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HEADLINE: 'Press 3 to wait some more or swear to speak to a human'

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BODY:

Frustrating battles with automated phone machines could soon be a thing of the past with the development of new technology to measure irritation in callers waiting on hold.

The latest voice-recognition device promises to not only understand what people are saying but also their tone. As the system is designed to recognise both angry language and inflection, customers who either swear or speak in "violent" tones could be transferred to a human operator who can ultimately calm them down.

Officials from US call centres have already expressed an interest in the technology with the hope it will improve their customer-satisfaction ratings.

However inventor Professor **Shri Narayanan**, from the Speech Analysis and Interpretation Laboratory at the University of Southern California, believes the technology could have many more applications.

"It had always interested me whether you could detect people's emotions by what they are saying and I think this could be used in many areas including education."

The technology is based on transforming speech into wave patterns which are used to measure emotion.

" It has a very compelling application for detecting if a person is either feeling happy or sad," he added. "If someone is going through negative emotion you would want to transfer them to an operator and if they were happy then you could use them as part of a survey or something."

In contrast to Narayanan's optimism, Dr Mark Huckvale, who specialises in the accuracy of machine voice recognition, does not believe the system could ever be reliable enough.

"It really depends on how accurate this new system is as to how useful it can be," he said. "The most accurate systems at the moment have about a 30% to 40% error rate."

"As this is even newer you might find that the system locates 20% of people who are genuinely angry and puts them through to a human operator and it might accidentally pick up another 20% it thought were angry but in fact were not."

Huckvale argues that the new system is unlikely to herald the end of automated phone hell, not least because he doubts the industry would be interested.

Affective Media, a Scottish-based company which specialises in voice recognition technology was turned down by UK call centres when it offered its own emotion recognition two years ago.

After discussions with several automated call centres it became clear that nobody was interested unless the cost of calls would be cut. Chief Executive Christian Jones said: "When we talked to the automated call centres they said that this was the last thing they wanted.

"They are interested in reducing the cost of calls first and preventing customers from getting angry second, so they said they weren't very interested."

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