Despite call centres’ phenomenal expansion in the past fifteen years and their important role as an employment generator in many countries, the media and the majority of academic studies have characterised them as inherently problematic standardised and globalised workplaces. Pejorative metaphors have included, for instance, the sweatshop analogy. Other authors have emphasised the similarities between call centres and factory environments. A key criticism in most of this research is their heavy reliance on standardisation, in particular the widespread use and top-down imposition of standardised scripts. Agents are said to have to follow scripts they are given verbatim. Drawing on a 4 year-long ethnography, this research follows the trajectory of a standardised script, the symbol of standardisation to explore how different participants experience and understand scripts and standardisation. Methodologically, participant observation was conducted at an outbound call centre in London that describes itself to speak ”300 + languages” and contacts on behalf of clients’ businesses worldwide in any language requested. Sixty interviews were also conducted with the staff (managers and agents).

This paper problematises current theorisations of scripts and standardisation. These are shown i) to draw on a long tradition in social theory that views standardisation negatively – leading to homogenisation and deskilling and as ii) restricted in their vision, focusing only on managements’ official account of ‘static scripts’ that are enforced top-down through surveillance – the tendency that scripts unofficially take on different meanings whilst travelling down the hierarchy is overlooked. Official verbatim policy also sees it possible to ’make their own’ within the set framework, and thus does not lead to homogenisation or deskilling. The trajectory of the script reveals that agents are supportive of scripts. In fact, they state they help them with, for instance, language learning.

Keywords: new economy, standardisation, language commodification.