

Linguistic Leveling in the Technical Frontier: A Qualitative Analysis of Gendered Speech Acts in the Philippine BPO Industry

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speech act theory, genderlects linguistic leveling, BPO industry, technical support, pragmatic competence

Abstract. This study investigates the influence of gender identity on the selection and execution of speech acts among technical support agents in the Philippine Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industry. Drawing on Searle's (1976) Speech Act Theory, the research deconstructs the illocutionary forces utilized during "troubles-telling" encounters involving complex networking hardware. A qualitative textual analysis was conducted on a corpus of 20 transcribed call recordings, balanced between 10 male and 10 female agents. The findings reveal a high degree of pragmatic density, with directives, assertives, commissives, and expressives functioning as the primary linguistic maneuvers to drive technical resolution and customer rapport. Contrary to traditional sociolinguistic frameworks—such as those proposed by Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1990)—the results demonstrate a significant "linguistic leveling." Both male and female agents utilized a nearly identical repertoire of task-oriented directives (e.g., modal request forms and closed-ended questions), assertive acknowledgment tokens (e.g., "so," "okay," and "I see"), and empathy-based expressives (e.g., "I apologize" and "thank you"). The study identifies that institutional training, standardized call scripts, and the "global call center register" effectively neutralize individual gender traits. The study concludes that in specialized technical domains, professional identity and pragmatic competence as an "expert troubleshooter" supersede traditional gendered dispositions, fostering a gender-neutral linguistic standard centered on "linguistic hospitality" and service excellence.

Introduction

Previous sociolinguistic research over the past 10 years identifies genderlects, which indicate ways of engaging with social domains and finding out how to interface with one another. For example, the first wave of research found that women use indirect, rapport-building communicative strategies, while men use direct, information-focused linguistic strategies. However, the most recent research finds that most frameworks neglect how communicative strategies are redefined by institutional logics in digitized workplaces. Thus, a linguistic leveling, in which the gendered aspects of an individual's speech are negated by the standardizing and normalizing work involved in call scripts or QA metrics, could be considered a professional change. Yet, the notion of gendered discourse is not fully specified here since the extent to which professional identity trumps gendered dispositions is unknown. This tendency can be viewed from the perspective of Speech Act Theory.

In the Philippine BPO context, technical support is a high-stakes task, where language use is considered a functional requirement of the job. It is also applied to the linguistic Register of the task, where technical urgency is expected to call for a "global call center register", and the biological sex of the speaker is not very relevant because of social pressure to appropriate this professional discourse. Another view is that task-related directives supplemented by rapport-building "softeners" is a form of practical competence in its own right and not part of gendered socialization, supporting the idea that linguistic practices vary in the BPO industry. This research is relevant to the current study, as the intersection between gender identity and professional role in a specialized technical field remains controversial in academic research.

Filling a gap in the literature on neutralization of "genderlects" in topic-driven and heavily scripted professional exchanges in the Philippine context, this paper presents a systematic analysis of the speech acts that male and female Philippine technical support agents select and realize when soliciting and providing information in a telephone-mediated service encounter. The study is connected to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) SDG 5: Gender Equality and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth. To achieve gender equality, professional competence should be assessed according to who can solve a problem rather than stereotypical gendered speech. Transcribed call recordings are analyzed qualitatively to determine whether institutional pressures have engendered the use of gender-neutral norms related to technical solution orientation and professional acquaintance-building.

Research Questions

This study looks at whether working in a technical support center changes the way men and women use language when talking to customers. Specifically, it answers the following questions:

What types of speech acts do male and female agents use during technical support calls?

How do male and female agents phrase their sentences when handling technical troubleshooting and building rapport with customers?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, with textual and pragmatic analysis, to explore the nuances of linguistic performance in a professional setting. Specifically, it adopts a descriptive-qualitative approach to investigate the selection and execution of speech acts, enabling an in-depth interpretation of how institutional demands shape gendered communication. By focusing on the "illocutionary forces" within a specialized corpus, the design facilitates the identification of "linguistic leveling" and the extent to which professional identity supersedes traditional genderlects. This methodology is particularly well-suited to capturing the complexity of human interaction in the high-stakes environment of technical troubleshooting.

Data Source

The primary data source for this study consists of a specialized corpus of twenty (20) transcribed call recordings from a Philippine-based Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) firm. The data is purposively selected and balanced between ten (10) male and ten (10) female technical support agents to ensure a comparative analysis of gendered speech acts. These recordings capture authentic "troubles-telling" encounters involving the configuration and troubleshooting of complex networking hardware. By utilizing real-world professional interactions as the data source, the study ensures that the linguistic analysis is grounded in the actual communicative demands and scripts utilized within the industry.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection followed a systematic process beginning with the acquisition of a pre-existing corpus of transcribed technical support calls. The selection process prioritized calls with a similar degree of technical complexity to maintain consistency across the sample. Each transcript was then meticulously reviewed and coded to identify specific conversational turns where technical resolution and customer rapport were the primary objectives. The transcripts were anonymized and stripped of personally identifiable information (PII) to ensure that the focus remained strictly on the linguistic and pragmatic structures used by the agents during the interactions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Searle's (1976) Speech Act Theory as the primary analytical framework. The process involved a three-step pragmatic deconstruction: first, identifying the locutionary acts; second, determining the illocutionary force (categorizing utterances into directives, assertives, commissives, and expressives); and finally, assessing the perlocutionary intent within the context of technical support. A comparative analysis was then performed to identify patterns of convergence or divergence between male and female agents. This textual analysis enabled the detection of "linguistic leveling," in which the frequency and type of speech acts were compared with traditional sociolinguistic markers.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with established research ethics, this study adhered to the principles of confidentiality, anonymity, and non-maleficence (Resnik, 2015). All data used in the analysis were derived from anonymized transcripts, ensuring that the identities of the agents and the customers remained protected. Furthermore, the study maintained reflexivity and transparency throughout the qualitative process to minimize researcher bias in the interpretation of speech acts (Wilson, Janes, & Williams, 2022). By focusing on the functional and professional aspects of the discourse rather than personal characteristics, the research ensures that the findings contribute to the academic field without compromising the privacy or professional integrity of the participants involved in the original recordings.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the interactional data gathered from technical support transcripts reveals a striking pattern of pragmatic isomorphism between male and female agents. When scrutinized through the lens of Searle's (1976) taxonomy of illocutionary acts, the findings suggest that the functional requirements of the BPO environment exert a leveling effect on gender-preferential language. This leads to a homogenized professional register where institutional roles and standardized troubleshooting protocols supersede individual linguistic traits. This convergence is systematically detailed in the comprehensive data distribution below, which categorizes the primary illocutionary forces identified across the corpus.

Illocutionary Category	Functional Purpose	Male Agent Realizations	Female Agent Realizations
Directives	Eliciting critical data and initiating technical troubleshooting steps.	"Can I have your first name?" (1.2) "Is this your first time to call?" (1.1) "How about your last name?" (1.3)	"May I ask who's on the line?" (2.1) "Can you tell me the brand?" (2.4) "Who's the provider?" (3.1)
Assertives	Validating information uptake and maintaining common ground.	"Alright." (1.4) "Okay." (1.8) "I see." (4.2) "That's correct." (4.5)	"Okay." (2.2) "Alright." (2.6) "I see." (3.4) "Ahuhm." (5.1)
Commissives	Committing the agent to a future course of action or resolution.	"No worries." (1.12) "Let me walk you through..." (1.15) "How may I assist you?" (1.0)	"I can certainly do that." (2.9) "We're going to work on this." (3.8) "How may I help you?" (2.0)
Expressives	Managing rapport and adhering to organizational branding rituals.	"Thank you for calling [Brand]." (1.0) "I'm so sorry." (4.8)	"Thank you for calling [Brand]." (2.0) "I apologize." (5.4)

Table 1. Taxonomic Distribution and Comparative Realization of Speech Acts by Gender in BPO Discourse

In the domain of directive speech acts, the qualitative analysis indicates a profound absence of disparity in deployment strategies between male and female agents. Both cohorts rely heavily on syntactic hedging, specifically the use of modal interrogatives such as "Can I...?" or "May I...?" to transform potential commands into polite requests for permission. This choice reflects a high degree of pragmatic awareness, where the agent minimizes the face-threat inherent in extracting sensitive customer data or directing technical actions. As evidenced in Code 1.1 and 2.1, the inclusion of honorifics like "Sir" and "Ma'am" serves as a consistent internal modifier to soften the illocutionary force. This adherence to institutionalized politeness protocols effectively overrides traditional gender-based variations in authoritative tone, suggesting that the "agent persona" is a gender-neutral construct shaped by the exigencies of the industry.

Furthermore, confirming the general discourse management role of assertive speech acts is their pattern of frequency; there is not important evidence for the use of assertive speech acts to convey propositional information given the frequency of agreement tokens such as "Alright", "Okay", and "I see" used by both customer and assistant. For example, the use of "Alright" (Code 1.4) after a customer utterance may be used to confirm the assistant has received the customer information, and that the assistant is open to following through to the next step in the troubleshooting algorithm. Both male and female agents use this kind of marker as back-channels to keep the interaction fluently going. The findings indicate that assertive force in technical support is used as a tool to achieve cognitive and realistic convergence.

Transitioning to the evaluation of commissive speech acts, the findings reveal that both genders utilize nearly identical linguistic frames to establish professional accountability and reassure the caller. While male agents occasionally favor the assurance marker "No worries" (Code 1.12) and female agents favor future-oriented modal constructions like "I can

certainly do that for you" (Code 2.9), the underlying illocutionary intent remains indistinguishable. Both variations bind the agent to a future course of action aimed at resolving the customer's technical difficulty. These acts are largely dictated by corporate training and standardized scripts, suggesting that the commitment to service is a performative requirement of the professional role that leaves little room for individual gender-specific stylistic divergence.

Moreover, alongside the high formulaic density of the expressive speech acts, overt politeness strategies that make use of ritualized expressions to manage the relationship with the customer, such as thank you and apologies, are also used in a ritualistic way, clear in the standardized opening and closing rituals of the transcripts. For instance, both male and female agents will use "Thank you for calling [Brand]" and "I apologize" at the same points in the conversation. Because male and female agents do not make different use of "emotional" language, this is understood to mean that expression is a performative demand of the brand identity in the BPO workplace. Once again, this seems to suggest that the customary dichotomy between masculine and feminine styles is neutralized by the professional demands of the genre, with its emphasis on technical accuracy and institutional politeness.

Considering both the form and function of politeness in BPO, the findings of the present study suggest that in the highly competitive and mediated environment of a call center, male and female call center agents display meaningful realistic convergence. In this competitive environment, the professional/occupational role and institutional constraints reduce the influence of gender-preferential language. Such a finding is consistent with Communication Accommodation Theory, where speakers adjust their language according to the limited linguistic resources permitted by the institution. Since the use of directives and assertives among the two groups did not considerably differ, one possible explanation for both male and female agents displaying a "neutralized" linguistic style when speaking with their customers is to promote predictability and reduce interactional risk. This is supported by Xiao and Chen (2025), who found that an "institutional voice" largely neutralizes markers of gender within digital business communication, creating a homogenous customer experience across contact points. In this regard, the "context-changing" nature of technical speech acts exacerbates the erasure, as the normative background of the BPO environment takes precedence over the mode of expression when it comes to making meaning (Sbisà, 2023).

The role of thematic alignment is further underscored by the high levels of formulaic density exhibited by the commissives and expressives, which some sociolinguists refer to as "stylistic uniformity". Examples such as the work of Balamurali, Hariharasudan, and Gnanamuthu (2023) reinforce the idea that workplace interactions are becoming more hybridized, optimizing emotional labor to support branding efforts. Conversely, male agents using reassurances such as "No worries", and agents using frames of inclusion such as "We're going to work on this", are more likely to reflect shared standards of affective labor, rather than gendered norms. This stylistic uniformity suggests that agents may be preparing for a world where "Artificial Speech Acts" and AI-mediated conversation are the norm. Agents should match the "pragmatic competence" of automated agents, which do not differ based on gender (Skiba, 2026; Solidjonov, 2025).

Furthermore, the results of this analysis challenge the theory of "report talk" and "rapport talk" (Tannen, 1990) that women's speech is predominantly expressive while men's speech is predominantly instrumental. In fact, the difference between these two linguistic patterns is not reduced by the speaker's gender. Both male and female agents use instrumental directives and rapport-building expressives equally. More recent research into contemporary professional discourse genres in the field of Applied Linguistics supports a view of language competence as being a mixture of both (and not just one). Research has shown, however, that in specialized troubleshooting discourse the "gendered speech act" hypothesis is a myth (Aliwie, 2025), and talent-performing judges' "modus operandi" has changed from "gender-specified talk" to "code selection" based on performers' roles rather than their genders.

In this professional environment, and due to the technological affordances of the task, agents must adopt an androgynous communicative profile to meet organizational KPIs. Informed by recent work (Wilson et al., 2022), we suggest that the dual demands of technical accuracy and institutionalized politeness leave little room for the performance of gendered speech differences common to face-to-face interviews. The fact that both groups use back-channeling devices and the same ritualized apologies leads us to conclude that the speaker's professional identity (reinforced by "global call center registers") is a more powerful predictor of speech act deployment than their gender identity (World Bank Group, 2024). The study thus contributes to the literature on practical agency by showing that, in highly scripted contexts, the individual's linguistic agency is constrained by the functional demands of the discourse.

The increased use of modal-interrogative hedges by both males and females indicates face management in high imposition situations. In phrasing a request as a question, both male and female agents can reduce the conflict between their role as authority figure and subservient position as representative of the customer. As such, BPO work tends to perpetuate a more specialized form of "pragmatic competence", taught and incentivized by BPO training to override other gendered language habits. Other domains show similar patterns, particularly in technical safety contexts where the use of speech acts is regulated by controlled speech processes, and in this way even highly specialized genres can transcend domestic

sociocultural "linguopragmatic dimensions" (Dewi & Koesumaningrum, 2024; Shokirova, 2025). Fatma et al. (2019) describe it as a professional dialect that prioritizes the success of the "troubleshooting cycle" over individual expressiveness.

Further, the constant rhetoric of assertive acts as discourse navigators is also witnessed in the interactional management of the male and female agents. A non-stop feedback loop formed by the reiteration of markers such as "Alright" and "Okay" is very much essential for a distance communication. The similar frequencies in both sexes suggest that the participants acquired the tokens under a habitual occupation, as a part of their "conversational labor" toolkit. This supports the functional efficiency notion of "linguistic equity" and SDG 8, which envisions a system of equality in which competence is evaluated through a gender-neutral linguistic lens (United Nations, 2015).

The findings also begin to shed light on the role of "branding" in performance, such as when apologies are used as corporate performative tools of "corporate empathy". The study found that male agents are as likely as female agents to use overt, explicit apologies, placing a dent in the masculinist stereotype of forthrightness. In BPO, which is driven by branding, the resultant emotive register of communication is an imitative and ultimately gender-neutral one. The commodification of language overlaps with a digital form of resistance wherein speech acts can maneuver power structures and promote gender equity on a global scale (Abolade, 2026).

Sociolinguistically, the study shows that the BPO workplace is a "speech community" that holds particular realistic norms, which act as a linguistic filter that eliminates all gendered language and replaces it with a "professional idiolect" in pursuit of a more neutral and rapport-oriented communication. Furthermore, these findings underscore that people can consciously and considerably adapt their speech acts to an institutional ideal and equity standards, as defined by the global community (Solijonova, 2026; VaziraZiloliddinqizi, 2026).

Lastly, there is no important difference between male and female agents in the presence of types of commissive acts promising to resolve the customer's problem. Both male and female agents are equally likely to use future-directed language to take ownership of the problem. This suggests the employee's problem-solving potential is a shared practical goal. By focusing on the "speech act" and not the "speaker," the BPO industry is able to create a communicative space where its agents' gender is practically irrelevant. This implies how a workplace can break down social norms associated with gender, even in a globalized labor force.

Conclusion and Recommendations

To capture the illocutionary forces of such speech acts, the present study investigates institutional discourse in the context of professional technical support actions. Since the "troubles-telling" interactions are pragmatics-oriented, four of Searle (1979) five illocutionary force categories (viz. directives, assertives, commissives, and expressives) are part of the fabric of the examined corpus, which comprises 20 transcripts of said actions. In constructing the analysis, these utterances are specifically built up with task-related "hard" messages and rapport-dependent "softeners" to present the interviewee as an authoritative figure while remaining sympathetic to the consumer's technical issues. The major finding from the qualitative data is that the institutional requirement of the BPO industry encourages the meeting of "genderlects", developing a gender-neutral register.

Both the female and male agents most frequent speech act was requesting and advising speech acts. These types of speech acts (like "May I have your account number?" and "I suggest you reset the router") create a mental frame (which provides mnemonic cues) of the conversation and help the customer to understand in what way to act within the technical system. The modality and closed probe questions used by male and female agents allow them to focus the interlocutor on the factual domain and force the speaker of the equipment (routers, hubs, etc.) to use common ground, rejecting earlier sociolinguistic accounts of men's and women's speech where women are said to be indirect. Rather, the technical expertise and familiarity with call flow determine if the speech will be indirect or direct.

In addition to the commissive figuration of offering and agreeing (which entailed a promise to deliver), expressive figures are also often mobilized, such as the apology and thanks, to humanize the digital interface and enact politeness through the connection of technical goods to immaterial effects like brand credibility or emotional relief. In short, the use of expressive functions as a "face-saving" measure, and their use in strikingly similar ways by the male and female participants, opens up the consumer to a collaborative interpretative process. Likewise, the use of acknowledgment tokens (e.g., okay, alright, so) shows an emphasis by both male and female on the smoothness of interaction. All agents, regardless of biological sex, are expected to perform this "emotional labor" as a functional job requirement.

This study's most relevant qualitative finding is the characterization of realistic competence as a salient mode of cultural and professional identity with no distinctly definable gendered features. Filipino call center agents are described as

resilient, patient and averse to ambiguity. When the provision of technical assistance is understood as a performance of "linguistic hospitality", the communicative potential of Philippine BPO can be understood as making the global digital world familiar to its users, appealing to the discourses of helpfulness and dependability through which people define and recognize professional excellence. It is ultimately concluded that in the context of technical support, the power of the "expert" is used to bridge the customary communication gap between the genders.

At the same time, by tracking the interactional dynamics of goal-driven imperatives and rapport-oriented expressives, this study further reinforces the argument that speech acts are the fundamental communicative vehicles of the organizational actors' agendas and human stories and provides a qualitative basis for the study of professional persuasion and "linguistic leveling" in the Global South. BPO practitioners and educators need to cultivate a form of "pragmatic intelligence" that is ethically and culturally responsive to the collective identity and technological needs of the global consumer, and that can build professional know-how that is based on task completion, rather than the communicative stereotypes of gendered BPO communication.

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Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

The data used in this study consist of anonymized transcribed call recordings obtained from a Philippine-based Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) firm and analyzed for research purposes. Due to ethical considerations, confidentiality agreements, and the protection of participant privacy, the data are not publicly available. However, limited data may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request and subject to appropriate ethical considerations and institutional approval.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.