Mi-Cha Flubacher*

Scripting Swiss smiles: a sociolinguistic analysis of affective-discursive practices in a Swiss call centre

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Abstract: Revisiting data from a sociolinguistic ethnography of an in-bound Swiss call centre (2010–2011), I will show how the scripted smile of agents is fused strategically with the use of the dialect in order to produce ‘affective-discursive practices’ that aim for a projection of quality of service. These practices include ‘scripted affective efficiency’ and the ‘stylization of Swiss authenticity’. Inherently embedded in and emblematic of the political economy, these particular affective-discursive practices are conducive to the company’s branding strategies of authenticity, directly linked to market distinction and profit generation. From today’s standpoint, i.e. 10 years later, transformations in ICT (Information and Communications Technology) have displayed the limits of these affective practices and their underlying discourses and ideologies in the face of cost-benefit analyses when the number of incoming calls dwindled due to the development of smartphones. This paper will discuss affective-discursive practices from a political-economic and critical sociolinguistic perspective.

Keywords: affective-discursive practices; authenticity; call centre; dialect; Switzerland

1 Introduction

Imagine a spacious and brightly lit room, buzzing with activity. About 30 desks are arranged in stars of four each. Every desk is decked out with a computer screen and mobile workstation, in front of which agents are engaged in phone conversations – we are at the heart of a call centre in the year of 2010. Both design and set up of the call centre are rather generic and, apart from the specific mix of languages used, could be located anywhere. Yet, as we know by now, the location of a call centre is never coincidental, but always connected to specific political economic conditions.
In Cameron’s words (2000: 328): “since its physical location is irrelevant – customers do not have to go there – it can be put where rents and labour costs are low”. While we will turn to the political economic transformations that led to the instalment of this particular call centre in this particular city in more detail below, in this case, the call centre (pseudonymised as “Call_In”) is located in an office building on a peripheral street in a rather rundown area of downtown Biel/Bienne (henceforth: Biel). Biel is a mid-sized officially bilingual Swiss city – hence the German-French city name Biel/Bienne – with a population of about 50,000, nestled on what has come to be described as the linguistic border between the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. As a case in point, all around us we can hear quick and efficient phone conversations mostly in Swiss German but also in German, French, Italian, and, occasionally, English. We are on one of the two floors of this in-bound call centre that delivers phone numbers, addresses and other contact information to in-calling customers (nota bene, it is 2010 and smartphones were only capable of a fraction for which we use them today). The conversations are short exchanges of information; most agents switch between languages from one call to the next, and sometimes even within the same call. There are stickers on the computers to remind the agents to smile when a customer calls – as “smiles can be heard”, the stickers say.

This sticker reminds us of how language practices of agents in call centres are ‘scripted’ (Boutet 2008; Duchêne and Flubacher 2015) for efficiency and profitability as well as ‘stylized’ for a positive customer experience, intertwining ideologies of femininity with service instructions (Cameron 2000; Calderón 2005). Practices such as recommending agents to always “smile” on the telephone have been described as ‘emotional labor’ by Hochschild (2012 [1983]). She argues that “[t]his labor requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others—in this case, the sense of being cared for in a convivial and safe place” (Hochschild 2012 [1983]: 7), even in a one-minute telephone interaction that is, in fact, a business transaction. In the context of German-speaking Switzerland, such “convivial and safe places” are furthermore typically marked by the use of the dialect, i.e. the variety considered ‘authentic’ and ‘natural’ by its speakers (Watts 1999) – in contrast to the standard variety, which is often perceived as artificial and formal for speaking purposes.

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1 In-bound call centres receive incoming calls from customers – in contrast to out-bound call centres, in which agents contact customers (cf. for an example of the latter Woydack and Rampton [2016]).
Revisiting data from a sociolinguistic ethnography of an in-bound Swiss call centre (2010–2011), I will show how the scripted smile of the agents is fused strategically with the use of the dialect in order to produce ‘affective-discursive practices’ (Wetherell 2012, 2013) that aim for a projection of quality of service. Inherently embedded in and emblematic of political economy (Duchêne and Heller 2012), these particular affective practices are conducive to the company’s branding strategies of ‘authenticity’ (Dlaske 2015), directly linked to market distinction and profit generation (Duchêne and Del Percio 2014). From today’s standpoint, i.e. a decade later, transformations in ICT (Information and Communications Technology) have displayed the limits of these affective practices and their underlying discourses and ideologies. In other words, when the number of incoming calls dwindled due to the development of smartphones, cost-benefit analyses had to be made with consequences for the call centre agents, as I will expand on below. In looking backwards, this paper will shed light on the multiple and multi-dimensional workings of affect in current capitalism from a critical sociolinguistic perspective.

2 The setting

Since the 1990s, the formerly industrial city of Biel has attracted a variety of businesses in the communication sector, ranging from ICT-companies, technological start-ups, and software developers to service-oriented call centres. It has done so, successfully, by highlighting its French-German-bilingual population. In its branding strategy, Biel positioned itself within Switzerland as the “city of communication”. In the following, I will describe the research project (Section 2.1) dedicated to study these political economic transformations (Section 2.2) and the ensuing establishing of several call centres, of which Call_In can be considered as emblematic (Section 2.3).

2.1 The call centre-project

The call centre described in the introduction is the site of the sociolinguistic ethnographic research project “When language becomes the subject of work: Multilingualism in Biel/Bienne’s call centres”, led by Alexandre Duchêne at the Institute of Multilingualism in Fribourg, Switzerland (2010–2011) and financed by the Forum du Bilinguisme in Biel. It was the aim of the project to study the connections and effects of the expansion of the service and communication sector and
the bi-/multilingualism of Biel. The project consisted of an ethnography of one specific call centre, on the one hand, and of a discursive genealogy of how Biel came to its (successful) self-positioning and branding as “the city of communication”, and the relevance of the local bilingualism in this process, on the other. In order to do this, we reconstructed the discursive rendering of the political economic transformation of this industrial city that had seen many crises and recessions, and is now home to one of the main ICT clusters in Switzerland. Apart from archival work and systematic literature survey, we interviewed several city officials and union representatives. Moreover, we were ethnographically interested in the lived experience of call centre agents who actually provide the necessary multilingual resources. For this, we intermittently spent half-days in this call centre over six months (observing, chatting with agents, listening in/recording interactions, and getting a grasp of business operations and the work processes), culminating in me completing the three-day training for future call centre agents. In the process of the ethnography, we interviewed call centre agents, supervisors, and Call_In’s managing director. The original aims and ensuing insights of the study will serve as a backdrop to this paper (cf. Duchêne 2019; Duchêne and Flubacher 2015; Flubacher and Duchêne 2012), but the focus here will shift onto two dimensions that are most promising for teasing out the meaning and mapping of affective practices in a work environment: the scripted smile, i.e. the ‘scripted affective efficiency’, and the stylization of Swiss authenticity through the dialect as affective marker of belonging and authenticity.

2.2 Biel/Bienne: the city of communication

As mentioned in Section 1, the mid-sized city of Biel (50,000 inhabitants) is officially bilingual in French-German – and presents itself as the largest bilingual Swiss city.\(^2\) Considering the two official languages, the statistics published on 1 January 2020 show the following linguistic distribution: 57% of the population indicated to use German,\(^3\) 43% French. In terms of main language(s), the latest survey in 2018 indicated that 48.6% chose German, 43.7% French, 9.6% Italian and 31.1% “other languages”.\(^4\) When it comes to multilingualism, 36.9% self-indicated

\(^3\) Swiss German is usually not an option in official language surveys but included in “German”.
\(^4\) The elevated percentage of Italian speakers is due to former labour migration from Italy to Biel (even if this immigration occurred a few generations ago, this community has maintained Italian as their main language).
to be monolingual, 32.9% bilingual, and 20.3% tri- or multilingual (Rieder 2018). The city officials of Biel used such statistical data to list its bilingualism as a ‘living tradition in Switzerland’ in 2003, still, these numbers do not tell us in which languages the inhabitants of Biel are bi-/multilingual or what their level of competence is in each language. Regardless, French-German bilingualism has become an identity marker for the city. Yet, it has also been turned into a commodity – i.e. in the sense that “language can be exchanged for various forms of capital gain on specific markets” (Muth and Del Percio 2018: 130) – by the city’s administration since the early 1990s, following and reacting to local, national, and global political economical transformations (in more detail cf. Duchêne and Flubacher 2015; Flubacher and Duchêne 2012). Today, the locally established watch industry is probably considered an inherent feature of the city’s socio-economic landscape as its French-German bilingualism. Interestingly, both only arrived in Biel in the end of the 19th century: At the beginning of the 19th century, the city was one of the principal textile manufacturers in Switzerland. But when the textile factories closed down in mid-19th century and high unemployment rates ensued, the city was pressed to find economic solutions. It was decided to actively recruit watchmakers from the Jura, the francophone region to its west, in opening its otherwise closed gates for non-local workers. Coincidentally, the then predominantly German-speaking city of Biel not only ‘imported’ this industry, but also the French language spoken by the watchmakers. This basically resulted in a shift of the language border further to the French-speaking east of Switzerland.

The watchmaking industry was graced with international success (one has to think of the success stories of Rolex and Swatch) and has become a strong pillar of Switzerland’s export business. Yet, this internationalization of economic production came with a price, namely under the hard-hitting economic crises of the 20th century. After the economic boom of the post-WWII-years, the recession induced by the international oil crisis (1973–1974) also affected Biel. Contrary to other cities that were economically more diversified, Biel had a hard time recovering, with exports slow to pick up. By the 1980s, it had become one of the poorest cities in Switzerland, infamous for its high rates of crime and unemployment, and a new political economic strategy was urgently needed. When young and ambitious Hans Stöckli was elected as mayor in 1990, he started to brand Biel as the “city of communication”. In our research interview, he recounted this decision as a


conscious effort to draw on what ‘natural resources’ the city had to offer, i.e. its bilingual population, competent in both German and French. With this move he naturalised the language competences of the local population, depicting them as destined to work in the “city of communication”. Individual bi-/multilingualism thus became a condition to find a job rather than a plus on the labour market. As such, language competences were not considered the result of personal ‘investments’ – i.e. “individual, institutional, or societal investments in terms of financial resources, time, and energy for the development of language competences that (ideally) can be turned into economic profit (Duchêne 2016)” (Flubacher et al. 2018: 2) – but as inherently and primarily linked to a specific place and, thus, to the people inhabiting that place. Language competences were banalized in the process, i.e. not subject to further remuneration (cf. Duchêne 2009), a point made politically and economically in Biel.

The multilingual population, it must be emphasized, consisted to a large extent of an unemployed working class with salaries that ranked among the lowest in Switzerland. Further, real estate was cheap and easily available (e.g., former industrial waste land). Due to the precarious economic situation of the city, the federal government also provided favourable conditions to attract companies to move their quarters there (minimized tax rates and generous loans). In the end, Biel managed to establish itself as the “city of communication” in not only attracting ICT companies but also, importantly, the Federal Office of Communication, which was created in 1992. In the wake of this transformation, several call centres relocated to Biel, both from abroad and from within Switzerland. Over the timespan of 10 years, these ICT companies and call centres created around 3,000 jobs, proving the mayor right. In today’s strategy (“Strategie Biel 2030”), Biel has been rebranded as “the city of opportunity”; the keyword “communication” has been erased, whereas “bilingualism” is still a central element and is now complemented by “diversity” (both of its population and its economic activities).7

The economic shift inherent in the branding of the city of the 1990s most importantly involved the transformation from a predominantly industrial to a service-based economy – a shift emblematic of “the current paradigm, in which providing services and manipulating information are at the heart of economic product” (Hardt 1999: 90). In this paradigm, services “are characterized in general by the central role played by knowledge, information, communication, and affect. In this sense, we can call the postindustrial economy an informational economy” (Hardt 1999: 91; emphasis added). Importantly, Hardt (1999: 92) adds that the “division between manufacturing and services is becoming blurred” – a point to

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keep in mind when addressing call centres, in particular their work processes and conditions.

2.3 Call_In: a call centre in the era of informational economy

Call_In was one of the call centres to put up shop in Biel. According to the managing director, the choice for Biel was mainly linked to the aforementioned political economic advantages of the city: low salaries for an unemployed working class, favourable fiscal and political conditions, and affordable real estate. Most importantly, however, the establishing of Call_In in Switzerland was premised on the liberalization of the Swiss market of telephone information in 2007. The business model of Call_In was to provide national and international information service upon inquiry by callers, i.e. phone numbers, addresses etc. around the clock – ideally within 30 s, or a maximum of 42 s, as instructions had it. Callers would pay a hefty inquiry fee of SFR1.99/minute, ca. US$2, whether the calls lasted 20 or 59 s, so agents were required to keep the calls as short as possible. At the time of our ethnography, Call_In employed about 120 agents, most of them on part time-contracts with shifts of 8.5 h (while everyone was obliged to work one weekend per month, night shifts were said to be voluntary). The short duration of the calls could amount to about 500 per shift. The agents were a broad mix of students or other young people undecided about their future trajectory, housewives and mothers returning to the labour market, job-seekers trying out a new venue, and agents transferring from other call centres.

Services were officially offered in the three national languages, which are regionally clustered in the following distribution across Switzerland: German 62.2%, French 22.9%, Italian 8.0%. This is why the calls – this was still the era of landlines – were automatically transferred to agents speaking the official language of the area code of the call, unless the caller had requested a specific language in a previous call to Call_In. Contrary to the ‘policy’ of Biel not to remunerate additional language skills, Call_In paid SFR100/month for any additional national language an agent was operational in. English competences, however, were not additionally remunerated according to the managing director, even if also offered as service language. All the other languages that agents could have offered

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9 While Call_In operates on the national Swiss market, it actually belongs to a parent company based in the United States of America that provides similar services in a variety of countries. The locations of its offices are far from random, and fit the call centre business footprint (e.g., Morocco, the Philippines, Ireland – and Biel, Switzerland).
services in were not paid extra (e.g. Spanish, Albanian). In fact, agents were discouraged from using ‘other’ languages for the sake of predictability, i.e. for fear of creating expectations on the side of customers that could not always be met (e.g. when no Spanish-speaker was on shift), which could potentially prove damaging for business. In the end, the most important linguistic resource was Swiss German, the umbrella term for the Alemannic dialects spoken within Swiss borders (Ruoss 2019: 3–4), and considered the authentic vernacular in contrast to Standard German used for official, professional, and education purposes (Flubacher 2013). This is why the managing director considered it primordial for the provision of services in Switzerland: As many call centres had relocated or opened up in other German-speaking countries – or even further away, thus providing service by L2-speakers of German – the availability of Swiss German speakers was regarded as one of the main points of distinction for Call_In, speaking to Swiss idea(l)s of authenticity and localness.

3 From language and affect to affective capitalism

After setting the scene of economic and linguistic stakes involved in both a city’s attempts at location branding and a call centre’s economic activity and operations, we turn to the following questions: What does it imply theoretically to study affect in a call centre in a bi- and multilingual Swiss city? How do language and affect come together in this? And, finally, why is this of interest? As such, then, this paper is part of a broader discussion on the potential contribution of sociolinguistics to the ‘affective turn’ in social sciences and the humanities and to the understanding of affective capitalism (cf. Introduction to this issue). Sociolinguistics has taken up this turn, arguing that the study of language and discourse can serve to unpack the meaning of affect, even if the relationship between language/discourse and affect has remained contested, or rather, whether affect can be considered a discursive matter or whether it is actually relegated to the outside of discourse (cf. Milani and Richardson 2021: 671). This contribution follows the discursive approach, for which Wetherell’s publication (2012) Affect and emotion proves inspiring, understanding “discourse as mediating affect in and through affective-discursive practices” (Nissi and Dlaske 2020: 448).

Now, not only does Wetherell (2012, 2013) propose that affects are discursive, but also that they are social. This means that they are socially patterned, distributed and, in fact, practices, in the sense of “what people do with meaning-making resources” (Milani and Richardson 2021: 673; emphasis in the original). In keeping with a political economic framework rather than reading affect as individual emotions, their effects and investments have to be considered. And, finally as
Ahmed (2004: 4) reminds us, “we should ask not what emotions are, but what work emotions do”. A practice-oriented approach finally leads us to speak of affective-discursive practice as “a figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning-making and with other social and material figurations” (Wetherell 2012: 19; cf. Karppi et al. 2016; McElhinny 2010). This does not mean that affects are not experienced or conveyed individually; it means that the analysis of affects looks beyond the individual level to understand how and why certain affects are legitimate, ‘stick’ (Ahmed 2004), and circulate in contrast to others (cf. Urban and Urban [2020], who offer a discussion on affect and cultural forms).

Turning to the question of how to situate language in this discursive configuration of affect – or rather, of affective-discursive practices – it might be necessary to lay out the epistemological anchoring of this contribution. For a while now, phenomenological approaches to language have “investigated the bodily/emotional prerequisites for [or effects of] speaking and experiencing language” (Busch 2017: 355), e.g. in the contexts of language learning or minority languages. Yet, in order to address affective practices in a political economic framework and in the context of capitalist labour extraction, it is worth returning to The managed heart, the seminal publication by Hochschild (2012 [1983]), in which she dissects the “emotional labor” asked of (mainly) women working in the service sector – and the toll it takes on their personal lives. Emotional – or affective – labour is, in Hardt’s (1999) understanding, typical of the kind of immaterial labour present in ‘capitalist postmodernization’ and ‘informatization’. Hardt (1999: 98; emphasis added) elaborates on different types of affective labour, one of which “is the immaterial labor of analytical and symbolic tasks, which itself breaks down into creative and intelligent manipulation, on one hand, and routine symbolic tasks, on the other”. In this division of affective labour, the routinized and repetitive work tasks of call centre agents clearly are located in the second dimension, i.e. at the bottom rung of work hierarchies. Duchêne (2019: 24) argues that “they [call centre agents] are part of a subaltern workforce that, apart from being at the service of others, lacks forms of social recognition in many ways. Certainly, they have jobs. Nevertheless, these jobs are often precarious, socially devalorized, and limited in terms of economic outcome.” What also brings to bear in the devalorization of these jobs is that the language competences of workers are naturalized (or “banalized” sensu Duchêne [2019]) – especially in the context of Biel (cf. Section 2.2) – contrary to the competences of highly skilled workers in the informational economy (cf. Duchêne 2019: 24). In this respect, Thurlow (2021: 1), directly referring to

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10 Duchêne (2019: 25) offers a similar distinction inherent in the concept of language workers: parole d’oeuvre versus “wordsmiths” (Thurlow 2019).
Hochschild (2012 [1983]), reminds us that “commercial (aka capitalist) uses of affect simultaneously surface and obscure structural socio-economic disparities”. Other critical scholars of language have argued along these lines, i.e. using affect as an analytical lens to understand which ideologies and mechanisms are mobilized to erase disparities (cf. Allan [2019] on the mobilization of hope for that purpose). Similarly, McElhinny (2010: 312) argues that there is an inherent connection between emotion, hegemony, and social structure. For example, Allan (2016) has empirically studied the ‘skillification’ of migrants in Anglophone Canada, i.e. the teaching of soft skills for the context of the job interview. Such particular skills, read as culturally defined affective-discursive practices, re-emerge in Flubacher’s (2020) study on job interview instructions for the unemployed in Francophone Switzerland, or as embodied practices to recognize and enact in professional training for migrants in rural Italy (Del Percio and Van Hoof 2017). The insight of these studies is that the teaching and uptake of affective practices serve as ‘disciplining activities’ (Del Percio 2017), reminiscent of the Foucauldian concept of self-actualization. In the context of the call centre and its routine symbolic tasks, affective practices are organised along two axes, as I will argue in the following.

4 Scripting Swiss smiles

Irrespective of Call_In’s business in ‘knowledge’ and ‘information’, the efficiency with which agents are trained to handle calls might be striking to readers but is actually typical of call centres (cf. Cameron 2000; Duchêne 2009). Customer interactions are heavily prescribed in their modus operandi and scripted linguistically, with lists of expressions to use or to avoid. Most importantly, they are instructed to always remain polite and formal. As the basis of the business is ‘communication’ (another central element of the ‘informational economy’ listed by Hardt 1999), it is the main aim to come across as professional. The use of scripts for this very aim in workplaces of this new economy has been researched extensively within sociolinguistics (e.g., Boutet 2008; Cameron 2000; Woydack and Rampton 2016). Several scholars (e.g., Duchêne 2009; Heller 2010) have described the scripting of work processes, the quantification of work tasks and units, and the supervised ‘production’ of such ‘language work’ (Duchêne 2019) as paradigmatic of the process in which language becomes a commodity in call centres and/or in other businesses of the communication-based service economy (Duchêne and Heller 2012). As such, language work is not that different from production processes in factories (Boutet 2008), thus echoing the blurring of distinction between manufacturing and services proposed by Hardt (1999: 92) above.
A script usually not only “standardizes what is said”, but prescribes a specific styling, i.e. “an attempt to standardize how it is said” (Cameron 2000: 331; emphasis in the original). The how is more often than not a stylization that employs “symbolic markers of feminine gender” (Cameron 2000: 324), which are imagined – across various cultural contexts – as representative of and ensuring polite, friendly and interpersonal interaction styles, in turn effecting prosody, voice quality and smiles! Cameron (2000: 324) concludes: “The commodification of language in contemporary service workplaces is also in some sense the commodification of a quasi-feminine service persona”. Most importantly, such stylized scripts for customer service interactions “produce a style of service which is strongly affective – that is, not just neutrally polite and efficient, but based on the expression of positive feelings towards the customer” (Cameron 2000: 235; emphasis in original). Cameron’s statement is not coincidentally reminiscent of Hochschild’s 2012 [1983]) analysis of the “commercialization of human feeling” rampant in the service industry and affecting primarily the female workforce (cf. Thurlow 2021).

Building on these foundational works, this contribution empirically unpacks the affective practice enacted and enforced in Call_In, which I term the ‘Swiss smile’, the scripting of which consists of both ‘scripted affective efficiency’ (Section 4.1) as well as the ‘sty lisation of Swiss authenticity’ (Section 4.2). Now, by mapping affective practices onto capitalist practices (most importantly: to smile and be polite in a local vernacular), agents are encouraged to project a specific persona with specific qualities in their short customer service interactions. In effect, the affective commercialization process in customer service interactions collapses the iconic with the indexical (cf. Keane 2018). In other words, the ‘friendliness’ of an agent has to be experienced as an ‘authentic’ quality and, thus, as iconic, i.e. as a character trait of that specific person, in order to function indexically, i.e. as part of their persona that is engaged in customer service interactions conditioned by affective capitalism. The qualities asked of them to perform are not coincidentally based on “strong symbolic links between smiling, femininity and subordinate status” (Cameron 2000: 335). We realize that, thereby, tropes of service encounters are reinforced that are deeply ingrained in unequal statuses of the involved parties; this means that while this affective practice is considered ‘feminine’ in our cultures, it is actually an expression of social structure. In turn, the affective practices enacted and enforced in a call centre can be considered emblematic of the workings of “affective capitalism [as] a broad infrastructure in which the emotional culture and its classed and gendered history merge with value production and everyday life” (Karppi et al. 2016: 5). At what point, why, and with which consequences this merging becomes questioned will be discussed at the end of this paper.
4.1 Scripted affective efficiency

At Call_In, the customer service interactions are of very short duration, ideally below 45 s. How is it possible, then, to script such a short call as affective-discursive practice? To remind the reader, affective-discursive practices are understood as social practices, distributed across and enacted by the bodies of the call centre agents. While it refers to their embodied experiences of emotionality, it is not based on individual emotions. In the following, I will mainly draw on field notes from the three-day training at Call_In for future agents, which I completed 3–5 January 2011. While the notes documenting my experience provide the basis for my argument, they are complemented by recordings and interviews involving team leaders and supervisors as well as by observations and notes from Alexandre Duchêne.

The training started at 8am on a freezing and grey January morning. It took place on the premises of Call_In, in one of the ‘teaching rooms’ that have work stations installed. As typical for such a speech event, the interactions were entirely in Swiss German, with any document and computer program in Standard German. Only three other women attended the training, between 30 and 50 years old. The head of HR welcomed each of us by name in line with the generally informal atmosphere in the call centre: agents and the management were on a first-name basis and everyone seemed to know each other. She took us through the upcoming programme: We would be familiarised with the software, introduced to the main issues, and be informed about organisational and legal issues. Later, on the first day, we would ‘shadow’ an agent and already on the second day we would work calls with the mentoring of an experienced agent. On the third day, there would be a test, including a language test in the other national language potentially available per agent. Throughout the training, we were instructed in strategies for customer service interactions in Swiss German, which we wrote down in Standard German, e.g. which phrases to use so not to invite criticism (e.g. never to blame the customer for a misunderstanding). Interestingly, these instructions were framed as ‘strategies for self-protection’.

Working the station on the second day, we were intermittently monitored – without noticing it, as is the experience of any other agent in the call centre. The main feedback to the four of us was the following: We were reprimanded for using too much ‘slang’, which in their opinion includes formulations such as okay, but also fillers (ähm [‘erm’]) or backchannelling devices (mhm). In my notes, I wrote that “weirdly enough we were not instructed on avoiding such formulations beforehand” (translated from German). I was also puzzled by this framing as, from a linguistic perspective, interactional devices as fillers and backchannelling are
usually seen as interactionally productive and as expressions of interest and communicative engagement – rather than ‘slang’. In fact, these devices alongside “supportive simultaneous speech, precision-timed minimal responses and questions” (Cameron 2000: 333) have long been considered ‘women’s language’ to be then coopted as the desired style for call centres or other service interactions, as Cameron (2000: 333–341) elaborates. Further, we were requested to avoid ‘informal’ openings and closings such as hallo and ade or adieu in favour of using more formal variants Grüezi (“good morning”) or uf Wiederseh (i.e. “goodbye” rather than “bye”) – and, very importantly, not to disconnect the call before completing the closing. What I take from this is that the call centre pursues the twofold aim of professionalizing and formalizing these interactions, as well as keeping them at minimal length.

A first recapitulation thus goes to show that the training insists on speedy professional(ized) and formal(ized) communication with customers – both for the sake of the agents and the reputation of the business. But where is the affect in this scripting of the agents’ practice? Well, on the third (and final) day of the training, the head of operations gave a presentation, dealing with the question of “how do I come across on the phone?” He started by asking us the question, “What is important on the phone?” – and continued by answering it himself: “Laugh! Be friendly!” He insisted that customers can tell whether agents smile and that every interaction is based on the agents’ voices. It is thus the voice that represents the main work instrument, which needs to be taken care of (smoking and colds were presented as risks). The voice needs to be lively, not monotonous, he maintained. Ultimately, as he elaborated, in face-to-face interactions impressions are effectuated by voice only by 40%, as movements and appearance also weigh in, whereas on the phone 85% of a personal impression is given by one’s voice. He did not disclose where these numbers came from, but the message was crystal clear and repeated in three summarizing slogans at the end of his presentation: “If you don’t present a friendly face, you should not be on the phone.” “The more positive your aura, the more you will receive.” “If you feel good about yourself, you will be good on the phone.”

While urging us to ‘smile’, the head of operations – a former agent himself – acknowledged the difficulty of maintaining a friendly demeanour throughout, advising us to keep an emotional distance and to take it easy on ourselves. Yet, this realization of the toll of emotional labour has no direct effect on how agents are evaluated. Agents are covertly monitored 60 times/month by team leaders to check

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11 In the German original: “Wer kein freundliches Gesicht macht, sollte keine Telefongespräche führen.” “Je mehr Positives in der Ausstrahlung, desto mehr kommt zurück.” “Wer sich gut findet, wirkt auch gut am Telefon.”
on their performance (20 times each by their team leader, by an external team leader, and by quality management). The aim is to achieve a score of zero points — if not, a malus in the form of a reduction of salary could ensue (*nota bene*, a bonus is also possible but is hardly ever accorded, according to our sources). But what are the criteria for evaluation? As the script is mainly implicit and basically taught via evaluations, as I experienced myself during the training, we could almost speak of a *script ex negativo*, which is implemented in the monitoring program, basically a digital manual for evaluation. Its main criteria are explained to Alexandre (INT2) by “Alessia”, one of the quality managers we were allowed to shadow (hence: QMA), as she is showing him the monitoring programme on her screen, with which the evaluation manual will be filled out while listening in on an agent’s handing of a call:

### Excerpt 1: Interview QMA (recording, 27 January 2020; lines 382–415)


INT2: mhm

QMA: womer üs tüä. ä::hm. drahautä

INT2: jo


INT2: [mhm mhm mhm]

QMA: mit dä prinzipiä glichä prinzipiä … chöi grad schnäu churz [driluägä]

INT2: [jo]

QMA: das isch eigentlich underteilt. und zwar unger chundäfründlichkeit

INT2: jä

QMA: [konzentration]

INT2: [jo]

QMA: und s ändi vom gspräch

INT2: ok jä

QMA: u när heimer do verschidnigi pünkt womer tüä. bewärtä.

INT2: jo

QMA: sprich. wä&wänn jez dä agent nid nafragt und so witer git das nächer aifach dementsprächend. [pünkt/]

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12 Cf. transcription conventions below.
English translation from Swiss German

QMA: so we have here that’s actually not random monitoring but we have really a manual

INT2: mhm

QMA: which we do. e::rm. follow

INT2: yeah

QMA: this is done by EVERY teamleader and everyone in quality monitors it EXACTLY THE SAME with this [exact the same for&]

INT2: [mhm mhm mhm]

QMA: with the same principles same principles … could quickly briefly [take a look]

INT2: [yes]

QMA: it’s basically divided. namely between customer friendliness

INT2: yes

QMA: [concentration]

INT2: [yes]

QMA: and the closing of the call

INT2: ok yes

QMA: and then we have different points that we . evaluate

INT2: yes

QMA: that is. i& if now this agent doesn’t continue asking etc that will result in points accordingly. [points/]

INT2: [yes]

QMA: so . if a call is evaluated with zero/

INT2: yes

QMA: then this was a perfect [call]

INT2: [ok ok]

Alessia continues to list the points taken into consideration, of which affective-discursive practices are only a part, however, the evaluation manual has the following main criteria:
Excerpt 2: **Evaluation manual** (copied in notes and complemented)

- **Search method**
  - Number of transactions (the use of additional software creates costs for Call_In)
  - Correct spelling (listed as “grammar” in the manual)
- **Questioning technique**
  - Checking with customer in case of doubt or bad acoustics
  - Spelling technique
  - Transactional link with customer (informing them of what the agent is doing or politely asking them to wait)
- **Customer friendliness**
  - Proper opening and closing of interaction (not disconnecting the call too early)
  - Wording (“can I connect your call”, “thank you”)
  - Interaction: no interruption or disconnecting
  - No slang (“okay”, “erm”, “mhm”)
  - Smile, no monotony
- **Concentration of agent** *(e.g. is the Internet/a game open at the same time?)*
- **Duration of call** *(average threshold below 42 s)*

In these criteria, we recognize an imminent tension, on the one hand, between the ideal duration of the call and, on the other, the desired script of affective-discursive practice (i.e. customer friendliness and its recipe for formality and politeness) as well as the institutionally preferred search method, both of which potentially prolong a call. The *script ex negativo* can thus be regarded as a disciplining technology: Considering the short duration of the calls, the agents have the full responsibility to manage the affective-discursive practice of a call, which in turn is based on their smiles and further includes customer friendliness, professional communication, technical affordances and time constraints, as these have direct impact on team productivity and company costs. Thus the call centre scripts the affective efficiency necessary for its customer service interactions.

### 4.2 The stylization of Swiss authenticity

Considering that call centre interactions are not only ‘scripted’ but also commodified affective-discursive practices, the question of ‘authenticity’ comes into play (McElhinny 2010: 312). Thurlow (2021: 14 emphasis added), for one, has argued that “given the deeply habituated presence of emotional labour in the
marketplace, the search for authenticity drives customers towards new affective depths – new levels of demand for personalization and attention”. The question is thus how an inbound call centre with extremely short interactions can meet the requirement for such demands for personalization and attention? After all, customer service interactions of any kind require affective-discursive practices, as elaborated above.

As I will argue in the following, the conscious use of the Swiss German dialect (henceforth Swiss dialect) is one important means of stylizing authenticity in the Swiss territory, as it “plays an important role in indexing local identity” (Berthele 2021: 131), especially against the dominant German neighbour (Ruoss 2019). This affective ascription of emotional and cultural authenticity to the Swiss dialect is historically and ideologically linked to 19th century romanticism and the emerging national identity, which in turn became possible in its linguistic negation of the powerful German neighbor during early 20th century industrialization (Ruoss 2019). Furthermore, in the wake of the democratization and informalization processes of the 1960s, Swiss dialects became a stylistic means to break with standardized and hierarchical interactions in Swiss Standard German (for a discussion on the particular Swiss case of diglossia, i.e. the parallel use of two linguistic varieties in one territory cf. Flubacher [2013]). In current times, the dialect is the preferred mode of informal interaction among Swiss peers (Watts 1988; Werlen 2005). In fact, it is a code-switch to the standard that can introduce formality to an interaction, as observable in the classroom, in some TV programs, etc. (Stevenson 1997).

Without an official standard dialect, the ‘Swiss dialect’ encompasses more or less distinct regional varieties within the Alemannic continuum (Ruoss 2019). Unlike in other dialect regions in German-speaking countries, the Swiss dialect is thus not per se indexical of social class or rurality, which, however, does not mean that intra-dialectal variation is free of social markers or that specific dialects are not enregistered with particular persona. Rather, it serves as a “badge of Swissness, an emblem of ‘belonging’ to [the German-speaking region] of Switzerland, which is more powerful than any other emblem” (Watts 1999: 75). Similarly, it functions as a demarcation to ‘others’ (Werlen 2005) within Switzerland and beyond. In close ideological conception, the dialect is considered the ‘natural’ language in the German-speaking region (Werlen 2005). In other words, it is inextricably related to the territory and its people, and is thus its ‘authentic’ vernacular.

This could be one reason why, in the context of German-speaking Switzerland, scripted affective-discursive practice not only standardizes what is said and how (Cameron 2000: 331), but also in which variety and by whom. First, in the training at Call_In, we were told to speak naturally and “as usual” (hence: not monotonously or stilted) and not to disguise or change our voices. The idea of authenticity in
speech, however, was also mapped onto the language variety: We were instructed to each speak ‘authentically’ in our own dialect variety (me with the dialect from Basel, the others trainees with their respective dialects from Biel or Zurich), which indexes the idea that the Swiss dialect is discursively valued as the natural and authentic speech for Swiss customers. In practice, this meant that callers from area codes of German-speaking cantons were automatically transferred to agents who opened the interaction in Swiss German. Finally, we were advised to adopt short Swiss names and thus to nominally index authentic Swissness – especially if we had foreign-sounding names. The official reasoning behind this practice was twofold: (1) to shorten the opening recording for every call, and (2) to protect agents against racist and/or abusive customers. In any case, in this process, I was stripped both of my ‘exotic’ first name (Mi-Cha) and my longish last name (Flubacher) and simply became “Mia Bach”. Swiss authenticity was thus stylised on all levels of customer service interaction: speech style (most importantly: lexis and prosody), speech variety (Swiss dialect), and speaker persona (indexed through the name).

Considering this multilevel stylization, the question emerges as to why. According to the managing director (GES: Geschäftsführer in German), this is due to the particular linguistic expectations of (German-speaking) Swiss customers:

Excerpt 3: **Interview managing director** (recording, 5 October 2010; lines 513–541)

GES: weil die leute sprechen in der schweiz gerade in der deutschschweiz ihren lokalen dialekt/ der spricht sein st. gallerdeutsch auch wenn er in bern anruft\nn
INT2: mhm
GES: und erwartet dass man ihn versteht. und das und das ist natürlich und da wir natürlich verrechnen für jeden anruf ist äh der kundenservice an erster stelle .h das heisst wir müssen wirklich die ein bisschen und natürlich sind viel mehr anrufe aus der deutschschweiz
INT2: mhjä jä
GES: und zwar über 70%
INT2: jä
[...]
INT2: aber hän sie das gfühl dass . dütschschwizer kunde erwartet vom agänt dass er oder sie schwizerdütsch redt aso das hän sie vorhär [erwähnt bi de wälsche zum beispiel das gegeteil aso umgekehrt au oder]
GES: [auf jeden fall auf jeden fall. ja ja auf jeden fall ja] erstens einmal dass man schweizerdeutsch redet und zweitens dass man. äh s& den dialekt versteht

**English translation from (Swiss) German**
GES: because people speak in switzerland especially in german speaking switzerland their local dialect/ he will speak his st. gall dialect also when calling someone in berne
INT2: mhm
GES: and will expect to be understood . and that and that is naturally and as we charge for each call is erm customer service top priority . h this means we really have to a bit and naturally there are many more calls from german speaking switzerland
INT2: mh yeah yeah
GES: namely more than 70%
INT2: yes
[...]
INT2: but do you think that . german speaking customers expect that the agent that he or she speaks swiss german as you’ve before [mentioned that with french speaker for example it is the contrary or]
GES: [for sure for sure. yes yes for sure yes] first that they speak swiss german and then that they . erm. s& understand dialect

The managing director (himself a speaker of Standard German; INT2 speaking Swiss German) obviously knows that we are interested in language practices in the call centre and thus might overstate certain language-related points. Yet, what is worth mentioning in this short excerpt is his emphasis on *Kundenservice* (‘customer service’), which he claims as top priority and which apparently includes accommodating German-speaking customers in their linguistic habits and expectations. However, when taking into account that more than 70% of the calls come from the German-speaking region, as he says, this accommodation basically ensures the main business for the call centre rather than just being *Kundenservice*. Offering services in Swiss dialects rather than Standard German thus becomes a ‘requirement’ (*Bedingung*) for business, as the head of operations concurred in his separate interview. This assessment is further shared by the head of HR, who rejects possible alternatives to Swiss German as the language of customer service.
(the notes are from an interview with the head of HR, who refused to be audio-recorded):

Excerpt 4: Interview HR (notes, 13 December 2010)
The challenge certainly is the integration of migrants or the Swiss accepting Standard German instead of Swiss German in the long run. But as long as the Swiss insist on Swiss German, no outsourcing is possible.

For one, in his experience an ideal agent brings some knowledge on Swiss geography, its institutional landscape and cultural domains, which migrants do not necessarily have. Secondly, service in Standard German would be considered inauthentic, i.e. as not Swiss proper (cf. Duchène and Flubacher 2015: 184). So while the Swiss dialect is perceived predominantly as a means of communication, the ideological investment of the dialect also indexes an affective function. I thus argue that the dialect, indexical of Swiss authenticity becomes its own affective marker of attachment for the call centre. In other words, the call centre (or rather: the managing director and the heads of HR and operations) discursively package the maintenance of services in the dialect as indexical of the call centre’s investment in Swissness and in the local market. Yet, as Dlaske (2015: 243) argues with regard to ‘authenticity’, “[t]he examination draws attention to how authenticities are always political, and, although discursively produced, have very material consequences for the actors involved in their production”. Employing agents speaking Swiss dialect is thus an affective-discursive practice directly related to value production – and thus worth its economic cost, as Switzerland is notorious for its elevated salaries.

Now, scholars in critical sociolinguistics such as Dlaske (2015: 243) have argued that “‘localness’ has gained currency as a source of authenticity and distinction in the niche marketing of the globalised new economy.” While Dlaske is primarily concerned with discourses on localness and authenticity in tourism and/or handicraft production, I argue that this insight can be applied to the capitalist economic activity in question, especially when considering that it is offered in Biel, a de facto economically, politically and culturally peripheral city of Switzerland that frames the bilingualism of its population as an authentic marker of distinction for its locality. In other words, the discursive construction of the dialect as a marker of authenticity on the Swiss market turned this into its own affective-discursive practice and into an affective marker of attachment. Swiss dialect speakers could feel valorized and recognized as economic players and as legitimate customers. Furthermore, this has material consequences for agents speaking Swiss dialect – if the dialect loses its value as a marker of authenticity and of affective attachment,
they would lose their jobs in the process of outsourcing. In fact, it is the realization of this scenario that we turn to next.

5 Costs versus local investment: switching off the Swiss smile

As a profit-oriented enterprise, Call_In has to gauge the language competences of its agents, the number of calls in each language, and work assignments in terms of productivity, i.e. of maximising profit. This logic determines everything. Shortly after our ethnographic study, Call_In experienced a reduction in transactions, i.e. in incoming calls. With the emergence and popularization of smartphones that allow for quick, cheap and individual searches for information, calls to the centre (at a cost of SFR 1.99 per minute) continuously decreased in volume. This added fuel to the question discussed already in 2011 of whether Call_In would hold on to the site of Biel in the long term. After all, even if the salaries in Biel were rather low by Swiss standards, they were still higher than in the rest of Europe – or the world, for that matter. On the one hand, the bonus of the provision of services in Swiss German comes with an extremely high cost for internationally operating providers. On the other, maintaining Swiss German as a service language would complicate relocation abroad.

Call_In thus faced a dilemma that emerged from a tension between productivity, profit and the insistence on authenticity, i.e. the affective-discursive practice of using Swiss dialect. We discussed this dilemma in 2011 with the managing director, who at that time insisted on fighting for remaining in Biel (cf. Section 4.2). He argued that it was impossible to relocate precisely because of Swiss German, which was a necessity in his view for the service of Call_In, as well as a certain geographical, institutional and cultural knowledge of Switzerland. However, a union representative we also interviewed in 2011 estimated that the maintenance of services in Swiss-German was most likely not sustainable, since these services represented a luxury for call centres that were in a constant struggle for profit.

Finally, what was foreshadowed in 2011 became reality a few years later. In the spring of 2015, it was communicated that Call_In would close shop in Biel and relocate its services within a few months: Services in German and English would transfer to a call centre in Austria, where they apparently put together a team of Swiss nationals, and French and Italian to another one in Morocco. Every single agent in Biel was laid off, since relocation to one of these destinations was out of

13 For reasons of anonymity, no news sources can be provided for this information.
the question for them. In the years before, and in anticipation of the technological and economic transformation, Call_In had tried to open up other venues, e.g. offering 24-h reception or booking services. However, with the increasing use of the smartphone and online booking via the Internet, none of these venues proved profitable enough to legitimize the expensive Swiss location. And this is how the Swiss smile was switched off in Biel.

It is difficult to gauge how the relocation of Call_In has impacted on the ICT location of Biel and if it can be treated as a precursor of further relocations to come. The decision to leave the Swiss location behind was taken by international management overseeing the productivity of several national offices, thus embedding it in a logic of a global flow of resources and capital that serve to maximise the profit of the company. Even if a national market with a specific regional linguistic feature such as Swiss German is targeted, the minimization of costs through international relocation takes precedence. In capitalist logic, flexibilization, productivity and profit maximization remain the core elements of the management of this call centre. In search of profit elsewhere, the formerly sought-after and celebrated bi- and multilingual language workers in Biel were left behind – picking up the Swiss dialect in a cheaper location.

In revisiting a specific site after a whole decade, we can establish a flexible and contextual valorization of affective-discursive practices. The city of Biel still brands its location with its ‘naturally’ bi- and multilingual population. Call_In still operates, albeit under new conditions. While the instructions for the ‘scripted affective efficiency’ most likely have remained the same across the languages offered in the new sites of Call_In’s call centres, it is the localized producers of dialect that were sacrificed in a business that has lost its former profitability. This goes to show that while certain affective-discursive practices are considered essential for the informational economy, localities and bodies are exchangeable.

6 Transcription conventions

[ ] Simultaneous utterance
& Broken-off utterance
: Extended syllable
CAPS Emphasis
\ Short pause
. Longer pause
. Long pause
. Breath intake
/ Rising intonation
\ Sinking intonation
</.../> Use of a different language
References


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