



“But It’s Truly Aggravating and Depressing”: Voicing Counter-Expectancy In US–Philippines Service Interactions

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Abstract: Intercultural competence is essential in a globalised business environment, where successful cross-border transactions rely on effective intercultural communication. Interactions between US customers and Filipino customer service representatives (CSR) in call centres are one example where intercultural competence is required. This study examines the use of counter-expectancy expressions in call centre complaint calls by American consumers and Filipino CSRs in the insurance sector. This study used a systemic functional linguistic (SFL) framework to examine the various linguistic realisations used in the dialogues, with a focus on the appraisal system. To further explore the connection between the use of business language, cultural norms, and the growth of intercultural competence, this study also considered Hall’s context cultures along with Hofstede’s cultural classifications. Using a mixed approach, the present study examined 20 authentic audio recordings of complex insurance complaint calls (approximately four hours long and containing 39,440 words). These spoken data were transcribed and analysed for linguistic characteristics that indicated concessive expressions, for example, connectives such as 'but' and 'however', and adjuncts such as 'just' and 'only'. The results of this study are significant for language and cultural awareness training programmes and, ultimately, for enhancing intercultural communication skills in professional settings.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence, US–Philippines Business Conversation, Appraisal System, Hall and Hofstede Cultural Differences, Counter-Expectancy.

1. Introduction

Due to the globalisation of business, intercultural interactions have increased significantly (Ferreira-Lopes & Van Rompay-Bartels, 2020). In these situations, intercultural competence is crucial for successful business interactions and effective communication (Montagna, 2023). There are different definitions of intercultural competence depending on the discipline, culture, and context (Deardorff, 2006). The present study uses the definition of intercultural competence from Deardorff (2011: 66) as “effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural situations, which can be further detailed in terms of indicators of appropriate behaviour in specific contexts.” Intercultural competence is interpreted as the ability to develop specific skills, knowledge, and attitudes that result in effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural interactions. Intercultural competence is very important in business interactions (c.f. Braslauskas, 2020; Martin & Nakayama, 2018; Nair-Venugopal, 2018). It entails being aware of one’s own cultural biases, adapting to various communication styles, and comprehending and respecting cultural differences (Deardorff, 2008).

This study investigated linguistic realizations in business conversations between the United States and the Philippines, with a focus on call center telephone discourse between US clients and Filipino customer service agents, in order to improve intercultural competence. Data analysis of authentic complaint calls revealed customers’ and call center agents’ methods for balancing different expectations, placing special emphasis on the interaction between linguistic conventions and cultural nuances. In the complaint calls, dialogic contraction, defined as “acts to challenge, end off, or restrict the scope of other voices” (Martin & White, 2005: 102), occurred frequently. The two subcategories of dialogic contraction are disclaim and proclaim. Disclaimers include words that deny (e.g., “don’t,” “never”) and counter (e.g., “but,” “however”), which are used to oppose or reject a contrary position (Martin & White, 2005, p. 97). The appraisal system established by Martin and White (2005) was used to identify the language patterns of concession expression, particularly counter tokens, which were then combined with theories of context cultures and cultural dimensions (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 1983) to analyze the discourse dynamics between US clients and Filipino customer service representatives. We were able to investigate how language choices and cultural

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factors influence intercultural business exchanges in this specific context using this analysis. Counter-expectancy expressions of concessive connectives, like “but” and “however,” as well as adjuncts like “just” and “only,” can improve intercultural communication by recognizing and addressing divergent expectations. With the help of these expressions, speakers can present opposing information while minimizing any potential offense or disagreement. The present study focused on the following research questions:

- 1- What are the frequency distributions and functions of counter-expectancy expressions in US-Philippines call center complaint calls?
- 2- How do cultural differences affect the use of counter-expectancy expressions in intercultural interactions between American customers and Filipino CSRs?

2. Literature Review

In today’s globalized economy, the call center industry is significant because it serves as a vital communication link between customers and a wide range of service providers (Darics & Lockwood, 2023; Xu & Lockwood, 2021). It is critical in this context to investigate the linguistic patterns and strategies used by CSRs to effectively handle complaint calls (c.f. Packard, Moore & McFerran, 2018; Wan, 2023a, 2023b). English-speaking call centers are in high demand throughout the world in this developing offshore outsourcing market. English is frequently used as a lingua franca when speaking with international clients (Lopez, 2022). Call center jobs frequently require a high English proficiency, as well as the ability to comprehend complicated business processes. However, we frequently read in the media about customer despair and communication failures (Kevoe-Feldman, 2019); for instance, overly scripted conversations with little linguistic variety are viewed as undesirable. It is, therefore, necessary to research intercultural interactions in call centers.

The language interactions and characteristics of call centre communication are currently being widely researched (Ali & Watson, 2018; Deschamps-Berger, Lamel & Devillers, 2021; Tupas, 2022; Hood & Forey, 2008; Wan, 2017, 2023b). Researchers have investigated emotions and attitudinal choices in call centers using software. For example, Deschamps-Berger, Lamel, and Devillers (2021) develop learners’ systems for identifying speech emotion. According to their research on emergency interactions, callers’ most frequently expressed emotions are anxiety, annoyance, and relief. Wan (2017) used Praat software to analyze voice quality features in call center conversations. According to the findings, the consumers studied tended to employ paralinguistic voice quality features such as loudness, tension, and high pitch to express hot anger in dialogue, while a soft voice and low pitch expressed cold anger. Her relevant interrater agreement validating methods are also being investigated (Wan, 2023b). Tupas (2022) researched the social class of call center speakers. The findings indicated that unequal English proficiency draws attention to the fact that the globalization/localization/pluralization of the English language continues to perpetuate harmful ideologies and unequal relationships between speakers. Further, it is investigated how patients with weak English proficiency from various nationalities can receive care (Ali & Watson, 2018). Research data came from 59 hospital professionals who worked in England. Communication is the most essential component of developing care and the role of a health profession. Data from call centers in the Philippines were studied by Hood and Forey (2008) to examine how participants affect the dynamic fluctuation of emotion in complicated conversations. Their results showed that both speakers tend to rely more on implied attitudes than on explicitly expressed attitudes. It is important to consider how each speaker’s choice of attitude affects the other, as well as how concessive connectors like “just,” “already,” “once”, and “yet” can help manage emotional intensity. Their discovery that concessive connectors significantly contribute to the linguistic growth of call center interactions served as the impetus for this study, which aimed to specifically investigate the role of concessive expressions in call center conversations.

The Philippines has emerged as a leading destination for call centers due to its English proficiency and cultural affinity. High English proficiency is required for the establishment of offshore call centers (Presbitero, 2017). At the end of the 19th century, the English language was introduced to Filipinos when the British government ruled the country and Spanish hegemony was waning. English-language Philippine literature is infused with the colonial experience (Hidalgo, 2004:155). English has been designated as the primary medium of instruction across various educational schools by the Philippine’s Education Department (Gonzales, 1997). The public education system was established by the 2nd Philippine Commission, with English as the sole language of instruction (Gonzales, 2004). American colonizers founded the University of the Philippines in 1908 with the goal of preparing the Filipinos to become educated English speakers (Lumbera & Lumbera, 1982:96-97). The Malolos Government required secondary schools to prioritize English instruction over Spanish. Perhaps this was due to the realization that English would have a big influence on the world. As a result, the majority of Filipinos now speak English, especially the educated (Gonzales, 1996). These historical and educational contexts provide the perfect setting for examining how Filipino CSRs can deal with intercultural interactions and English-speaking conversations. The interactions between the US and the Philippines highlight the complex nature of intercultural communication.

The systemic functional linguistics (SFL) field, which was established by renowned linguist Halliday, studies how language interacts with its social environment. Language is defined as socially constructed in the

SLF model, and the context in which a text is constructed influences the speaker's choices through three general social functions, namely ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings (Martin & Rose, 2003:6). The SFL framework provides a theoretical foundation for analyzing the interaction of linguistic resources and social practices in conversations. SFL emphasizes the interrelationship between language and social situations (Eggins, 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Working in a call center usually necessitates a satisfactory level of interpersonal interaction with clients (Harry, 2021). For instance, the CSR must use attitudinal language when speaking with a customer to draw attention to a concern, express displeasure, and establish power. The CSR must address the problem while also giving the customer assurance and comfort. Appraisal analysis offers a systematic means of deconstructing interpersonal meaning within the framework of the system of interpersonal meaning (Martin, 1984; Martin & White, 2005). To negotiate solidarity and understand how the speaker is expressing their point of view through the lexico-grammatical choices they make in the text they create, an appraisal system was established. It analyzed the interpersonally evaluative meanings of text (Martin, 2000; Martin & White, 2005). It was used to investigate the Filipino CSR's language and communication techniques from the emotional, attitudinal, and evaluative perspectives. By examining how language is used in context, this framework aided in identifying more general patterns and structures in intercultural conversations. According to Martin and Rose (2007), engagement is one of the primary components of the appraisal system, which refers to the author's attitude toward the information source. It can be classified as monogloss (single voice) or heterogloss (various voices) engagement, with the former focusing on the sources of view, i.e., how we negotiate values and persuade readers to align with our points of view (Martin & Rose, 2003). Specific categories of engagement include modality, projection, and concession (Martin & Rose, 2007). The present study focused on concession expressions as a heteroglossia dialogic contraction resource. Figure 1 depicts the engagement system of the appraisal system.

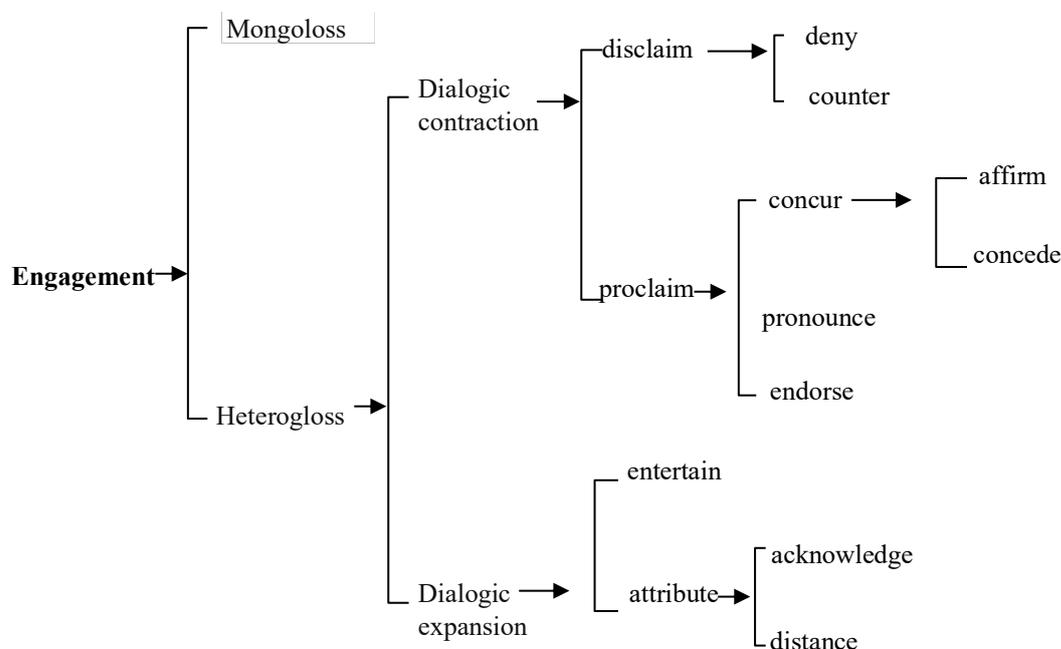


Figure 1: Engagement system

Source: Adopted from Martin & White (2005: 134).

The counter-expectancy expressions presented in call center telephone conversations were identified and categorized using an appraisal system. Then, these features were linked to two significant cultural frameworks, namely the cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede (1991) and the high/low context cultures developed by Hall (1976), in order to explore various cultural behaviors with the contrasts of the US and the Philippines. To comprehend how cultural variations affect communication styles and interpersonal dynamics in these conversations, Hofstede's cultural dimensions (1983, 1985, 1991) were employed. By examining various cultural dimensions, Hofstede's framework (1991) investigates cultural differences. Specific cultural dimensions include collectivism/ individualism, femininity/masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and power distance. These factors enable cross-national comparisons of cultural values and preferences. Individualism–collectivism is the main cultural variable that was used in this study to account for cultural variations in counter-expectancy expressions among the four dimensions. Another significant framework was the high-/low- cultures of Hall (1976), which was used to comprehend the cultural dimensions that influence intercultural communication. Hall (1976) classified various cultural characteristics along a continuum. Implicit cues and shared cultural knowledge are used more heavily to convey meaning in high-context cultures. According to Hall (1976), the language used in high-context communication is ambiguous, subdued, and indirect, with participants frequently remaining silent and considerate of other speakers. Low-context cultures, on the other hand, place a premium on direct and explicit verbal communication. The low-context communication style is defined as explicit, direct, and precise.

Hofstede's (1991) and Hall's (1976) theories are isomorphic: low-context cultures are individualistic, and high-context cultures are collectivistic (Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1998; Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005). Numerous studies have used the dimensions of masculinity and femininity, individualism and collectivism, and high-low context culture to understand cultural variations in various kinds of behavior (Broeder, 2021; Merkin, 2018; Yang, Hou, & Arth, 2021). These cultural theories can provide a solid theoretical foundation for comprehending the discrepancies and similarities of counter-expectancy expressions used in globalized business sectors, thereby aiding in the development of intercultural competence.

3. Methodology

This study makes use of a well-developed call center corpus developed by a large international research team from the Department of English and Communication at Hong Kong Polytechnic University and other educational institutions in Hong Kong, China, India, and the Philippines. The telephone conversations gathered from English-speaking call centers relate to US-based businesses that offer financial consulting, technical support, and insurance firms. The present study used a mixed approach to investigate the discourse patterns of concession expressions in the English conversation constructed by two identified speakers—the CSR and the customer. The English insurance call centre was based in Manila, the Philippines, but has its headquarters in the United States. The recorded conversations related to interactions with English-speaking commercial customer service.

Table 1: Summary record of call center data transcripts in the present study.

Text(s)	Focus of Complaint(s)	American customer (F: Female M: Male)	Filipino CSR (F: Female M: Male)	Length of each call (hour: minute: second)	Word count (words)
Text 1	Company policy	F	F	10m04s	1474
Text 2	Payment problem	F	F	10m06s	1523
Text 3	Incorrect policy holder	M	F	9m23s	1682
Text 4	Premium problem	M	F	14m36s	3015
Text 5	Confusion about a notice	F	F	13m43s	1655
Text 6	No information	M	F	11m26s	1924
Text 7	Incomplete information	F	F	17m25s	2563
Text 8	Understanding problem	M	F	26m31s	4398
Text 9	Wrong payment	F	M	9m19s	1585
Text 10	Incomplete process	F	M	3m44s	676
Text 11	Information problems	F	M	8m00s	1698
Text 12	No premium	F	M	15m38s	2413
Text 13	Multiple payments	F	M	8m56s	1674
Text 14	Incorrect policy holder	F	M	9m11s	1997
Text 15	Policy problem	M	M	15m59s	2531
Text 16	Payment problem	F	F	14m22s	2162
Text 17	Disclosure of information	M	F	8m31s	1534
Text 18	Policy problem	F	F	7m26s	1420
Text 19	Delay payment	F	F	10m48s	1750
Text 20	Incorrect mailing address	F	F	8m22s	1736
Total		14F/6M	13F/7M	3h53m30s	39440

Source: information from the data

From a pool of nearly 2000 insurance service calls, 20 lengthy complaint calls were selected. As shown in Table 1, the spoken data were made up of 20 transcripts consisting of around four hours of spoken data, totaling 39,440 words. This was a well-organized collection of spoken texts that was adequate for representative analysis. Each call lasted, on average, 12 minutes and contained 1972 words. Forty-five participants are involved in the spoken data: three supervisors, twenty-two US customers, and twenty Filipino CSRs. These texts allowed for a thorough examination of interpersonal meaning in complaint calls. In addition, the number of participants in the two groups of speakers was balanced, with twenty-three Filipino CSRs and twenty-two American customers, allowing this study to compare usage frequency and occurrence patterns. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. To maintain confidentiality, all names, numbers, and private information have been changed.

4. Findings And Discussion

Service encounter has historically been described as an organizational genre that encourages social engagement (Ventola, 2005). The call center customer phones in to inquire about their insurance policy and potentially lodge a complaint about the service quality; the CSR must handle the inquiry, respond to complaints, and form an alignment. Both participants aim to narrow the gap between their own expectations, gain understanding from others, and ultimately arrive at an acceptable compromise. The results demonstrated that counter-expectancy

expressions construct positive values when used to correct information errors and negative values when used to criticize the ideas of other speakers. The analysis that responds to the two research questions is presented. Functions of counter-expectancy used by American customers and Filipino CSRs in relation to the appraisal system are illustrated in Section 4.1. In Section 4.2, the counter-expectancy frequency distribution patterns are given, and in Section 4.3, the relationship between the concession voice and the cultural differences of US-Philippines conversations is explored.

4.1 Functions of Counter-Expectancy in the Appraisal System

A concessive refers to the polar opposite of the original meaning and is frequently realized by lexical words such as “but,” “already,” “just,” “however,” and so on. The concessive function is part of the appraisal system and is used to construct counter-expectancy (Hood & Forey, 2008). Some words and phrases of concession discovered in the call centre data were especially common in the 20 complex calls constructed by both the CSRs and the customers. Martin and White (2005: 120-121) stated that conjunctions and connectives like “although,” “however,” “yet”, and “but” are commonly used to convey countering. Adjuncts with counter-expectational meanings include “even,” “only,” “just”, and “still.” These eight lexical items on the countering list—“although”, “however”, “yet”, “but”, “even”, “only”, “just”, and “still”—performed as the initiating point for examining of the functions constructed by these words in US–Philippines call centre conversations. Table 2 displays comparable examples used by American clients and Filipino CSRs in the data.

Table 2: Counter-expectancy in US–Philippines call centre conversations.

Countering	Lexical realisation	Example from Filipino CSR	Example from American customer
conjunctions & connectives	but	but you were informed about the premium renewal. (Representative#1)	but anyway, I want to keep this. (Customer#2)
	yet	yet I don't have any information ma'am (Representative#14)	yet I know, let's take it this way. (Customer#4)
	however	Please fax it back, Ma'am; however , it will normally take five business days. (Representative#7)	(N/A – not available in the data)
	although	It appears to have been written in advance, sir, although you want it changed to every sixth of the month. (Representative#4)	(N/A – not available in the data)
adjuncts	just	Okay, let me try to retrieve this document. Just wait me a moment. (Representative#15)	I just stop payment. (Customer#14)
	only	Is there the only way we can mail you the form? (Representative#18)	And it should be 11,000 dollars only . (Customer#7)
	even	That's correct. You will have coverage even after March 11 until April 11. (Representative#1)	you guys just automatically let them withdraw my money, even without my permission. (Customer#1)
	still	I'm still here sir. (Representative#6)	I would still make no difference. (Customer#19)

Source: examples from the data

The main purpose of counter-expectancy expressions from dialogic contraction was to challenge and restrict the verbal scope of others (Martin & White, 2005). For instance, in Transcript 1, the CSR limited the scope of the customer's argument by rebutting her expectations: “But you were informed about the premium renewal.” In Transcript 7, the customer narrowed down the amount of premium she should pay, saying, “And it should be 11,000 dollars only.” Counter-expectancy expressions were employed as a language tactic to manage and control other speakers' expectations, especially when resolving complex complaints regarding insurance policy plans. In Table 2, we can also see that the data show no examples of the words “however” or “although” from American customers. The analysis of this phenomenon will be covered later in the paper.

In general, concessive connectives and adjuncts were used to minimize any potential linguistic gaps by bringing customer expectations and agent explanations into alignment. However, counter-expectancy

expressions in complaint calls also served a wide range of positive aligning purposes. For example, CSRs used them to show empathy and acknowledge the customer's concerns (e.g., "I'm still here sir" in Transcript 6; "Just wait me a moment" in Transcript 15). Without visual cues, in telephone conversations, CSRs need customers to recognize that they have their undivided attention when assisting them with problems. CSRs effectively interact with customers in cross-border intercultural exchange by positively using language resources that promote interpersonal connection and empathy. Additionally, counter-expectancy expressions serve to comfort customers by reassuring them (e.g., in Transcript 1, the CSR said, "That's correct. You will have coverage even after March 11 until April 11"). The customer feels anxious and anticipates that her policy will expire soon. The CSR counters the consumer's incorrect assumption by saying, "You will have coverage even after March 11 until April 11". The aforementioned illustrations in Table 2 provide a preliminary view of the lexical examples of both customers and agents toward countering. Specific frequency distribution patterns for counter-expectancy expressions are presented in Section 4.2.

4.2 Countering Frequency Patterns for Customers And CSRS

This section reveals the interpersonal dynamics and communication approaches used in US-Philippines business conversations by examining various frequency patterns of concessive conjunctions, connectives, and adjuncts. The frequency distribution analysis in Table 3 revealed interesting distinctions between American clients and Filipino CSRs. The data contained 413 tokens in total as countering tokens, of which 219 tokens belonged to American consumers and 194 tokens to CSRs from the Philippines. Counter-expectancy tokens were slightly more frequently used by American customers (53%) than by Filipino CSRs (47%). American customers frequently expressed their dissatisfaction through counter-expectancy expressions, which tended to imply a negative evaluation of the CSR's performance, as well as annoyance with the policy and payment. Filipino CSRs used counter-expectancy expressions with different orientations and purposes: to manage customer expectations, explain situations and underlying reasons, and maintain customer satisfaction in a proactive and problem-solving manner. These patterns revealed differences in how CSRs and customers manage expectations and handle complaints.

Table 3: Frequency of conjunctions, connectives, and adjuncts in US-Philippines conversations.

Countering	Lexical realisation (total frequency)	American customer		Filipino CSR	
		Male (n=7)	Female (n=13)	Male (n=6)	Female (n=14)
Conjunctions and connectives	but (n = 162)	52	53	21	36
	yet (n = 10)	2	3	3	2
	however (n = 5)	0	0	0	5
	although (n = 2)	0	0	1	1
Subtotal (a)	179	54	56	25	44
Adjuncts	just (n = 152)	20	44	26	62
	only (n = 38)	6	11	4	17
	even (n = 17)	4	8	0	5
	still (n = 27)	7	9	2	9
Subtotal (b)	234	37	72	32	93
Total (a) + (b)	413	91	128	57	137

Source: Examples from the data

In the conjunction and connective category, "but" was the most common word, accounting for 162 out of 179 tokens (or 90%) of conjunctions and connectives. Most adjuncts (152 out of 234 tokens, or 65%) belonged to the "just" category. In complaint calls, customers used "but" nearly twice as much (65%) as CSRs (35%). In this section, some representative examples were extracted from the transcripts for demonstration purposes. In the following extracts and analyses, R refers to the customer service representative, and C refers to the customer.

Extract 1 (Transcript 3: Turns 22-24)

Turn 22	Customer#3	Yes, because I spoke with another girl in Spanish the other day = =
Turn 23	Representative#3	= = Uh huh = =
Turn 24	Customer#3	She said, "This policy number does not exist on the computer," but I'll tell you again, okay?

In Extract 1, the customer (C3) claimed to have obtained a letter from an insurance provider that belonged to someone else. She called the customer service hotline to inquire about the problem. Turn 22 indicates that this was not C3's first time asking for assistance. The previous Spanish CSR had assisted her in checking the system, but she reported in Turn 24 that they had been unable to locate any information. C3 then decided to give the current CSR the policy number for verification and said, "But I'll tell you again, okay?" This "but" was intended to draw attention to the current CSR in contrast with the current setup and previous practice.

By using the concessive conjunction “but” in Extract 2, the client (C4) vented her annoyance at the convoluted policy payment and handling processes. She let out a frustrated sigh at turn 82 and said, “This does not make sense.” “You’re saying I’m covered until May, correct?” is the reported speech that follows to give context for the issue. The phrase, “but they took the first payment” was used immediately after this reported speech to emphasize how serious and ridiculous they found the situation.

Extract 2 (Transcript 4: Turns 82-83)

Turn 82	Customer#4	Hm. This does not make sense. You’re saying I’m covered until May, correct? But they took the first payment. When are the two payments you take, and which month do they cover?
Turn 83	Representative#4	It covers the March and April premiums.

Contrary to the concessive expression’s usual negative connotation, the CSR used it in a more neutral and positive way, clarifying the situation and handling the complaint, as shown in Extract 3.

Extract 3 (Transcript 6: Turns 32-33)

Turn 32	Customer#6	Okay, since you served as the family trust’s trustee and John Smith’s life is covered by this policy. But you are unaware of who John is.
Turn33	Representative#6	No. Are you certain that you have the right first name?

In transcript 6, the CSR (R6) first presents information obtained from the record system indicating that the customer (C6) is the family trust’s trustee and that Mr. John Smith is listed as the insured person. R6 follows up by saying, “But you are unaware of who John is.” R6 uses this concessive conjunction in a different way than customers typically do, which is negative. This “but” was effectively used by R6 to identify and investigate the problem’s underlying causes. In turn 33, C6 is helpful and verifies the inference of the CSR. To discover the problem, both parties worked calmly and cooperatively. Concessive expression in call center complaints thus goes beyond simply venting rage or correcting misconceptions; it also helps to focus attention and, in the end, brings out the truth.

In contrast to the large quantity of “but” tokens, the frequency of “yet,” “however,” and “although” was very limited, accounting for less than 10% of the total conjunctions and connectives. “Although” and “however” were only used by CSRs. It is possible that these two tokens are more formal, and CSRs may use them to establish institutional authority during the call’s initial stage. Extract 4 shows how a CSR used the concessive word “however” in the data.

Extract 4 (Transcript 19: Turns 9-10).

Turn 9	Representative#19	Well, our address is in Dallas, Texas; however , Excellent Insurance’s corporate office is in Euston, Texas.
Turn 10	Customer#19	Okay, let me tell you my social security number and policy number so that you can put me on the screen, and then we can continue from there, okay?

Turns 9-10 were located in the first stage of Transcript 19, where the CSR (R19) provided the customer with information about the company’s headquarters and the relevant address. Many studies have ranked the power of the customer and the representative as higher and lower, respectively (Chen, Brockner & Greenberg, 2003; Deery, Iverson & Walsh, 2002). However, it is clear from turn 9 that the CSR (R19) chose the more formal concessive expression “however” over the more informal expression “but” in order to establish greater institutional power. C19 was able to recognise the institutional authority projected, so on the following turn, she gave her social security number, “let me tell you my social security number and policy number,” in the hopes of advancing to the next step and starting her inquiry, “you can put me on the screen, and then we can continue from there, okay?”. We can observe from Turn 10 that C19 was very familiar with the handling process. Turn 10, on the contrary, is an excellent example of customer power, which is the power that customers have over the institution due to their extensive knowledge and experience. This customer power was used to counteract the institutional influence of the CSR projects in Turn 9. This revealed the subtle linguistic sensitivity of both communication partners. The use of concessive expressions and other dynamic and interactive linguistic exchanges made the interaction between the customer and the CSR more engaging.

Customers (42%) and CSRs (35%), in the subcategory of adjuncts, showed a similar percentage of the use of “just”; they also had a similar percentage of the use of “only,” with customers accounting for 45% and CSRs accounting for 55%. Extract 5 shows the use of “just” in the data.

Extract 5 (Transcript 3: Turns 71-72).

Turn 71	Representative#3	Can I confirm your date of birth, sir? Just to ensure that this is not your policy.
Turn 72	Customer#3	Okay, it is ah 2 2 62.

Before the CSR and the customer have confirmed the identities of the other party, they are unsure of whom they are speaking with during call center conversations. “The exchange of personal information is sensitive” (Wan, 2023b: 11) before the other speaker can be identified. In fact, some customers may find it offensive for their identity to be confirmed or personal information to be checked. However, the verification procedure is required by the institution for further processing. In extract 5, R3 asks, “Can I confirm your date of birth, sir?” before checking the identity. Perhaps she is afraid that the customer will refuse. In Turn 71, she adds a concessive adjunct to soften this demand: “Just to ensure that this is not your policy”.

Contrarily, customer usage of “even” is much more prevalent (71%) than CSR usage (29%). Extract 6 is an example of the use of “even” in the data.

Extract 6 (Transcript 11: Turns 74-76).

Turn 74	Customer#11	And if I pass away and no one can even find me, how useful will this be? == [laughter]
Turn 75	Representative#11	== right
Turn 76	Customer#11	and if nobody can figure it out, it’s truly absurd.

Despite the fact that the customer in extract 6 claimed to be the policy holder, the record system contained no information about her. The customer was enraged and frustrated to be paying for a policy. She says in a sarcastic tone, “And if I pass away and no one can even find me, how useful will this be?” in turn 74. With a “right” at turn 75, the CSR demonstrates his comprehension and empathy. From turns 74 to 76, the effectiveness of the insurance plan is negatively evaluated, with the phrase “it’s truly absurd” being used. In the data, customers frequently use “even” to level up their tone, emphasise their seriousness, and sharpen their complaints.

4.3 Interplay Between the Counter-Expectancy Voice and Cultural Differences

This sub-section examines the concessive linguistic strategies used by American customers and Filipino customer service representatives to navigate intercultural business conversations. We also examined concerns caused by gender differences, as well as the presence of some specific language patterns that facilitate effective communication and enhance intercultural competence. As shown in Table 3, American customers (53%; 219 tokens) used counter-expectancy tokens more frequently than Filipino CSRs (47%; 194 tokens) in the conversations that were analysed. Filipino CSRs exhibit a collectivistic orientation, also known as a high-context culture style (Benosa & Ramos, 2021), with a relatively lower overall concessive token frequency. This communication style targets establishing rapport and fostering a sense of social connectedness among communication partners. The concessive adjunct “just” was used by Filipino CSRs 38% more frequently than American customers when processing and explaining situations. This linguistic approach is thought to be more “flowery” because indirectness and politeness are highly regarded in the culture of the Philippines. Based on the data, Filipino CSRs exhibited a high degree of interactional alignment and adjustment to the linguistic preferences of their US customers, as shown by the decreased use of “but” (35%) and “even” (29%).

According to Hofstede (2001) and Hall (1976), the United States has a high individualism and low-context culture, placing an emphasis on the effectiveness and clarity of communication. In comparison to Filipino CSRs (47%), American customers (53%) used more counter-expectancy tokens. This may reflect that they place more emphasis on effectiveness and communication that is task-focused. In addition, they frequently used the words “but” (106 out of 162 tokens) and “even” (12 out of 17 tokens), making it easier to construct succinct, timely responses to questions without engaging in over-socialising. When communicating with Filipino CSRs, American customers demonstrated their comparatively direct communication style. This preference for clarity, conciseness, and straightforward communication reflected the low-context American cultural orientation (Kong & Lou, 2023; Xu & Shi, 2023). Lastly, the data showed that American male customers tended to use more “but” tokens than American female customers (52 tokens spoken by 7 male customers versus 53 tokens spoken by 13 female customers), suggesting that male American customers prefer a more informal but explicit communication style than female customers when voicing their counter-expectancy; male and female Filipino CSRs exhibited similar countering behaviors. This might have been due to the preference of American male customers for CSRs to treat them as equals, thereby bridging the social gap and promoting clear and concise communication. This could promote cooperation between the two communication partners and help to avoid misunderstandings brought on by cultural differences.

According to the data, countering expressions were strategically used because they highlighted the knowledge and experience of CSRs and customers, thereby assisting in the call center interactions and overcoming cultural barriers. The present study emphasized the significance of identifying Filipino and

American cultural norms in intercultural conversations. The cultural dimension analysis developed by Hofstede and Hall helped to explain underlying cultural influences that shape these intercultural conversations. The cultural distinctions between the Philippines and America were clarified by the framework of cultural dimensions and high-/low-context cultures. These expanded our understanding of the subtle cultural differences that influence interpersonal communication styles and business interactions. However, it is also worth noticing the limitations of Hofstede's and Hall's cultural models, even though they are widely regarded by those studying business culture as the comprehensive frameworks of cultural values. These models also have received criticism for their relatively narrow cultural dimensions and use of surveys as an insufficient research instrument (c.f. Ailon, 2008; Cardon, 2008; McSweeney, 2002). Hofstede seeks to promote understanding among different groups, while it may also fail to recognize certain differences within a given group of people (Rathje, 2007). For instance, in our data, we find that one male US customer prefers to use "but" more frequently than other male US customers. Furthermore, these Hofstede and Hall model frameworks were developed decades ago, and the modernization, cultural diversity, and rapid evolution of the working environment as a result of globalization were not taken into consideration.

5. Conclusions

Intercultural competence is interpreted as the capacity for individuals to interact, engage, and communicate effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations (Deardorff, 2006, 2011). In today's globally connected business environment, increasing intercultural competence requires an understanding of the communication dynamics in intercultural interactions. SFL and, especially, the appraisal system were used to analyze commercial telephone interactions between Filipino CSRs and US customers in the insurance sector. This study emphasized the importance of linguistic rapport-building and cultural sensitivity in developing intercultural competence. The function and frequency patterns of counter-expectancy expressions that emerged in service interactions between two groups of speakers were the primary focus of this study. According to the data, American clients (53%) used counter-expectancy tokens slightly more frequently than Filipino CSRs (47%). When voicing complaints, American customers use more "but" tokens to convey a relatively explicit and straightforward communication style, whereas Filipino CSRs use more "just" and "only" tokens to gently narrow and focus the scope and explain the problem being encountered. These analyses unveiled the underlying relationship between lexical choices (such as concessive conjunctions, connectives, and adjuncts) and various communication strategies. Then, the study incorporated cultural dimensions and high-/low-context cultures to comprehend how speakers manage their verbal counter-expectancy behavior in service interactions. Filipino customer service representatives (CSRs) can thrive in a globalized customer service industry if they embrace cultural diversity and develop intercultural communication skills. By becoming more aware of the underlying linguistic and cultural dimensions of these interactions, call center representatives can successfully navigate intercultural interactions and contribute to satisfying business relationships. The next stage of research could look at how distinct cultural backgrounds affect customers' expectations, as well as the effectiveness of training programs in resolving potential conflicts across various business sectors. Individual language preferences can also be explored further within a given culture, as nations are not the best unit to compare when examining cultural differences (McSweeney, 2002). By exploring the appraisal resources of interpersonally evaluative meanings and cultural dimensions identified in this analysis, customer service representatives will gain a better understanding of the linguistic dynamics in intercultural complaint calls, leading to higher customer satisfaction and, ultimately, successful globalized business relationships.

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