoles had potential to re-frame the value of local languages for the call center agents as well since they too are speakers of creole languages. In our training, we took advantage of this and asked them to reflect on the pragmatics of their own creole languages, which were Patwa, Dominican English Creole, and Kokoy. We asked them to consider their local ways of interacting with service providers in Dominica and to compare them with the global call center style they had been trained in, and to consider that Pidgin speakers' norms would also be distinctive. This power dynamic thus differs from most studies that have reported on workplace training in that they have examined differences among migrant, second language speakers who communicate in English-medium interactions with English speakers (Gumperz, 1979; Holmes & Marra, 2011; Yates, 2008).

Still, it is important to acknowledge the power differences were far from absent, as the call center workers were positioned to serve customers in a location in the United States, which, from a global perspective, clearly has more economic power than the small island nation in the Caribbean. As one point of consideration, at the time of writing, the minimum wage in Dominica is \$4.05 East Caribbean dollars (\$1.50 USD), while the minimum wage in Honolulu is \$10.10. While call center agents in Dominica made more than minimum wage, the conditions of their employment were based on neoliberal principles of maximizing profits by offshoring and outsourcing work. This arrangement offers employment to a small number of Dominicans, but it maximizes the profits of Connex and Moana Cable even more by cutting the costs of business through reducing their total investment in human resources.

## 4 | LANGUAGE REGIMES OF DOMINICA AND HAWAI'I

### 4.1 | Dominica

Dominica was originally the land of the Carib people. In present-day Dominica, English is commonly used in urban areas, though more than half of the population has proficiency in Patwa, a French-lexified creole and/or Dominican English Creole, an English-based creole (Christie, 2010). Patwa

is spoken due to the colonization of the island and the enslavement of Africans in Dominica by the French in the 17th century. The British took over the island in the second part of the 18th century, and English replaced French as the official language (Paugh, 2012). Dominican English Creole refers to the linguistic spectrum of Englishes as spoken in Dominica which have likely resulted from calques based on Patwa (Christie, 2010). A much smaller number of people speak Kokoy, an English-based creole limited to the northern part of the island which resulted from slaves brought from Antigua and Montserrat who spoke a number of English-lexified creoles.

English is treated as the language needed for educational success and a means of socioeconomic mobility while Patwa is largely valued as a language of the home, and a vehicle for socializing children at home and school (Paugh, 2012). This sentiment was echoed by the several of the participants in our study based on their experiences with language in Dominica's workplaces. It is important to note that what counts as English in Dominica is quite fluid. As Paugh (2012) notes, "The variety of English does not necessarily matter, as long as children speak "English" rather than "Patwa"" (p. 10). With the rise of the call center industry in Dominica, English has become even more powerful with a supra-regional U.S. accent seen as particularly valuable for dealing with calls from the contiguous U.S. Nevertheless, Patwa is seen as more expressive than English and as an effective means of expressing authority, particularly with children (Paugh, 2012). It should be noted that recent efforts to raise the profile of Patwa have been undertaken by the Konmité Pou Etid Kwéyòl (Committee for Creole Studies, or KEK), the language planning committee in the government's Cultural Division that seeks to preserve and revitalize Patwa. KEK's efforts have focused on introducing Patwa into domains where it was previously restricted, including Patwa literacy, radio, and public education (Paugh, 2012).

## 4.2 | Hawai'i

Similar to creoles in Dominica, Pidgin has historically been subordinated to English in Hawai'i, particularly in the realms of schooling and professional life. Pidgin is an English-lexified creole and is estimated to be spoken by a majority of residents, alongside Hawai'i English (Drager, 2012). Many residents speak both Pidgin and English daily, while others speak languages such as Hawaiian, Ilokano, Tagalog, Chuukese, and Japanese. Though Hawaiian is the language of the indigenous people who first lived on the islands, the language was nearly lost due to policies that encouraged assimilation to U.S. norms after American businessmen overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy in 1893. At the turn of the century, Pidgin developed among the children of sugar plantation workers who had come in large numbers since the 1880s. Pidgin was initially Hawaiian-lexified but became more English-lexified as English was institutionalized in schools and society after Hawai'i was made a territory of the United States.

Due to social movements in the 1960s and 1970s that focused on civil rights, ethnic identity, and cultural reclamation in connection to Hawaiian language and culture, Pidgin speakers began to display their pride in Pidgin. Since the 1980s, Pidgin has been featured in local literature, plays, comedy, the linguistic landscape, radio shows, and in public speeches by politicians (Furukawa, 2018; Higgins, 2015; Saft, 2019). There is evidence that the public is increasingly aware that Pidgin is not simply 'broken English,' and that Pidgin speakers have rights to use their language in a number of sociolinguistic domains, including those governed by the nation-state, such as education (Higgins, Nettell, Furukawa, & Sakoda, 2012; Lockwood & Saft, 2016). While English remains dominant in these realms, the use of Pidgin is frequently used in advertising to connect to local audiences and customers through an authentic voice (Hiramoto, 2011).

In both Dominica and Hawai'i, we can see a shared history in which plantation economies produced creole languages which initially operated as the language of laborers, and then of the working class. Through colonial occupation, English was imposed as the language of socioeconomic mobility. Nevertheless, in recent decades, the creoles in both locations have experienced an increase in prestige through language planning and language advocacy efforts. In designing and implementing our training, we built on these shared histories to invite the agents to learn more about Pidgin speakers' language practices.

## 5 | DESIGNING THE TRAINING PROGRAM

Our team designed instructional materials about Pidgin for a 1-month training program to train 81 workers twice a week in three different groups. Since no materials existed for such a program, we designed them as a team, drawing from teammates' experiences as Pidgin speakers and as scholars with expertise in discourse analysis and intercultural communication. We used the principles of *interactional sociolinguistics* (IS) (Gumperz, 1982; Holmes & Stubbe, 2015) to inform our work, as this framework has been productively used for analyzing workplace interactions. Central to the IS framework are *contextualization cues*, or features of verbal and non-verbal language that signal meanings which are shaped by sociocultural frames. In addition to teaching important aspects of Pidgin pronunciation, prosody, vocabulary, and grammar, we taught Pidgin contextualization cues to help the agents understand their future customers. Upon our request, Connex shared several recordings of call center interactions involving customers in the continental U.S. We used these to guide our discussion of how interactions might be different with customers in Hawai'i as we went about designing lessons for the agents-in-training. We also benefited from several meetings with a team of three Dominican senior call center agents who worked briefly on O'ahu with Moana Cable while we were designing our materials. We discussed our ideas with them and shared draft materials to get their feedback. Connex's U.S.-based chief trainer also joined us for one of these meetings.

While call center training ideally draws upon the interactions among agents and clients to ensure sociolinguistic authenticity (e.g. Lockwood, 2012), our unique circumstance required us to develop a program that would prepare the agents to serve Hawai'i customers before they began their work. Research on the discourse and interactional aspects of Pidgin is scarce, and studies on Pidgin in service encounters are non-existent. Nonetheless, our lessons were designed to address communication issues that we felt would be the most beneficial based on our collective experience as Pidgin speakers, intercultural communication scholars, and language teachers. Moreover, as Pidgin language advocates, our development of the training materials was also designed as sociolinguistics for social activism and social justice in that we viewed our work as potentially helping to serve Pidgin speakers by validating Pidgin as a legitimate language in a new realm (Hammersley, 2000, pp. 6–7; Hudley, 2013).

We developed a series of 10 lessons. Each lesson took 2 hr to complete, so the agents were trained for 20 hr in total over the course of 1 month (see Table 1). While Pidgin was the focus of the training, we immediately recognized a need to guide the agents in the pronunciation of place names, most of which are Hawaiian. We also provided instruction on the pronunciation of representative Hawaiian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Japanese customer names, the key ethnicities which make up the majority of the population (Lessons 2, 5; see Table 1). In terms of vocabulary, we developed lessons based on our own assessment of what words would be useful to the agents for taking calls about phone, cable, and internet service, drawing from the sample phone calls (Lessons 3 and 6). For grammar, we

**TABLE 1** The Pidgin language awareness curriculum

| Lesson                                      | Focus   | Location                        |
|---|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Introduction to language in Hawai'i      | History of Pidgin and Hawaiian, examples of Pidgin in public discourse              | Remote videoconferencing        |
| 2. People names and place names in Hawai'i  | Pronunciation of Hawaiian, Japanese, Korean, Chinese, and Filipino names            | Remote videoconferencing        |
| 3. Technical jargon in Pidgin               | Ways of using Pidgin for cable, phone, and internet                                 | Remote videoconferencing        |
| 4. Pidgin grammar                           | Key grammatical points, compared to English   | Remote videoconferencing        |
| 5. Pronunciation review                     | Practice listening to and pronouncing local names                                   | Remote videoconferencing        |
| 6. Pidgin vocabulary                        | Key vocabulary for call center work, comparison with English                        | Remote videoconferencing        |
| 7. Grammar review                           | Comprehension practice of Pidgin  | Remote videoconferencing        |
| <b>8. Anger and empathy in Pidgin</b>       | <b>Markers of anger in Pidgin, analysis of media discourse</b>                      | <b>Remote videoconferencing</b> |
| <b>9. Role plays</b>                        | <b>Role plays to practice pronunciation, grammar, comprehension, and pragmatics</b> | <b>Dominica, at Connex</b>      |
| 10. Immersion in Pidgin and Hawai'i English | Extended listening and comprehension activities                                     | Dominica, at Connex             |

identified key aspects of Pidgin, such as negation and tense/aspect markers, that we expected might cause pragmalinguistic failure (Lessons 4 and 7).

Based on our reading of the call center literature and our experience as customers in service encounters on the phone, we recognized that the pragmatics of communicating with frustrated customers would likely arise, and so we developed two lessons on how to recognize and respond to anger and frustration (Lessons 8 and 9 in bold). In the analysis below, we focus on how the agents demonstrated their increased awareness of these aspects of Pidgin pragmatics, as we were interested in seeing how our instruction in locally appropriate communication styles was understood and expressed by the agents in role plays. Since our instruction asked the agents to reconsider their current ways of expressing empathy, we were aware that their previous training might be at odds with our lessons. Nonetheless, our instruction was developed in line with the interests of Moana Cable's CEO (as conveyed to us via Connex), who wanted to ensure that the agents would be sensitive to Pidgin interactional styles.

We taught the agents remotely for Lessons 1–8 during the first 3 weeks of the program. For the final week, Lisa, one of our Pidgin-speaking team members, traveled to Dominica to deliver the final two lessons face-to-face (Lessons 9, 10; see Table 1). Lesson 9 focused on scenarios that taught contextualization cues for anger and frustration and also asked the agents to participate in role plays during which they were asked to illustrate how to respond to angry or frustrated customers. The final week provided the agents with greater exposure to Pidgin speech as spoken by Lisa, and in the form of Pidgin 'immersion,' using data from song, film, television, and social media to provide them with expanded listening opportunities.<sup>3</sup>

## 5.1 | The agents

The 81 agents in Dominica were aged between 19 and 44 years old, with the majority in their twenties. Most of the agents were female (70%). As we designed the training, we intended to compare and contrast the linguistic differences of Pidgin and English with their own creoles whenever possible. We distributed a questionnaire to the agents to better understand their linguistic repertoires. Roughly even numbers identified as monolingual English speakers (21), trilingual English/DEC/Patwa speakers (20), or bilingual English/Patwa speakers (20). A smaller number (11) identified as English/DEC bilinguals, and three agents from the north part of the island reported knowing English/Kokoy.<sup>4</sup>

We also asked the agents to answer the following open-ended question: *Are there any places in Dominica where people are not supposed to use Patwa or Dominican English Creole? Please explain.* Here, most of the 59 responses expressed support for the use of creoles in all contexts (57), and only (2) indicated restrictions. An example of the majority response was as follows: ‘All the time, everywhere, with everyone’, and an example of a restricted response was ‘Just not at work’. Based on such findings, it appeared that most of the workers were quite positive about Patwa and DEC in all realms of society, including work. We found this to be important for how we introduced Pidgin as a language to be valued in call center work and how we discussed Pidgin pragmatics with them. We imagined opportunities to encourage discussion of the similarities and differences across our two contexts, not only to engage them in the materials but also to invite them to reflect on the value of creole languages in all domains of life.

## 6 | TRAINING AGENTS TO UNDERSTAND ANGER AND RESPOND APPROPRIATELY

### 6.1 | Identifying Pidgin anger and frustration

We expected that the agents would not be able to identify which Pidgin features index various degrees of anger. Therefore, we began by teaching them to recognize key *pragmalinguistic* (Leech, 1983) elements of Pidgin, or the linguistic encoding of pragmatic force. We presented a basic set of contextualization cues (Table 2, in bold) that mark increasing degrees of anger and frustration. This process led to the development of teaching materials that focused on the contextualization cues in Table 2. In our materials, we opted to present Pidgin using eye dialect, as this is the most common (yet quite variable) orthographic system for the language. While the Odo orthographic system was developed by linguists to standardize the orthography (Bickerton & Odo, 1976), it is not widely used.

**TABLE 2** Contextualization cues pointing to anger and frustration in Pidgin

| Contextualization cue                            | Example   |
|--|---|
| 1. Style shift to ‘heavier’ Pidgin               | Acrolectal Pidgin: You can fix em for me?<br>Mesolectal Pidgin: <b>Can fix em?</b>  |
| 2. Discourse markers (utterance initial)         | <b>Eh</b> , why it cost so much?<br><b>Ho</b> , I never knew wuz gon get charged fo dat   |
| 3. Lexical items indexing interpersonal distance | So why <b>you guys</b> never wen tell me dat?<br><b>How come</b> da ting neva work?<br>Da <b>buggah</b> stay broke. (‘X is still broken’) |

Through videoconferencing, we instructed all agents on these cues in Lesson 8, and we made use of excerpts from film and social media clips to illustrate these features. Specific discourse markers and lexical items can index anger, such as the use of the interjection *ho* at the beginning of an utterance to mark irritation and *buggah* ('thing') to refer to an item that has caused trouble (see Table 2). As studies of style-shifting in creole speaking communities have demonstrated (Rickford, 2014; Youssef, 1996), anger can also be cued when speakers move from acrolectal, or lighter forms of creole, to more basilectal (heavier) forms, or when they codeswitch from languages like English to the creole. Anger can be marked this way in Pidgin, so we developed several tasks that illustrated the spectrum of speech styles used by speakers and asked the agents to identify which utterances expressed lower and higher degrees of negative emotion (e.g. see Figure 2).

The agents appeared to learn the content easily and often remarked upon how similar the acrolectal forms of Pidgin were to their own DEC in cueing anger and frustration. They were also well aware from their own experience that style-shifting cued a person's level of aggravation. Differences were also noted, such as a much more intense negative meaning for the word *buggah* in Dominica.

## 6.2 | The role of empathy in call center work

Responding to angry and frustrated customers is a key feature of call center work (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2008; Friginal, 2009; Hood & Forey, 2008). Empathy demonstrates to customers that the service provider is hearing their concerns, expressing understanding, and taking action to resolve the problem. From a more critical perspective, however, empathy is a form of emotional labor that helps to promote what Korczynski and Ott (2004) refer to as the 'enchanted myth of customer sovereignty', or the process by which frontline workers in service encounters make it appear that the customer is in control and yet is really quite constrained by the corporate interests in sales and profits. As they explain, 'Empathy is what [is] expected when the enchanting myth of sovereignty is promoted, which has at its essence the aim of creating the symbols and formal sense of sovereignty for the customer to perceive while subjecting the customer to the controls necessary for the functioning of rationalized production' (2004, p. 588). We recognize that our work helped to perpetuate this myth by providing the agents with the pragmatic tools for sustaining the myth. At the same time, we aimed to raise awareness of the ways that the expression of empathy might be offered more authentically, as we were sure that customers in Hawai'i would be quickly put off by the scripted forms of empathy that Connex workers were used to providing.

In their analysis of call center communications in Singapore, Clark, Murfett, Rogers, and Ang (2013) found three types of empathy to be important. First, through *attentive empathy*, agents show they are listening closely. Attentive empathy includes acknowledging, repeating, paraphrasing, and asking follow-up questions. Second, through *affective empathy*, agents offer emotional support,

Rank each of these sentences. Mark the happiest customer (1) and the most upset customer (3) by identifying the Pidgin as light, medium or heavy.

\_\_\_ A. You guys can fix em?

\_\_\_ B. Eh, how come dis buggah always no work?

\_\_\_ C. Ho, das expensive you know.

**FIGURE 2** Task to identify anger in Pidgin (A is the most acrolectal Pidgin, which can index a low degree of frustration; B is the most basilectal or 'heavy' Pidgin; C is in between)

showing that they can put themselves in the place of the customer. Affective empathy includes stating an understanding, referring to the customer's feelings, and apologizing. Examples from Clark et al.'s study include 'I understand', 'That must be difficult', and also 'Actually, other customers also called to clarify what the letter means'. Third, through *cognitive empathy*, agents anticipate the needs of their customers. Cognitive empathy involves thinking through the lens of the customer, assuming their perspective, and offering relevant next steps to solve the issue. In our study, we focus on the second type, affective empathy, as our experience in working with the call center agents in Dominica revealed that it was likely to be a source of cross-cultural communication.

## 6.2.1 | Expressing empathy in the global call center industry

Hultgren (2011, p. 50) notes that prescriptions for empathy are rather uniform across geographical contexts and appear as follows:

- Britain: The agent uses words that demonstrate empathy and understanding when appropriate, for example, 'I understand that must be really frustrating for you', 'I'm sorry you've had that experience'.
- Denmark: The agent must acknowledge the problem, for example, 'I understand your problem', 'I will help you with the case/problem'.
- Hong Kong: 'We understand that this is difficult, but we are here to help you'.
- Philippines: [The agent should say] 'Oh that's too bad. I understand your frustration. Let me see what I can do to help.'

Explicit training in interactional styles is arguably more important for offshore call centers, given the potential for cross-cultural styles to lead to miscommunication. In training offshore call center agents in India and the Philippines, Lockwood (2012) found that agents rarely displayed lexical or grammatical problems but needed more training in showing their understanding of the customers and expressing the right amount of affective and cognitive empathy in responding to complaints. She explains, 'For example, the difference between the [customer service representative] saying "Sorry about that" and "I really am so sorry about that, would you like me to follow that one up?" can be crucial in terms of the customer feeling listened to and professionally assisted' (2012, p. 20). In the latter utterance, the use of the intensifier 'really' serves as a contextualization cue indexing sincerity, and the offer to 'follow-up' with further action helps to construct cognitive empathy.

## 6.2.2 | Localizing the transnational expression of empathy

Early on, it was clear that Connex agents had received training in the global call center speech style with regard to expressing empathy, and that they were adept at offering attentive and cognitive empathy. In terms of affective empathy, however, we predicted that their responses to customer complaints would sound hollow to Pidgin-speaking customers, as the empathetic statements in the sample calls from Connex to continental customers were limited to briefly expressing an understanding of how the frustrated customer was feeling before moving on to cognitive empathy statements.

To design more culturally sensitive materials, our training team worked with members of Da Pidgin Coup, a group of Pidgin advocates based on O'ahu who meet regularly to discuss Pidgin-related research, outreach, and community events (Higgins, 2010). Consultations with Da Pidgin Coup showed that a more culturally relevant expression of affective empathy in Hawai'i would involve not just

statements about the customer (the other) but also statements about the call center agents (the self) which show that the customer's feelings are truly understood. In other words, a response that aims to show a mutual experience is the goal. Beyond this, a greater use of exclamations of an empathetic nature would be expected from the service provider that would resonate with Pidgin expressions such as *pua ting* ('poor thing') and Hawaiian interjections used in Pidgin *auwē* ('how awful') and *aloha 'ino* ('what a shame'). While we did not aim to teach the agents to use Pidgin, we encouraged them to find ways to express empathy in English in a manner that would be aligned with Pidgin speakers' expectations for showing mutual experience or reciprocity.

### 6.2.3 | Teaching Pidgin empathy

To illustrate how we taught the pragmatics of empathy, we focus on the face-to-face instruction when Lisa was on-site at Connex in Dominica. The analysis considers our instructional materials in Lesson 8 (see Table 1) and 6 hr of classroom interaction that took place during Lesson 9, divided among three class meetings of agents (2 hr per group). During Lesson 9, the call center agents were first exposed to scenarios we devised to examine how mutual experience could be expressed. Similar to how most language textbook dialogues are invented, we designed these scenarios to draw attention to our pedagogical goal: to raise awareness of contextualization cues in Pidgin that point to anger. In writing these scenarios, we followed a process of referring to the samples Connex had sent us, consulting call center research, and discussing relevant scenarios as a team. We also shared our draft scenarios with Da Pidgin Coup and with the chief trainer of Connex.

In the classroom in Dominica, Lesson 9 began by asking two agents to read the dialogue (Figure 3) aloud, followed by a discussion about the pragmatics. In the excerpts below, transcription conventions are adapted from Hepburn and Bolden (2013). While we video recorded the interactions, we only examine the verbal expressions of empathy below, in line with what customers who call in to speak with an agent would hear.

|    |         |  |
|----|---------|--|
| 01 | Agent:  | Good afternoon. I see I'm speaking with Kye-sung Kang. My name is Natalie. How can I help you today?                                     |
| 02 |         |  |
| 03 | Caller: | Oh, my name Karen.   |
| 04 | Agent:  | Sure, Hi Karen. How can I help you today?  |
| 05 | Caller: | My internet not working. I wen try fix em but stay all hamajang. ('My internet is not working. I tried to fix it but it is still down.') |
| 06 | Agent:  | Oh no. That's no good. Well, let me see what I can do to help.   |
| 07 | Caller: | Dis da second time dis week no work. ('This is the second time this week that it hasn't worked.')  |
| 08 | Agent:  | Oh wow. Let me try to help you to make sure that doesn't happen again.   |
| 09 |         |  |
| 10 | Caller: | I like watch my Netflix but no can. Da ting neva download. ('I want to watch my Netflix but can't. It didn't download.')                 |
| 11 | Agent:  | Oh, I hate it when that happens. Just when you want to watch your favorite show, right? Now let me see what I can do.                    |
| 12 |         |  |

FIGURE 3 Written scenario used in teaching locally relevant anger and empathy

The scenario in Figure 3 draws attention to the affective empathy that the agent offers about the customer's internet problems. The agent displays contextualization cues of attention and empathetic understanding ('oh no,' line 6; 'oh wow' line 8), but the significant turn in the conversation is in lines 11 and 12, when the agent expresses her own emotional experience, indicating that she knows what it feels like to not have access to a favorite show. While this statement about the self is not overly intimate, it goes well beyond what has been reported in the call center literature for recommended ways of expressing affective empathy. After reading the scenario, our on-site instructor, Lisa, explains how the short reciprocal narrative in lines 11-12 of the scenario work as a contextualization cue showing genuine empathy. The agents' comments in lines 4-5 and 10 in Excerpt 1 point to this difference. Following Lisa's constructed dialogue in line 9, which represents a typical response to a continental U.S. customer, Agent2 shows her understanding in line 10 of a need to connect more personally in order to construct this frame.

#### Excerpt 1. Teaching and understanding Pidgin empathy

- 1 Lisa: So: one of the ways that Pidgin speakers show empathy is to share  
2 personal experiences. People from Hawai'i are friendly. Personable.  
3 We like to talk story.=
- 4 Agent1: =You tell me what happened to you and I tell you what happened to  
5 me.
- 6 Lisa: ((nods)) If a Pidgin speaker is sharing personal experiences, maybe  
7 about, it could be about weather (.) their family or whatever, how is  
8 this approach different from an American person. A customer service  
9 person. (1.0) "Oh thank you for complaining."
- 10 Agent2: There would be more connecting.

Next, Lisa encouraged the agents to consider the expressions of empathy, which led to comparisons with how empathy is conveyed generally by customers in Dominica and by customers from the continental U.S. when interacting with the agents.

#### Excerpt 2. Reflecting on empathetic call center style across speakers

- 1 Lisa: What do you notice about empathy?
- 2 Agent3: The last statement, that was a nice one.=
- 3 Agent4: = I hate when that happens.
- 4 Agent3: She brought in her own experience. She understands.

- 5 Lisa: She is expressing 'I agree with you' and 'it's so annoying.' (0.5) I
- 6 know that hate is a little strong.
- 7 Agent5: The person is so angry with the agent (.) it will calm them down.
- 8 Lisa: How would this be different here. (0.5) Same conversation?
- 9 Agent6: >'ll try to see what I can do to get it resolved.<=
- 10 Agent2: =If you call up, they'll be like >yes we are aware of this situation and
- 11 we will send our field technicians out to check that for you.< We would
- 12 get straight to the point.
- 13 Lisa: What about the mainland?
- 14 Agent4: >You better fix it<=
- 15 ((laughter))
- 16 Agent2: =They'd be more angry.=
- 17 Agent6: =They would request a technician for the service.=
- 18 Agent7: =If it happened twice they would be rougher. They would be swearing.
- 19 First time, they would be more upset (.) but then when it happens
- 20 again, prepare for banging.=
- 21 (((laughter)))

In lines 3-4, Agent 3 and Agent4 mention the specific contextualization cue of telling a reciprocal narrative which indexes empathy in the scenario in lines 2-4. Then, in line 7, Agent 5 points out the perlocutionary effectiveness of creating an empathetic frame. Lisa then connects the example to the local context of Dominica in line 8, and the agents describe the service style as direct and straight to the point. Their constructed dialogue lacks any affective empathy (lines 9-11). Lisa then asks about the conversational style of empathy on the “mainland,” or contiguous United States in line 13. The agents draw upon their own work experience with continental U.S. customers to point out the differences in the participation frameworks and schema involved, as they see the customers in the continental U.S. as more willing to make demands and to show their emotions through the cue of swearing (line 18) and upgraded complaints (“banging,” line 20).

Following these discussions, the agents were asked to write their own scenarios and prepare to perform them in pairs. They drew on their experiences working at the call center working with continental U.S. customers, but they incorporated the lessons about Hawai‘i-specific anger and

empathy into their dialogues. While we did not expect them to produce Pidgin in their customer roles, some of them did so (and quite accurately). The agents also showed off what they had learned from us about the distinctive names in Hawai'i, for they took the opportunity to give their role play characters names common to Hawai'i. While the role plays were meant to be designed so that the 'agent' would be located in Dominica, in (3), Agent8 names himself 'Kimo', which is common in Hawai'i but unlikely in Dominica. We see this as enthusiasm for the lessons we taught about local names. The agent playing the customer (Agent9) names himself Mr. Reyes, which is a common Filipino and/or Portuguese name in Hawai'i, and he even makes use of Pidgin for his part in the role play.

Excerpt 3 is a role play of a complaint about a malfunctioning cable box. The 'agent', 'Kimo', expresses a great deal of local knowledge by anticipating the customer's concern about seeing a live football game broadcast from Hawai'i featuring a local team. The agent who is enacting the customer role enhances his performance by explaining that he has bet a lot of money on the football game, underscoring the importance of watching the game.

### Excerpt 3. Role play about a malfunctioning cable box

- 1 Agent8: Hi, thank you for calling, this is Kimo. How can I help you.
- 2 Agent9: I'm Mr. Reyes. And dis ting is in junk. (I get) choke problems with  
3 my box man.  
(I'm Mr. Reyes. And this thing is no good. There are a lot of problems  
with my box man.)
- 4 Agent8: Oh no, I'm so sorry Mr. Reyes. Football is on today, right? Well, I'd  
5 hate to miss the season like I did last time. I'm going to get you  
6 through this okay?
- 6 Agent9: Kay. So how long can stay like dis? Can you fix em?  
(‘Okay. So how long will this be? Can you fix it?’)
- 7 Agent8: Well, we can definitely have this fixed right away. You are going to  
8 see the Rainbow Warriors win this one, tru:st me.
- 9 Agent9: K-den, dat would be good. I got choke money on dis one.  
(Fine, that would be good. I have bet a lot of money on this game.)

Agent8 shows his mutual experience by not only anticipating the focus of Mr. Reyes's concern but also by concocting a personal experience that relates to the presumed feelings of the customer. In lines (4–6), he depicts himself as a football fan of the same Hawai'i team, and he expresses affective empathy about having missed the football season himself at an earlier time, which establishes a more cooperative frame. The statement ('I'd hate to miss the season') also serves as a contextualization cue displaying local knowledge to the caller. This local understanding and knowledge is furthered by the use of another contextualization cue in line 8, where Agent8 uses the an older nickname for the local football team which, while not currently used in official merchandise, is still often used in local discourse. While Agent8's performance requires a suspension of disbelief, the point is that the affective empathy frame is quite marked through his use of intensifier ('so'), his shared repertoire about the football game schedule, and his own narrative that displays emotion.

Another role play that shows a sensitivity to Pidgin interactional style is in Excerpt 4. Here, Agent4 plays the role of Mary DeSilva, a believable Portuguese name for Hawai'i. Though there is no Pidgin attempted in the role play, Agent3 successfully expresses Hawai'i-style empathy toward 'Mary', who cannot get her movie to play. In line 5, she apologizes in a manner aligned with the global call center style, but then adds an expression of mutual experience, which can be heard as a means of aligning with local sociopragmatic norms: 'I really hate it when that happens', using language similar to the pedagogical scenario in Figure 3. The agents explained that they would not normally speak this way with their continental U.S. customers but wanted to show that they had understood the lessons. Making use of the global call center style, Agent3 continued to express attentive and cognitive empathy in line 8, reassuring 'Mary' that she was following her complaint and also taking action to resolve the problem, using cognitive empathy. While some of the lexical features would not be heard as 'native-like' in any part of the United States ('Good day'), the expression of affective empathy in lines 5 and 6 is well-suited for Hawai'i customers.

#### Excerpt 4. Role play about a rented movie not playing

- 1 Agent3: Good day, thanks for calling [Moana] Cable today. I'm Stacey. How  
2 can I assist you?
- 3 Agent4: Good day, Stacey. I'm Mary DeSilva, calling in reference to a movie I  
4 ordered, Frozen, and it's not playing.
- 5 Agent3: I'm so sorry to hear that Ms. (.) Mrs. DeSilva. I really hate it when this  
6 happens.
- 7 Agent4: Yeah I know, and the kids were really looking forward to seeing it.
- 8 Agent3: I understand, I'll do any- everything I can to get this fixed for you. (.)  
9 It will take just about five minutes.
- 10 Agent4: Great, I'd love that. Thanks so much Stacey, you just saved movie  
11 night.

While these examples show how the agents were able to express empathy in a reciprocal manner, about half of the pairs did not personalize the agent's role through any contextualization cues that index a mutual experience. This may have been because they were not familiar enough yet with the Hawai'i interactional style, or that they simply needed more practice and guidance. Their prior training by Connex to keep calls as efficient as possible surely also discouraged them from taking a few more seconds to express reciprocal empathy. In these cases, the agents kept the affective empathy brief in the form of an apology and moved on to the cognitive empathy stage of anticipating the steps required to solve the problem, as illustrated in Excerpt 5.

#### Excerpt 5. Role play about an unexpected charge

1 Agent10: Good morning and thank you for calling [Moana] Cable. My name is

2 Tina. How can I help you today.

3 Agent11: Hi Tina, my name is Christine Alinguen. I'm calling about this charge

4 I saw on my bill for a service call fee that I was not told about.

5 Agent10: Okay well I really do apologize that you were not told of the fee. And,

6 we do appreciate you calling in today. (.) I'll be more than happy to

7 take a look here for you.

8 Agent11: You better take it off. (0.5) Cause I wasn't informed. (.) I want it off.

9 Agent10: Okay once again I'm very sorry and I do apologize. I'm reviewing the

10 to account have it removed.

11 Agent11: I'll wait.

In Excerpt 5, Agent10 apologizes about the unexpected charge the customer reports, thanks the customer ('we do appreciate you calling in today'), and moves on to cognitive empathy, indicating that she will resolve the problem. She uses metalanguage to express cognitive empathy in line (9), stating, 'I'm reviewing the account', which helps the customer to understand that actions are being taken toward resolution. However, such interactional styles are likely to leave Pidgin-speaking customers wanting more in terms of feeling like they have truly been heard. While Agent10 apologizes multiple times (lines 5 and 9), her discourse lacks a reciprocal narrative or even discourse markers with emotional valences, and hence has the potential to be heard as impersonal.

## 7 | DISCUSSION

In their analysis of call center interactions in Singapore, Clark et al. (2013) found that empathy was not welcome by customers in cases where moving quickly forward to resolution was the goal. Moreover,

Hultgren (2017b) found that onshore agents preferred to use customer names as a strategy for building rapport over other options, such as small talk, as it was the most efficient strategy at hand. Even though efficiency is central to call center work, we would still consider the expression of affective empathy to be crucial when serving Hawai'i customers. In Excerpt 5, it would have been appropriate for the agent to have responded to the customer's line 8 with a brief acknowledgment of the customer's feeling of surprise, such as 'oh, no' or even 'that's a shame', utterances which take less than one second. Conversations with Connex's U.S.-based chief trainer about the need to share more affective empathy revealed a corporate concern, however, that was rooted in a more global call center orientation. We were told that in handling complaints regarding monetary transactions, providing these acknowledgments might be interpreted as culpability, so Connex strongly guided the agents away from making such statements in talking about payments, refunds, and surprising charges reported by customers. In such cases, our training was constrained by the corporation's financial interests. The agents were well trained to avoid expressing culpability, and this was likely a major challenge to practicing the expression of empathy that we were encouraging. Even though we observed some clear cases of agents taking up our Pidgin empathy lessons, we saw that for many, it was not always possible to follow our advice while also enacting the efficiency-driven call center script they had been required to learn.

Despite this, the call center agents were all trained to understand Pidgin speakers when engaged in customer service, and we see this as a step in the right direction. Another positive outcome of this work was finding that the call center agents were not only willing but enthusiastic to compare Pidgin, Dominican, and continental U.S. interactional styles, and that they recognized each interactional style as unremarkable and normative for its local context. They also expressed positive sentiments about Hawai'i's local norms, particularly when comparing Pidgin interactional styles with those in the continental U.S. Another positive outcome of the training that we learned from the agents was that while their previous training had encouraged them to neutralize their Dominican accents, our training had provided an opportunity to 're-creolize' their communication in a professional context. Even the chief trainer of Connex noted humorously that while she spent most of her time on accent neutralization, preparing the call center workers to serve Hawai'i customers meant that they had to unlearn everything she had taught them. Her recognition of the context-specific nature of linguistic norms in the realm of 'good' customer service in English was a (very brief) moment in which the neutralizing forces of the global call center style were challenged. These outcomes show that people working in transnational work environments are able to reflect upon and expand upon their linguistic repertoires to enhance their translanguaging awareness.

From a more critical perspective, the benefits here are mainly to the companies involved, as the expansion of training to marginalized languages is simply part of the neoliberal enterprise, which involves expanding markets and finding ways to maximize profits by tailoring customer service (Duchêne, 2009). Using the client's language is a marketing strategy that benefits the corporation in terms of profits and is an added 'skill,' in line with Taylorist techniques created for industrialization. Linguistic diversity is only relevant as it relates to benefits for the bottom line. While the language training was apparently valued, the agents' ability to articulate empathy following our instruction was constrained by whether or not doing so would inhibit profits, since it would make Moana Cable appear too apologetic.

## 8 | CONCLUSION

Local call center workers in Hawai'i would surely be best positioned to serve local customers in Hawai'i, given the shared linguistic and cultural practices. However, the relocation of the workplace

across two oceans drew attention to the problems inherent in the homogenizing communication practices of the global call center industry. While Moana Cable's CEO recognized the limits of this linguistic Taylorism by requiring Pidgin language training for Dominican workers, it is clear that the many other constraints of call center work, including efficiency and culpability, were obstacles in fully implementing localized interactional styles.

Since our work was managed by Connex's corporate office, located in the southeastern U.S., our language training was subject to the norms that were in place for that office. While our lessons on understanding Pidgin speakers were well received, our lesson that focused on articulating a locally sensitive pragmatics was met with some obstacles. If the CEO of Moana Cable had been our supervisor, we feel that the outcome would have been different, given his initial concerns about the importance of knowing how to communicate to local people. However, given the transnational channels of our work, we did not have the chance to communicate with him despite living on the same island.

While companies have benefited from a uniform approach to providing service, customers will also demand high-quality customer care, and in an interactional style that speaks to them. Given the cost–benefits of locating the service work of companies in the global North to more profitable settings transnationally, we expect that various forms of linguistic Taylorism in call centers and other industries could result in more calls for localization, but only if the voice of the customer is in fact a key concern of all of the corporate stakeholders involved in doing transnational business.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> It is important to distinguish between the Commonwealth of Dominica, where this study takes place, and the Dominican Republic, which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti.
- <sup>2</sup> The team was comprised of Gavin Furukawa, Christina Higgins, Lisa Houghtailing, and Kent Sakoda.
- <sup>3</sup> After administering the training to agents in Dominica remotely ourselves, we then conducted a 'train the trainers' program with these three senior agents so that they could take over the Pidgin language awareness instruction for future agent cohorts in Dominica.
- <sup>4</sup> 75 of the 81 agents completed the questionnaire.

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