

# Marketing, management and performance: multilingualism as commodity in a tourism call centre

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**Abstract** This paper focuses on the ways an institution of the new economy—a tourism call centre in Switzerland—markets, manages and performs multilingual services. In particular, it explores the ways multilingualism operates as a strategic and managerial tool within tourism call centres and how the institutional regulation of language practices intersects with issues of power, economic interests and the reproduction of essentialist views of language. Furthermore, this paper highlights some of the ideological tensions between the performance of authenticity through language and the struggles over the definition of legitimate speakers.

**Keywords** Globalization · New economy · Multilingualism · Call centres · Tourism · Commodities · Language ideologies · Managerial practices · Authenticity

## Introduction

In recent years, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have addressed central questions related to both the impact of globalization on language practices and their standardization. New research sites have emerged as terrains for sociolinguistic research—for instance, call centres and the tourism industry—allowing for a better understanding of the interplay between economic interests, labour selection, gender, language ideologies and language practices. On the one hand, specific attention has been given to the increasing importance of language and communication as a tool for the regulation of communication patterns, the standardization of language varieties, and the performance of identities (Cameron 2000a, b).

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On the other hand, multilingualism has also attracted the interest of scholars who challenge the new face of languages as commodities within the new economy. These studies have insisted on connections between market strategy and the valorisation or devalorisation of certain languages (Piller 2003), highlighting the role of multilingual workers as a means of cost-efficiency and market extension (Dubois et al. 2006; Heller 2003, 2005; Heller and Boutet 2006).

Both lines of research focus on the central role of language within broader social changes and critically interrogate the way language practices are embedded within institutions of the new economy. This research also provides a critical understanding of the institutional control over language practices surrounding the performance of authenticity, either in terms of standard variety selection and training (in the case of call centres, for instance) or in terms of the promotional use of local varieties (in the case of tourism activities). Lastly, these two lines of research highlight two supposedly contradictory movements that can be observed in the terrain of the new economy, such as the strong homogenization of language practices through prescribed forms of communicative practices (including the elimination of accents, the use of pre-coded formulaic structures, and the selection of a standard variety of English) and the diversification of languages—in fact the “multilingualization”—as a means of economic expansion and localization.

The central goal of this paper is to extend this body of work by attempting to understand the way language, as a homogenized work practice, is articulated with multilingualism as a working tool. To meet this aim, I will focus on a particular site: TSC (Tourism Service Centre), a call centre dealing with tourism and located in Switzerland, a European country which has the interesting particularity of being nationally multilingual (German, French, Italian and Romansh) and where the tourism industry is a central economic sector.<sup>1</sup>

More precisely, two characteristics of this specific institution—TSC—make it a unique and particularly relevant terrain in which to interrogate the interrelations between language as a work practice and multilingualism as a strategic working tool and product. First, TSC’s main purpose is to sell Swiss travel products and to provide information about Switzerland. In fact, this call centre can be considered a place where authenticity is produced with both promotional and transactional goals. Second, TSC caters to both Swiss local and European customers by providing multilingual services in accordance with national and international interests. The location and the product to be sold both bring into light the way a certain type of multilingualism becomes unavoidable. Switzerland is officially multilingual and as a consequence, the three main languages should be represented in this particular site as it targets Swiss locals. At the same time, as detailed below, internationalisation allows other languages to emerge as strategic working tools targeting international clients, and as a consequence, enlarges the necessity of providing services in other

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<sup>1</sup> In Switzerland, tourism is the third largest export sector (behind the Chemical Industry and Engineering; [http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/tourismus/uebersicht/blank/panorama/wirtschaftliche\\_bedeutung.html](http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/tourismus/uebersicht/blank/panorama/wirtschaftliche_bedeutung.html); last viewed on 21/04/05), and one that is of particular importance to the national identity. Furthermore, tourism is an important employment sector: in 1998, 5.2% of all Swiss jobs were in the tourism industry ([http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/tourismus/uebersicht/blank/panorama/wirtschaftliche\\_bedeutung.html](http://www.bfs.admin.ch/bfs/portal/de/index/themen/tourismus/uebersicht/blank/panorama/wirtschaftliche_bedeutung.html); last viewed on 21/04/2005).

languages then the national ones. As a matter of fact, TSC can be considered as a site in which both the production of authenticity and multilingualism intersect in one specific work place (namely a call centre) where language practices serve as a central working tool.

Subsequently, the critical examination of promotional discourses, managerial practices and employee discourses in this particular site helps explore the way multilingualism operates as a strategic and managerial tool within tourism call centres and how the institutional regulation of language practices intersects with issues of power, economic interests and the reproduction of essentialist ideologies of language. Furthermore, this paper highlights some of the ideological tensions between the performance of authenticity through language and the struggles over the definition of legitimate speakers (Bourdieu 1982) and authenticity.

I will begin with a general overview of the central links across the globalized new economy, the new work order and the role of multilingualism. Then I will move on to a brief description of the site, highlighting its historical emergence and its key activities. In analytical terms, I will focus on three key issues. First, I will show how the call centre and its multilingualism emerge as a key promotional and marketing strategy. Second, I will explain how and why the management of multilingualism is based on principles of cost-benefit ratio and workers' skills. Finally, in the last section I will show how these promotional and managerial strategies are linked to essentialized views of language and how they are enacted in the daily practices and discourses of the workers.

### **Work order, the new globalized economy and multilingualism**

The significance of the new economy as a central site for linguistic research derives from the nature of social transformations that are observable today. Societal changes, such as the globalisation of spaces, the circulation of goods, the mobility of individuals and the spread of new technologies, occupy an increasingly important place in all spheres of social life—economic, political and educational. Questions arise, therefore, surrounding the impact of such changes on linguistic practices, presenting a challenge to the field of applied linguistics and sociolinguistics.

Indeed, the ever-increasing mobility of people and the circulation of goods (Appadurai 1996) in a globalised market place give rise to new language needs (e.g., translators, multilingual workers) and practices (e.g., computer or phone mediated communication). New realities are emerging from the contact between contemporary forms of language and culture, which are tied to migration and trade as well as computer-mediated communication practices.

Within this new social order (Gee et al. 1996), the new economy—characterised by its informational, global and network oriented components (Castells 2000)—implies all the aforementioned changes. In other words, the new economy is both the catalyst and the consequence of these social transformations. Moreover, it is a site that exemplifies the transformation of language practices that are currently observable for a number of reasons. First, language is no longer merely exceptional as it was in the primary industrial sector—to the point that speaking during work

may be prohibited (see Boutet 2001 in regard to language practices in the metallurgy sector in France in the 1980s). On the contrary, language has become a key tool in the new economy (Cameron 2000a, b; Heller 2003; da Silva et al. 2007). Second, communication skills have become a selling point (for instance, in advertisements concerning the quality of services offered by telecommunication operators). This has resulted in the introduction of conversational scripts and institutional communication strategies (Cousin 2002). Third, multilingualism is emerging as a practical necessity; the new economy tends to constitute itself in transnational networks reaching international markets that are, *de facto*, multilingual. Moreover, multilingualism (often including English in relation with other national languages or, in the case of Irish call centers, a wide range of languages available based on a specific immigration labour-market) itself has become a commodity given the fact that interacting in the client's language is a key marketing factor. Consequently, the recruitment of multilingual employees is becoming a clear financial advantage for companies as it is cheaper and more practical, for example, to have employees who are able to answer phone calls in more than one language (Dor 2004; Dubois et al.; Roy 2003). The fourth reason why the transformation of language practices is currently observable is because economic exchange presupposes a constant dialectic between the principles of internationalization and of localization. This implies multilingual language work in terms of translation and/or "cultural adaptation" (Cronin 2003; Pym 2004; Venuti 1992).

In effect, the new economy, by its very nature, confers a growing importance to language as a working tool and to market-driven multilingualism within working spaces. Furthermore, the new economy also has consequences not only on the valorisation and devalorisation of certain language varieties, but also for the construction of the identities of those who are part of this economy. Workers are bound by institutional conditions in terms of productivity and flexibility; this is visible, for instance, in irregular work rosters, the precariousness of work and the different codifications imposed on employees (Sennet 2000). Flexibility has become the watchword for employees of the new economy, engaged in multiple activities and practices concomitant with the company's performance (Amiech 2005). In the new economy, productivity is not measured by the number of items produced, but by the number of phone calls made and received; the number of words translated; the number of products sold; or the number of successful commercial interactions with clients. The new economy is reshaping the workplace. Indeed, as Castells (2000) states, today's workplace is a space of flux that is understood as a series of significant and repetitive exchanges and interactions between different geographical locations occupied by various social agents (see also Taylor and Bain 2005 for the specific case of call centres located in India). This series of exchanges and the processes of transmitting information are made possible by the increase of new technologies. These also determine the location and the structuring of work in terms of centres, which are likely to be occupied by more qualified employees, versus the peripheries, like back offices, which become increasingly occupied by less qualified employees. New emerging forms of power relations can therefore be observed in such spaces (Korczynski 2002; Mulholland 2004). This then leads us to consider the various processes of marginalisation that operate in the new economy.

These social processes linked to the new economy are such important phenomena that we should re-consider the role of language in our society. In fact, the basic components of the new economy, presented earlier, and their corollaries—productivity, flexibility and flux—constitute the general framework in which language practices operate, as well as the central role given to language. This dialectic refers to the various forms of control and interests at play within the new economy, with regard to language and the use of an individual's linguistic resources according to the logic of profit. It seems fundamental to think about the links between the process of standardisation, language choice and market law, as language practices do not happen by accident; on the contrary, they are clearly codified. The choice of specific languages in particular companies tends to be defined according to potential profit and benefit, and correlates to the following:

- (a) strategies of market expansion (Which languages/varieties for which market?)
- (b) ideologies about service in relation to a specific product (What is the best way of serving the client and in which language? How do linguistic performances reflect identity and place the eradication or the retention of accents as a matter of authenticity?)
- (c) the cost-productivity principle (How profitable are the employees? How profitable are the links between qualifications and language competence?).
- (d) the work forces or *parole d'oeuvre*<sup>2</sup> available (Where can be find legitimate workers/speakers?)

As a result, it becomes quite evident that there is a link between linguistic capital and communicational capital (Heller and Boutet 2006), inviting us to radically rethink the role of language in general and the importance of multilingualism in particular within our changing society. It is this link which this paper aims to explore by examining marketing and managerial practices in a multilingual tourism call centre.

### **Tourism call centre as a site of research**

The data for this paper come from a broader project that deals with multilingual ideologies and practices in the tourism sector in Switzerland.<sup>3</sup> This ethnographic project, conducted in various tourism sites (local and national information boards, airports, tourism and hospitality colleges, national representative offices outside Switzerland and marketing agencies), questions the way language practices intersect

<sup>2</sup> I propose this French word which literally means “speaking work” in relation to the word “main d'oeuvre” (hand work) used in French in order to design the primary industry workers. A possible parallel wordplay in English proposed by Heller (in press), although not symmetrical, could be made between “work” forces and “word” forces. Both terms aim to highlight the importance of language in work activities by at the same acknowledging the fact that both work conditions still present some similarities.

<sup>3</sup> The data for the present paper were collected for the research project, Languages, identities and tourism: Towards an understanding of social and linguistic challenges in Switzerland in the context of globalization (2005–2008) funded by the Swiss National Fund (project number 108608) as part of a national research program on Language Diversity and Linguistic Competence in Switzerland. The grant is jointly held by Alexandre Duchêne and Ingrid Piller.

with a certain political economy order and how the new economy conveys a certain idea of language use in the workplace. The goal was not to say something about multilingualism and/or language practices *per se*, but rather to explain the interrelation between managerial practices—the ones observable in the tourism industry—and the management of linguistic diversity as a work practice.

Among the various institutions we have studied, call centres appear as particularly interesting sites in which the production of authentic knowledge of places and destinations intersects with marketing and sales activities. Destinations, locations, transportation and accommodation have increasingly become products for sale, and the same is true for support services provided by customer service agents on-line and on the telephone. In order to meet the needs of their target audience, as well as maximising their profit, tourism call centres may decide to offer services in more than one language by hiring agents to answer the phone in various languages. In the case of this particular call centre, the local pan-Swiss and the European clientele are multilingual by default. As a result, managers pay particular attention to the language skills of their workers as well as the diversity of languages they are able to speak. Indeed, tourism call centres constitute key sites in order to investigate the very notion of multilingualism as practice and as commodity within the globalized new economy. Furthermore, this specific site will also allow to extend the scope of the research to call centers as most call center research has focused on the ways delocalized call centers convey—in primarily non-English speaking countries—a certain form of neutral English language ideologies and the way workers are placed in situations in which they have to conform to the definition of the legitimate language (English) decided by the company (see for instance Cowie 2007). In such call centers, services are provided in English only and tensions often surround different varieties of English. Interestingly, little work has been undertaken on call centers where multilingualism is part of the call center activity itself (one of the few exceptions are the work done by Roy 2003 and Dubois et al. 2006). As we will see in this paper, both elements, that is multilingualism as a work activity and the construction of the legitimate varieties for the various languages in the call centers, intersect and provide interesting insights into the ways legitimacy and authenticity can be linked to the products and the market of a specific call center.

### TSC as a case study

Tourism Service Centre (TSC)<sup>4</sup> was created in the late 1990s as an initiative by the Swiss National Tourism Board (hereafter NTB) and in collaboration with other tourism providers, such as the National Railway Company (hereafter NRC), a Swiss airline and an association of hotel providers. At that time, TSC was meant to provide centralised on-line and telephone services for Swiss and foreign tourists, with a focus on hotel booking, tour counselling, train reservation and providing general information about Switzerland as a tourist destination. If the emergence of this service provider is clearly linked to the spread of new technologies, more

<sup>4</sup> All company and employee names have been anonymized.

precisely an increasing demand for computer-mediated and phone service availability, the creation of this institution is also resultant of a more general dynamic within the new economy: the centralisation of services. In fact, the main idea behind the creation of TSC was to combine the reservation and informational services of the various aforementioned companies into one place. Furthermore, TSC was also regarded as a key innovation which consolidated all email and phone information—previously provided in the individual countries—into one place, resulting in a clear cost benefit. In that regard, TSC constitutes a form of outsourcing, not in terms of the delocalization of call centres to India for example, but rather in terms of the relocation of services, which were previously provided in separate countries and by separate companies, into one place. This concentration also allows TSC to promote itself as the main provider of logistic tourism information for Switzerland.

On the one hand, TSC provides an online hotel and package reservation system and invests considerable resources into developing the necessary computer software. On the other hand, TSC also offers telephone customer service, providing both information about Switzerland and hotel booking. Today, TSC has two main stake holders: the National Tourism Board (NTB) and the National Railway Company (NRC). For the former, TSC coordinates both the online and the telephone hotel reservation service in Switzerland and it is the only call centre service across Continental Europe to offer general information about Switzerland to interested potential tourists. As a matter of fact, all calls and emails addressed to NTB are redirected to TSC.

For the National Railway Company, TSC serves as a travel agency providing travel accommodation and train reservation services both online and over the telephone. Besides these two main partners, TSC has signed a specific agreement with a holiday apartment provider in Switzerland for whom it coordinates the call centre services through a separate phone number available on the customer's website. In addition, TSC is currently working to attract hotels as part of their database, and it aims to become an advertisement platform for specific Swiss destinations. Overall, TSC has four types of clients (besides, of course, the individual consumers calling for travel reservations and information): (a) the stake holders involved in the overall management of TSC and who can be considered as the privileged beneficiaries of the services provided, (b) the affiliate partners who pay in order to use TSC services in addition to their own, (c) the tour operators, mostly travel agents outside Switzerland, who use the TSC network in order to outsource the organisation of travel to Switzerland, and finally (d) the hotels and destinations that use TSC as an advertising and promotional platform. This variety of clientele allows TSC to diversify its sources of income and, at the same time, to maximize the value of its hardware and services for a diversity of purposes.

The cost-efficiency component that is revealed through the diversification of activities is also evident in the geographical centralisation of their activities. Indeed, TSC has two main offices: one in Zurich (Switzerland) and one in London (United Kingdom). The Swiss office is in charge of the conception of web tools for both offices, and it serves as the official headquarters of the institution. TSC-Zurich is also responsible for all incoming calls from various European countries: Spain,

Italy, Holland, France, Germany and Belgium. The London office deals with English-speaking European countries (providing information about Switzerland and holiday/hotel reservations in Switzerland).

## Data

I conducted fieldwork at the Zurich office of TSC for 10 days in 2006. During my fieldwork at TSC, I carried out participant observations of language practices, social and work structures and the relational dynamics between employees and managers. The time spent with the employees also allowed me to understand the way workers give meaning to their daily practices and how they frame and describe their life trajectories. Furthermore, I collected interactional data, mostly telephone interactions, in order to understand the way the interactional work is structured and the way institutional regulations are enacted. I sat next to the employee during the phone interactions and recorded them so that I could take notes on the specific activities the agent was doing while interacting with customers.

In order to understand the way social actors construct their daily practices, I interviewed managers as well as call centre employees. However, since I was following the employees individually during their shifts, I often had the opportunity to interact with them on a more informal basis. In fact, the agents often talked to me about their life, their work or a specific activity while I was following them, thus providing me with crucial data including comments on interactional sequences and discourses about their own trajectory and positioning. Since I was simultaneously recording customer-employee telephone interactions as well as employee-manager and employee-employee in situ interactions, workers' discourse about themselves and their jobs were recorded at the same time and with their permission. The data I have collected are de facto multilingual and reflect the various languages spoken in this particular call center. For interactional data (phone-call recordings), languages entail German, Swiss German, French, Italian, Spanish, Dutch and English. Interviews were conducted mostly in Swiss German, the language used within the company, and in one case, in French.<sup>5</sup>

In order to understand the way the institution organizes the work, as well as the way it promotes itself, I collected policy documents (for instance, scripts or other guidelines), computer tools (reservation systems) and promotional documents (websites, brochures) of the call centre and of their partners. These documents were written in various languages, but mostly in Standard German. Promotional documents were written in the various languages in which the call center operated. This institutional material helped me to understand the way the institution discursively promotes itself and offered significant insights into the company's (language) policies.

Together, these data illustrate the ways in which TSC promotes call centre services and manages multilingualism. Moreover, they also shed light on the way the call centre employees discursively construct their multilingual skills.

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<sup>5</sup> The employee originally comes from the French-speaking region and preferred to speak with me in French.



## Marketing multilingual “live agents”: call centres as added value

The marketing strategy of TSC emphasizes various competencies and services that they provide: technical competence, modern infrastructure, quantitative amount of information in their database as well as an extensive knowledge of the field (i.e. Switzerland). However, there is another selling point highlighted in the promotional documents: personalized phone service.

In order to understand the importance of these specialized services for the company, I will examine the way TSC presents them by analysing the promotional discourses primarily available on their websites. Through this examination, I will first explain how the existence of a call centre is legitimised and highlight the role of language as a commodity within the promotion of the call centre services. In the second part, I will focus on the way multilingualism (and more precisely language choice) interrelates with market-oriented strategies.

### The humanization of services

The following excerpt<sup>6</sup> provides evidence for the discursive construction of TSC’s “special” services and stresses the central components to which the call centre is committed by addressing two issues: (a) the *raison d’être* of the call centre and (b) the qualification of the employees.

#### Excerpt 1

(Hotel-Affiliate Partners)

#### Services

Not all you [sic] visitors feel comfortable with booking their vacation to Switzerland online. Some of them need more information and others just simply prefer to talk to a live agent.

That’s why we provide call centre-based assistance to your visitors, from 08.00–19.00 from Monday to Friday. Our friendly travel consultants know Switzerland in and out and help you [sic] visitors design their Swiss dream vacation.

[Website excerpt: retrieved September 2, 2007]

There are at least two purposes or justifications for a call centre. First, the objective of a call centre is to provide services for people who may not be familiar with online booking systems and prefer to have more differentiated services. Indeed, in the second paragraph of the excerpt above, TSC justifies this particular service (“That’s why...”) by making the potential client aware of the fact that TSC is providing an added value for their customers. Mentioning a preference for speaking with live agents is a classic marketing argument in this particular field. Numerous advertisements for telephone services insist on the human face of the services, using slogans based on the authenticity of live agents. TSC, as well as the principal stakeholders (NTB and NRC), all use the same picture on their websites: that of an attractive and smiling woman with a headset.

<sup>6</sup> The excerpts presented here were available in German and in English.

This humanizing strategy intersects with one of the central tensions observable today between an increase of automated services available online and the impression, from the consumer's point of view, that our technological society is "dehumanizing". By offering its affiliated partners both high standard web management services in addition to real, personal telephone services, TSC attempts to bridge this tension.

Another aspect of this promotional text deals with the qualification of the workers. In this text, TSC presents different information thereby highlighting the way it discursively constructs the characteristics of its workers. Indeed, the text underlines the qualification of its employees and more specifically their knowledge of Switzerland ("Our helpful and knowledgeable agents know Switzerland in and out").<sup>7</sup>

This emphasis is certainly not neutral and aims to distinguish TSC from the traditional vision of informational call centres, which are often seen as hiring non-qualified employees and providing poor services. This impression was also often confirmed by the managers and employees themselves while talking about their job. During a preliminary interview, for example, the head of the call centre insisted on the fact that TSC was not a run-of-the-mill call centre ("TSC isch nit a null acht fufzah call center" [TSC is not a nil eight fifteen call centre], meaning "TSC is not an ordinary call centre"), but instead a high-standard call centre providing professional services. During this interview, the manager insisted on distinguishing TSC from call centres where the work load was very high and the qualifications of the employees very poor. The manager made a concerted effort to portray a professional image of her company while at the same time insisting on the specificities mentioned above.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the qualification of the call centre agents is linked to the necessity to construct them as possessing an authentic knowledge of the tourism business and Switzerland in general. This discourse echoes the logic that a country or region can only be properly represented by someone who does not only know how to act as a professional, but also possesses experiential knowledge.<sup>8</sup> This experiential knowledge, then, is stressed in the promotional excerpt. The discursive construction of qualified agents and its corollary demarcation from the traditional vision of call centres is also apparent when describing the workers' activities.

<sup>7</sup> The qualification is also emphasized in another promotional text addressed to tour operators:

(Tour operators)

Service for your customers

While travelling, your customers may contact our call centre if they need assistance. Our helpful and knowledgeable agents know Switzerland in and out and can help you with anything from finding the right restaurant, suggesting day excursions and special events or the opening hours of museums or tourist attractions.

Our agents are available from Monday through Friday (08.00 until 19.00) and speak German, English, French, Italian, Spanish and Dutch.

[Website excerpt: retrieved September 2, 2007]

<sup>8</sup> They are in their thirties (mostly women) and are Swiss locals or already well established in Switzerland. They all have gained experience through their own trajectories, that is through travelling or through internal migration trajectories. Most of the workers do not have a background in the tourism sector, and professional knowledge of Switzerland is not a necessary prerequisite in order to enter the job. However, they have received specific training about the products they are selling.

During the interview mentioned above, the manager insisted on how the diversity of activities makes the job fascinating. Employees themselves often told me that it was indeed an exciting job, thus creating meaning of their daily activities, as seen in this statement below:

Excerpt 2<sup>9</sup>

SP: ich bruch Bewegig und Abwächslig und das het mer do. Me hets mit de Chunde, me het jede Tag neu Chunde, me het viel viel meh Chunde vor allem, oder im ene Reisebüro het me vilicht zwei drü Lüt pro Tag, wenss höch chunnt, aso und done het me halt glich äbbe wenss höch chunnt zwüsche zwänzg und hundertfüfzg Telefon am Tag und no Emails derzue und was halt au nid isch, me het do fascht kei Pendänze<sup>10</sup>

*Translation*

SP: I need exercise and variety, and you get this here. You get it with customers, every day you meet new customers, you get many many more customers here, especially, well in a travel agency you may get two or three customers a day, maximum, well and here you get between twenty and a hundred and fifty phone calls a day, and then you also have email and you know, the other thing we hardly have here are pending files.

Interestingly, this construction of the work as diverse and as a consequence stimulating from the point of view of the worker intersects with other discourses of the employees stating multilingualism also make the job not only interesting but also challenging and “special”. Employees often explained that the constant switch from one language to the other—and their own multilingual skills—(a) broadens their horizon (a bit ‘world view’), (b) allows them to be in contact with clients from different cultural backgrounds and (c) gives them the sense of providing good services for a wide range of people. In this specific case, discourses of the company and discourses of the employees partially overlap, suggesting the power of internalized dominant discourses as a way of making sense of the activity of the worker.

In sum, this brief investigation into TSC’s promotional presentation sheds light onto the construction of language work as a commodity in two ways. First, it shows the importance of live services as a means of addressing the critique of dehumanized electronic services, and similarly constructing talk-services as an

<sup>9</sup> Transcription conventions

... pause  
 - truncation  
 , clause final intonation  
 . sentence final falling intonation  
 ! sentence final high-fall  
 ? sentence final rising intonation  
 /???/?/ inaudible utterance  
 /transcriber’s doubt/ doubtful transcription  
 @ laughter (one @ per syllable, ie. @@@ = hahaha)

<sup>10</sup> The interview is in Swiss German.

added value; second, it documents the authentic qualification of the workers as knowledgeable about Switzerland. If the call centre services are presented here as an added value in the landscape of TSC's proposed services, multilingualism is also a part of the promotional arguments (cf. excerpt in note 4). Here multilingualism is constructed as a characteristic of the workers' ability and, as we shall see in the following section, conceived of as a key marketing strategy.

### Multilingualism: a market-oriented strategy

As already mentioned, TSC provides services in six languages. The choice of these languages is a strategic institutional decision made by the company in regard to specifically targeted countries. Indeed, the languages available at the time of this study were German, French, Italian, English, Spanish and Dutch. Given the multilingual setting of Switzerland, and the pan-Swiss mission of TSC, French, German and Italian can be considered as "obvious" language choices. However, these three languages not only target Swiss local customers, they also aim to provide services to other countries: France and Belgium for French, Italy for Italian, Germany and Austria for German. In fact, all calls from the above-mentioned countries are redirected to the TSC call centre. This is particularly the case for NTB, one of the central stake holders of TSC, which provides a free phone number on its websites for any information related to Switzerland. Customers from Germany, for instance, are invited to dial this phone number and arrive directly at TSC in Zurich. The same goes for customers from France.

The choice for specific languages and the provision of multilingual services is clearly linked to the fact that in order to sell a product (like a trip or a destination), speaking the languages of the majority of the targeted customers is undoubtedly a "plus" in terms of marketing strategies. But this strategic multilingualism also correlates to (a) the effective amount of tourists choosing Switzerland as a holiday destination and (b) the ratio between investment in languages and the profit gained from it. The choice of services in Spanish is explained by the fact that in recent years Spain has become a target country for NTB, which invested a considerable amount of money and energy in marketing and opening a representative office in Barcelona. Spain is in fact considered an emerging market due to its changing economic order and its positioning in the European Union.

This economic approach to language choice is also intrinsically linked to two other arguments in favour of multilingual services, as the following excerpt should illustrate:

#### Excerpt 3

MV: ja aber das isch, das könne sie natürlich viel besser üssere

AD: und das isch wichtig?

MV: ja, ja, und da wir wir versueche nid allzulang am Telefon z sii oder? Und wenn öpper natürlich en andere Sprach muess rede, denn goht das au viel länger

AD: ja, das stimmt, ja

MV: also ich ha /????/ und ich meine wir sind für d Holländer das sind eifach, die hend eifach Freud dass mer cha Holländisch und wisse dass öpper in der Schwiz isch oder? Nöch am am Fүүr oder?

*Translation*

MV: well, but that is, they can express themselves of course a lot better

AD: is that important?

MV: yes, yes, and since we try not to be on the phone for too long, you see? and if someone has to speak another language, of course then it takes a lot longer too

AD: uh, that's right, yes

MV: you know I have /????/ and I mean we are—for the Dutch we are simply—they are simply delighted when someone speaks Dutch and to know that someone is in Switzerland you see? Close to the fire, you see?

In this excerpt MV, a call centre employee in charge of incoming calls from Dutch-speaking countries as well as calls in German, Swiss German and English, highlights two strategic reasons why multilingualism can be considered an asset. The first reason is undoubtedly linked to the symbolic factor of addressing the client in his or her language: “they are simply delighted when someone speaks Dutch and to know that someone is in Switzerland you see”. The second reason is based on the consideration that offering clients the opportunity to express their wishes in their own language will shorten the length of the call and hence its cost. As MV implies (“and since we try not to be on the phone for too long, you see”), the company—as the majority of call centres do—insists that calls be answered in the minimum amount of time in order to meet the demand (and that the callers do not wait too long on the phone). This concern is made explicit by the company through the installation of a large flat screen in the open space where service agents work, it shows the number and average length of calls each employee has answered so far that day.

Both of the arguments above point to crucial importance of the promotion of adequate services (i.e. speaking the language of the client) and the logic of cost-efficiency (multilingual workers). In fact, multilingual “live agents” can be considered as one of the responses to the specific needs of globalized and centralized services, constructing multilingualism and language practices as a commodity. At the same time, this particular conception of multilingualism addresses another set of questions that are linked to the way language practices are managed and structured within those institutions and within the same logic of cost-efficiency.

### **Managing multilingual “live agents”: the institutional regulation of multilingualism**

As we have seen so far, the call centre services are clearly constructed as an added value in terms of TSC marketing strategies. Furthermore, multilingualism appears

as one of the central services proposed by TSC and, in particular, a central managerial concern. In the following section I will address key issues regarding the ways multilingualism is managed by the institution.

Since TSC offers services in six languages,<sup>11</sup> as well as different kinds of services for various companies all having special needs in terms of call services, the logistic regulation of calls is vital. When it comes to the managing calls, two significant pieces of information are crucial: the identification of specific services (that is, the companies) for which the clients are calling and the language in which the call should be answered. The first information is provided by the computer system. The system identifies the phone number dialed by the customer and displays the company name on the agent's screen. The language issue is managed through the geographical localisation of the call identified by the country code of the customer's phone number (or the regional code for Switzerland and bilingual countries like Belgium). This automatic language identification assumes that the customer is speaking the language of the region they are calling from and the computer system goes so far as to display the language on the agent's screen.<sup>12</sup>

This system promotes a close association between the geographical origin of the call and the language used by the worker when initiating the interactional sequence. The fact that the phone number is the same for all countries cannot allow customers themselves to select the languages in which they want to be addressed and, moreover, it presupposes the fact that callers from a specific region have to be addressed in the language of the region they are calling from, reinforcing links between geographic location and language choice.

For Switzerland, however, it is interesting to note that bilingual regions, like the canton Berne and the canton Fribourg, are displayed on the agents' screens as German speaking. Similarly, all calls coming from Switzerland issued on a cellular phone are automatically identified as German (due to the absence of regional area codes). As a matter of fact, this system clearly has the advantage of having a unique phone number for all the countries serviced by TSC, however, it is also based on the assumption—of course statistically true!—that geographical location is sufficient in order to identify the language of the customer. Furthermore, this system is definitely based on a monolingual logic which, being unable to address and manage situations of geographical regions as well as the absence of automated area code localization, chooses to use German—the majority language in Switzerland—as the default language.

<sup>11</sup> All services are available in all the six languages but languages are not equally represented. In the logic of multilingual management, the number of workers for each language is clearly dependant to the targeted market and regular call statistics were conducted in order to evaluate the needs for various languages. In the case of English, however, and since TSC has an office in London, it has the function of being a default language in rare cases where the language of the caller was not available at TSC.

<sup>12</sup> TSC did not choose to adopt a language selection menu, like other call centres ("For English press 1", "For French press 2" ...), as the main tool for the management of calls. Actually, this language selection system has been introduced on the request of one specific partner who decided to outsource their call centre services to TSC. Customers are invited to choose between English, German, French and Italian. This partner is the only one to have a phone number different from the one provided to the other partners. The reason behind this choice was that this particular partner had several other call centre services and wanted to align the services and the management of services to his pre-existing system.

This general language identification has two important consequences for the regulation of work practices. Firstly, the language identification process attributes the call to specific agents according to the languages they are able to speak. Secondly, the language identification process also triggers a specific script in terms of greetings and the computer interface.

Indeed, in order to deal with the multilingual nature of calls, the institution needs to manage the multilingualism of its workers. In the same cost-efficiency logic that prevails in those organisational structures, workers must be as flexible as possible. This flexibility is, in this particular case, also linked to multilingualism. In fact, all employees of the call centre are multilingual and proficiency in at least three languages is a condition *sine qua non* of the recruitment process. As was already pointed out above, a multilingual work force is an asset for multilingual enterprises. Indeed, since the fluctuation of calls is high depending on the language of the customers (e.g. there may only be a few calls from Spain on any particular day) it is neither efficient nor manageable to hire employees with only one language, nor with only two languages in this particular case.

Furthermore, since the services are also addressed to locals, particular attention was given to hiring employees who are able to speak Swiss German. This particular competence, however, is not a pre-requisite for employees who have Italian or French as their mother tongue, since Swiss Germans do not usually expect their non-German-speaking compatriots to master this dialect, but only the standard language. However, at the time I conducted my fieldwork, no German employees (from Germany) were working at TSC, since the lack of Swiss-German proficiency in their case was considered to be an obstacle in communicating with Swiss-German locals. In regard to the degree of proficiency that TSC expects of its employees, the emphasis is on the ability to communicate fluently<sup>13</sup> in three languages.

Consequently, TSC employees are tri- or quadrilingual, but they do not have the same resources in all the languages they speak. Since they do not all have the same language combinations and since they work in shifts, TSC has established a system to structurally organize the flux of calls based on the language proficiency of the workers, which allows attributing priorities for each language and each employee.

Table 1 outlines how the languages are distributed among the various employees. When employees start their shift they must sign in on the computer. The code an employee puts in the system automatically activates the call management software, which identifies the worker and the worker's language priorities. Each worker is given a priority for each language in which he/she is able to answer the phone; number 1 corresponds to the highest priority and number 3, the lowest. Priorities normally correlate with the employee's level of language proficiency. Sometimes, however, and this is particularly the case for less-spoken languages, priorities correlate to the availability of languages. For instance, in the case of employee Xx12, Holländisch (Dutch) is indicated as priority 1, and German as priority 3, although he is highly proficient in both German and Swiss German. This is because a Dutch-speaking employee should always be available for Dutch-speaking

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<sup>13</sup> Language skills were not explicitly tested, but during recruitment interviews the employees were asked to answer questions in various languages.

**Table 1** Language repartition

|      |         | SIGN-IN | DE | FR | IT | EN | SP | NL |
|------|---------|---------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Name | Surname | Xxx1    | 1  | 2  | 1  | 2  | 3  |    |
| Name | Surname | Xxx2    | 1  | 1  | 3  | 1  |    |    |
| Name | Surname | Xxx3    | 1  | 2  | 3  | 2  | 1  |    |
| Name | Surname | Xxx4    | 1  | 1  | 3  | 1  |    |    |
| Name | Surname | Xxx5    | 1  | 2  | 1  | 2  | 3  |    |
| Name | Surname | Xxx6    | 1  | 1  | 1  | 2  | 1  |    |
| Name | Surname | Xxx7    | 1  | 2  | 1  | 2  | 1  |    |
| Name | Surname | Xxx8    | 1  | 1  | 1  | 1  | 1  | 1  |
| Name | Surname | Xxx9    | 2  | 1  | 2  | 2  | 3  |    |
| Name | Surname | Xx10    | 1  | 1  | 1  | 2  | 1  |    |
| Name | Surname | Xx11    | 3  |    |    | 3  |    | 1  |
| Name | Surname | Xx12    | 3  |    |    | 3  |    | 1  |
| Name | Surname | Xx13    | 3  |    |    | 2  |    | 1  |

customers, and if employee Xx12 is too often connected with phone calls in a language other than Dutch, then managing the calls becomes more difficult. The idea behind this prioritization of languages is to avoid unduly waiting time for the customer and to maximize workers' activities.

In this section I have shown how the management of multilingualism is conceived and operationalized at TSC. The two specific processes described, namely the identification and the distribution of calls, are based on specific ideologies of languages being bounded to geographical location and on an organisation of work practices based on workers' language competence. Currently, the tension between the costs of multilingual services and their economic benefits, is clearly solved by building on the multilingual ability of the workers. At the same time, by setting up a prioritized hierarchy of language skills, TSC manages to maintain the ideology of the native speaker (which is expected in some circumstances by the customer, as we will see in the next section), while still fully exploiting the employee's other linguistic competences as a means of maximizing profit.

### **Performing multilingualism: authenticity, legitimacy and identity**

Thus far I have insisted on the institutional regulation of multilingualism in this particular enterprise; this next section will address the worker's perspective of a central issue that emerges from the managerial practices described earlier, that is the tension between authenticity and legitimacy. On the one hand, workers have to perform a certain authenticity connected to the product they are selling: Switzerland. On the other hand, they are also legitimized or delegitimized by the customers through their multilingual performance.



### The (il)legitimate workers

From the company's perspective, language competence is constructed as an identity marker (as seen, for example, in the desire to hire Swiss Germans, the standardised greetings including "Gruezi" ("Hi" in Swiss German), the tolerance of an accent in German for Italian and French speakers). From the customer's perspective, however, the language issue—and more specifically the speaker's legitimacy—appears to be much more complex. First of all, customers consider accents as a form of exoticism—and, consequently, also as a form of authenticity. Secondly, language proficiency can be the subject of dissatisfaction,<sup>14</sup> in cases where agents are constructed as incompetent because of their non-native knowledge of the customer's language. These two specific reactions can be observed in two interview sequences I will analyze below:

#### Excerpt 4

SM: non, la plupart pas, étonnamment, je trouve qui non contrairement aux romands même si je suis romande et on aime moins ouais parce qu'on est une minorité on se sent agressé et puis euh non normalement, mais bon, du moment que les gens i comprennent qu'i qu'i sont en Suisse et qu'il y a plusieurs langues ils sont aussi plus flexibles que peut être à Frankfort

AD: uhmhu

SM: ou quand on entend qu'on a un certain accent ou il y a des gens qui trouvent ça vraiment exotique, ah vous venez d'où, ah, c'est super, c'est joli, on vous a bien appris, et toute sorte de réactions

#### *Translation*

SM: no, most of them don't, strangely enough, I find they don't on the contrary to the Romands but yes I'm a Romand (French-Swiss) we yeah like it less because we're a minority we feel aggressed and then uh no normally, well, as soon as the people understand that that they're in Switzerland and that there are several languages they are also more flexible than perhaps in Frankfurt

AD: uhmhu

SM: or when they hear that we have an accent or there are people who find that very exotic, ah where do you come from, ah, that's super, that's nice, you learned (it) well, and all sorts of reactions

SM is a female agent from the French-speaking region of Switzerland who speaks French and takes French calls in priority, as well as German, Italian and English calls. In this excerpt, SM highlights the fact that her accent in German or Italian is not at all a problem for the customer. On the contrary, they often see it as a form of exoticism. In addition, SM explains the "non-problem" of her accent in a foreign language by the fact that customers know that they are calling a multilingual country and are, therefore, rather tolerant in that respect. In fact, here the

<sup>14</sup> This is often the case when you look at complaints about call centres in India, where customers emphasize the lack of the workers' language skills (as an example, refer to [http://www.consumeraffairs.com/computers/dell\\_tech\\_support.html](http://www.consumeraffairs.com/computers/dell_tech_support.html)).

localisation of the call centre (which is indicated in the greeting announcement) allows for an acceptance of her language skills and the reference to Frankfurt provokes an argumentative distinction between the expectation for services in German to be based in Germany, and the expectation of native command of German. If this is true for non-Swiss customers, the same applies for Swiss-German ones. As she states, the recognition of her belonging to a francophone community induces a certain of acceptance from the customer. In fact, being a Romand and speaking German, despite the accent, is already valued by a Swiss-German customer. Since SM does not consider her foreign language skills problematic, it illustrates the way authenticity conveys a certain form of legitimacy.

In the following excerpt, language proficiency is experienced in a different way:

Excerpt 5

- RB: und äh manchmal glaubi erwaarte sie dass tuet mit ihne eine als muttersprach rede und-  
 AD: uhmhu  
 RB: und mal s isch sehr wenig froge sie du duesch sage *bonjour ça va, comme ça* und sie sage sie saged eifach *non je veux parler avec quelqu'un qui parle français*  
 AD: uhmhu  
 RB: und denn ich sage ich rede Französisch, *non non ça doit être und denn okey, denn muesch an [name of colleague] witerleite [...]*

*Translation*

- RB: and erm sometimes I think they expect that a native speaker speaks to them  
 AD: uhmhu  
 RB: and sometimes it is very little that you say like you say *bonjour ça va, comme ça* [hi how are you like that] and then they already tell you that *non je veux parler avec quelqu'un qui parle français* [no I want to speak to someone who speaks French]  
 AD: uhmhu  
 RB: and then I tell them that I speak French, but they insist that this is not the case and then ok, then you have to refer them to [name of colleague]

In excerpt 5, the non-native command of the language has another consequence on the transactional interaction. RB is originally from Ticino, the Italian speaking-region of Switzerland. He answers calls in Italian, German, Swiss German, English and—if necessary—in Spanish. When I asked a question about customers' expectations in terms of the service provided by a service agent, RB underlined the fact that some of them expect to be on the phone with a native speaker. This expectation, then, results in the call being referred to a particular colleague who is a native speaker (SM). In this excerpt, RB does not actually refer to a specific situation, but rather his discourse is a global illustration of some of the performances in the workplace. Interestingly, however, RB refers to a situation where a francophone customer expects to be answered by a native francophone agent, an example which is not coincidental. Indeed, I have very often heard from call centre

employees that French-speakers are the most demanding in terms of language proficiency, creating a further hierarchy between francophones from France being the most difficult in terms of language and francophones from Switzerland—although demanding—being a bit less. In that regard, SM has a special status in the TSC since he is the only native speaker of French and thus acts as the French language reference person.

As we have seen, language proficiency and legitimacy are constructed in various ways through the lenses of the workers. These constructions clearly illustrate how workers are also constructed by the customers who project their expectation of good service based on the workers' language practices. In fact, these expectations are rather mixed, since for some customers language reveals a certain form of authenticity whereas for others, poor language proficiency can be considered a lack of professional competence and a disregard for their specific needs.

The striking—but not surprising—importance of accents appears at the centre of the two employee's discourses. In the case of SM it is the accent that confers exoticism and authenticity; in the case of RB it is the accent that provokes the rejection (since his French is grammatically correct). In fact, in this specific telephone interaction, the agent's accent structured the interpretation of belonging.

#### Blurring identities: multilingual performance and the categorization of the worker

More importantly, what these two statements reveal is the fact that it is the caller who ultimately defines who and what counts as legitimate. Customers also determine the level of acceptability of an agent's language skills and consequently value or devalue their linguistic abilities. In this sense, linguistic features, such as an accent (or its "absence"), are often the grounds for categorization processes made by the customer towards the worker, revealing how the attribution of categorical identities constructs the worker's legitimacy, as seen in the following excerpt:

##### Excerpt 6

MV: joo, jo. Es isch ab und zue luschtig wenn ich denn z lang Schwizerdütsch gredet han, denn isch min Holländisch nümme so suuber und denn aaah, sie spreched aber guet Holländisch, @@@@, super! Danke Du! Kompliment! @@ @ @ @

AD: @ @ @

MV: sind Sie? @ @

AD: ja?

MV: und vo de Schwizer ghör ich denn teilwiis, vo wo chömmed Sie? us Bündner Land? Wälsch oder ich chan ihne nid guet platziere, @ @

AD: passiert das am Telifon, dass die Lüt?

MV: äh nei, meischtens aso aso hm aso wenn ich Holländer am Telifon han ja, denn sägeds mer, ja das han i scho e paar Mol erläbt, Lüt wo säged jaa, sie redet jetzt aber guet Holländisch!

AD: ja, und bi de Dütsche?

- MV: ah die säged denn ahhh endlich ein ein Schweizer am Telefon und ihr wunderschönes Heimatland! @@@ Muess me echli mitmache! @@
- AD: @@
- MV: ich säg au nid /last name/ wenn wenn ich mine Nachname säge, das tönt, das @ das isch zu schwierig glaub ich, das isch zu kompliziert und wenn ich mine holländische Name säge wie ich es eigentlich sött säge (pronounces his last name in Dutch), das verstoht jo fascht niemand oder? Und dann mach ich immer (pronounces his name in German), @@ damit s echli @ besser tönt! Und de Dütsch verstoht das au

*Translation*

- MV: yes, yes. it is sometimes funny when I have been speaking Swiss German for too long, then my Dutch is not so clean anymore and then aaaah, your Dutch is very good, @@@@, brilliant! Thank you! Compliment! @@ @@ @
- AD: @@@
- MV: and you? @@
- AD: well?
- MV: and from the Swiss I sometimes hear where do you come from? From the Grisons? Wälsch (Swiss French-speaker) or I cannot place you very well, @@
- AD: does this happen on the phone? That these people?
- MV: erm no, mostly well well hmm well when I speak to a Dutch person on the phone, then they often tell me, yes, that happened a few times, people who say yes, you do speak Dutch very well!
- AD: yes, and the Germans?
- MV: ah they say ah finally a a Swiss person on the phone and your beautiful country!! @@@ you have to play along a bit! @@
- AD: @@
- MV: I don't use /last name/, either when I answer the phone with my last name, that sounds, that @ that is too difficult I think, that is too difficult and when I pronounce my Dutch name in the Dutch fashion (pronounces his last name in Dutch), hardly anybody understands that, you see? And then I always go (pronounces his name in German), @@ so that it sounds @ a bit better! And the Germans understand this too

In this excerpt, MV actually describes three specific situations. In the first one, he is constructed as a non-native speaker of Dutch by a Dutch costumer and as a result is complimented for his good command of the language. In the second one, MV mentions some of the reactions of local Swiss Germans who either construct him as an inhabitant of the region of the Rhaeto-Romanic canton Grison, or as a French speaker (“Welsch” being the word used by Swiss German in order to designate the member of French-speaking region of Switzerland), or as a non-locatable speaker. In the third situation, he is constructed as a local speaker of Swiss German by a German costumer, and consequently MV is positioned as a representative of Switzerland, its beauty and charms! In reality, MV comes from Holland and has been living in Switzerland for almost ten years. In the interview, MV clearly

constructs himself as a native speaker of Dutch and emphasises the fact that he is (quite) pretty much fluent in Swiss German, although he would never consider himself bilingual. During our conversation he described these anecdotes because he wanted to illustrate how customers often react oddly to his language abilities.

This excerpt illustrates some of the issues that have been raised thus far. In both situations described by MV, his language proficiency is valued positively by customers. In each case, customers categorize him as a Swiss local based on his language production. In the first situation, MV believes that it is the perceived ‘uncleanliness’ of his first language that provokes the construction of him as a brilliant non-native Dutch speaker. In the third situation, it is the German pronunciation of his name that categorizes him as a local. In addition to that, the greeting for incoming calls from Germany includes the word “Gruezi” (“Hi” in Swiss German) and the explicit reference to the call centre’s location in Zurich (“[NTB] in Zurich”), thus revealing the Swiss (local) identity of the institution.

Finally, these positive reactions also reveal the two strategic reasons why TSC is particularly concerned with language issues and the management of multilingualism. First, in the particular case of tourism call centres, the command of Swiss German—although produced by a non-“native” speaker—conveys an authentic image of the service. Second, addressing clients in their language is often valued by customers. However, as we see from this excerpt, if a worker is categorized by strongly linguistic criteria, it is the linguistic features valued by the customer that confer the worker’s legitimacy.

## Conclusion

As this paper demonstrates, the management and marketing of language practices constitute not only a complex set of practices that are ideologically and contextually conditioned, but they also illuminate some of the key challenges facing the new economy. In the tourism sector, language choices and practices are institutionalized by defining which languages should be spoken by whom and with whom, and thus they serve a specific interest, which is to either sell a tourism product or to provide a service to the tourist. Fundamentally, these institutionalized language choices remain strictly market-driven and do not incorporate languages that are considered to be of no economic or national value to tourism companies. Consequently, institutionalized language choice, in a way, reproduces the economic power of the globalized society by choosing languages that are already highly valued or by choosing languages which allow them to enter a new market. Enterprises of the new economy, such as TSC, are unquestionably very aware of the strategic dimension of such a market-oriented multilingualism.

At the same time, they are also very concerned with the necessity to make the workforce profitable and hence they structure work activities in that direction. Instead of considering multilingualism as an obstacle, the examination of these managerial practices revealed the use of multilingualism as a means of increasing efficiency and flexibility. This is made possible by the emphasis on workers’ multilingual skills, which allows the company to rely on existing resources in order

to provide both multilingual services that are considered an added value for the beneficiary of the services and the manageability of calls.

In fact, the potential tension between profitability and linguistic diversity does not arise in this specific case. On the contrary, linguistic diversity is a source of benefit and multilingual skills are seen as commodities. Similarly, TSC does not follow the same processes of linguistic standardization that other studies on call centres have shown. Accordingly, the level of accent ‘acceptance’ at TSC is rather high and the proficiency in a second and third language is not entirely codified by the institution. Indeed, this non-expectation of perfect and balanced language skills at TSC is by no means coincidental. On the contrary, it is strongly linked to the nature of the call centre itself. Selling and talking about Switzerland must be done by a local (or at least a near local), who possesses ‘authentic’ knowledge. The fact that customers know that they are phoning Switzerland (in this case there is no desire to hide the call centre’s location, on the contrary) and that Switzerland is a multilingual country (a well-known fact) actually adds a rather positive dimension to the non-native command of the agent’s language. On the other hand, the fact that there are workers with native skills of non-national languages may be received by customers as a form of the company’s respect, especially since the location of TSC in Zurich already provides these language speakers with enough ‘authenticity’. However, as we have seen in some of the excerpts above, language proficiency can—although rarely—be seen as problematic by the customer. In order to prevent this type of problem, TSC adopts the strategy of having at least one “native” speaker available to answer customer calls.

In sum, it is a clever win-win situation for the company: either the worker is identified as a native speaker of the customer’s language, which indicates respect and good service, or the worker is identified as a non-native speaker of the customer’s language, which is seen as a form of authenticity.

Nevertheless, this strategic management of multilingualism as explored here clearly indicates that multilingualism is only appealing when the interests of institutions of power are at stake. Indeed, languages and workers continue to be objects of regulation and hierarchization within this new social order, where essentialist views on language are maintained and take new forms and consequences. Results of this research invite us to complexify the classical assumption that language skills are correlated to economic capital in the workplace. Of course, all of the workers at TSC have been recruited because of their specific language skills, making multilingualism a condition of employment access. However,—and because all employees are multilingual—once they enter the workplace, their multilingualism becomes “banalized”, that is to say of no added value for employees. What’s more, multilingual skills, in language dependant industries like tourism, and more specifically services like TSC, are considered to be evident and in turn are excluded from any kind of salary recognition. On the other hand, companies clearly gain both in terms of management and marketing from the multilingualism of their employees. The considerations made here are of course specific to the type of job that is at stake in this research, that is non-qualified and low-paid employment and cannot be generalized to all sorts of work activities. It is nevertheless imperative to attend to the ways in which conditions of access and economic capital do not

necessarily converge in certain sectors of the economy and to constantly address the question of who profits from what kinds of multilingualism and who is excluded both in terms of access to jobs and to salary/status recognition in the job. In order to address these issues, careful considerations should be made of the social and economic conditions in which multilingualism becomes an object of interest in the new economy. This cannot be done without a complex inquiry into the interrelationship between the product to be sold, the target market, the cost-efficiency logic and the *parole d'oeuvre* available. By understanding the logic of interests in the new economy, we will be able to gain further understanding on the way language ideologies are produced and re-produced and how language remains a terrain on which legitimacy and belonging are constituted.

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