

THE SPEECH ACT OF THANKING IN ENGLISH. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN NATIVE AND NON- NATIVE SPEAKERS' BEHAVIOUR

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The main purpose of this article involves the analysis of certain aspects of the speech act of thanking in English both as a native and as foreign language. Those aspects include the selection of the strategy used in the expression of gratitude and the use of external modifiers. Expressions of gratitude in Spanish, the mother tongue of the English non-native speakers, were also considered for the sake of comparison. The data for this study were collected by means of a discourse completion test (DCT), which was administered among 225 informants. The main difference between the expressions of gratitude produced by English native speakers and those produced by English non-native speakers was related to the use of colloquial strategies. The results of this study suggest the importance of paying attention to pragmatic aspects in the class of English as foreign language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Expressions of gratitude are closely linked to the notion of verbal politeness. In the same way as apologies, expressions of gratitude are produced as a reaction to a previous action and have as an objective to restore the balance in the social relations between speaker and hearer. The aim of this paper will be to analyse certain aspects of the speech act of thanking in English, such as the strategy employed to express gratitude or the use of certain external modifiers or supportive moves. Likewise, a comparison is established between the expressions of gratitude produced by English native speakers and those realized by English non-native speakers.

2. THE SPEECH ACT OF THANKING

Expressions of gratitude, like complaints, are expressive speech acts, but unlike the latter, their nature, following Leech's (1983: 104) terminology, is *convivial*, since their objective involves keeping harmony between speaker and hearer. In this sense, Bodman & Eisenstein (1988: 1) state that the expression of gratitude is an essential pragmatic function to establish social links, which is reflected in the association produced in many English native speakers' minds between that function and politeness or good manners. Eisenstein & Bodman (1993) highlight the importance of the social value of the expression of gratitude in American English in the following way:

One indication of its importance is that it is one of the few functions that most speakers can remember being explicitly taught as children. Used frequently in a wide range of interpersonal relationships, this function, when appropriately expressed, can engender feelings of warmth and solidarity among interlocutors. Conversely, the failure to express gratitude adequately can have negative consequences for the relationship of speaker and listener (Eisenstein & Bodman 1993: 64).

Searle (1969: 65) also refers to the positive aspects of thanking, which he defines as an illocutionary act produced by a speaker as a reaction to a past act carried out by a hearer which the speaker considers that has been beneficial to him/her. Therefore, expressions of gratitude, like complaints and apologies, and unlike requests, are retrospective acts or post-events, since they refer to a past or ongoing action. Haverkate (1993: 160) states, in this sense, that the act of thanking is a reactive act, that is to say, it is determined by an interlocutor's previous action. According to him, "[e]ste acto, que puede ser verbal o no verbal, produce un cambio en el mundo que redundo en beneficio del hablante que agradece" (Haverkate 1993: 160). Apart from its retrospective or reactive character, thanking may also be characterized as a speech act which is included, following Searle's (1975) typology, under the category of expressive acts, whose illocutionary point may be formulated in the following manner: "to express the psychological state specified in the sincerity condition about a state of affairs specified in the propositional content" (Searle 1975: 12). The main characteristics of thanking may be summarized by means of the following table:

Type of speech act	Action	Assessment of the action	Actor	Addressee of the action
Expressive	Previous to the speech act	Positive	Hearer	Speaker

Table 1. Characteristics of the speech act of thanking

Coulmas (1981: 74-75) states that all verbalizations of thanking are addressed to an action by the “benefactor” or to some result of such an action, which he calls “the object of thanking” and which is subjected to variation on a wide scale. He distinguishes, therefore, across four dimensions along which the expressions of gratitude may differ, namely,

- I – thanks *ex ante* (for a promise, offer, invitation)
– thanks *ex post* (for a favour, invitation (afterwards))
- II – thanks for material goods (gifts, services)
– thanks for immaterial goods (desires, compliments, congratulations, information)
- III – thanks for some action initiated by the benefactor
– thanks for some action resulting from a request, wish or order by the beneficiary
- IV – thanks that imply indebtedness
– thanks that do not imply indebtedness

(Coulmas 1981: 74)

According to this classification, the object of thanking may be described in relation to different properties. Thus, it can be real or potential, material or immaterial, requested or not requested and indebting or not indebting. Likewise, the object of thanking may vary with regard to a scale of importance. The different objects of gratitude demand different strategies of thanking. In this sense, Okamoto & Robinson (1997: 412) say that the expressions of thanking are diverse and that their choice is conditioned not only by the relationship between the interlocutors, but also by the characteristics of the hearer’s action, particularly the weight of imposition of the action on the hearer: the amount of effort, time, money, etc. demanded by the action. In Okamoto & Robinson’s own words,

This is similar to Brown and Levinson’s *R* variable, although the latter refers to the imposition placed by the speaker’s utterance, not by the hearer’s (the giver’s) behaviour. It is expected that the greater the imposition there is on the giver, the more often the more polite gratitude forms will be used (Okamoto & Robinson 1997: 412).

Coulmas (1981) defends that thanking, as well as the apologizing, may be considered as a pragmatic universal, to such an extent that every language has a range of conventional devices to carry out such an act:

Apologies and thanks are strategic devices whose most important function is to balance politeness relations between interlocutors. It has been convincingly argued by R. Lakoff (1973) among others that politeness is a universal linguistic variable. As regards apologies and thanks, it seems to be a reasonable assumption that they exist as generic speech acts in every speech community. I would even go so far as to venture the hypothesis that every language provides a stock of conventionalized means for fulfilling these functions (Coulmas 1981: 81).

As indicated by Haverkate (1994: 93), in many cultures it is polite to inform the person who is expressing gratitude that it is not necessary to produce such illocutionary act, or in his own words, re-establish the cost-benefit balance. In this way, in languages such as Dutch, English or Spanish, such a function may be expressed by means of formulas such as the following ones: *géen dank, niet te danken, don't mention it, de nada, no hay de qué, no las merece* (Haverkate 1994: 94).

As has been highlighted more than once (Rubin 1983, Eisenstein & Bodman 1986, 1993, Bodman & Eisenstein 1988, Wolfson 1989, Aston 1995), by means of the expression *thank you*, apart from thanking other functions may also be realized, such as the opening or closing of a conversation. The opposite is also true, that is to say, in certain languages thanking may be realized by means of formulas corresponding to other illocutionary acts. Thus, Haverkate (1994: 96) mentions the case of Japanese, a language in which in order to express gratitude formulas which normally correspond to apologies may be used. Thus, in Japan, in order to thank somebody for an invitation to a dinner it is frequent to use an expression equivalent to "I have caused you too much trouble tonight". Obviously, the hosts, moved by the norms of politeness, will insist that it has been no trouble at all. In addition, there are some cultures in which the act of thanking has a non-verbal realization. Thus, Botswana, an indigenous language of the South of Africa, does not possess linguistic formulas to express gratitude. Speakers of that language, therefore, instead of verbalizing their gratitude, employ a hand gesture, which consists in raising the fingers in such a way that the points touch before the body.

3. METHOD

3.1. SUBJECTS

Seventy-five British English native speakers and seventy-five non-native speakers of English whose mother tongue is Spanish acted as informants to this study. For the sake of comparison, data in Spanish as a native language were also collected from another seventy-five subjects. Therefore, two hundred and twenty-five informants participated in this study altogether. All of them were university students at the universities of Leeds, Stirling, and Jaén. Their ages ranged between twenty and twenty-five years old. The reason to choose students as our target population, apart from purely practical reasons of availability, was to ensure as much homogeneity as possible with regard to educational background, social class

or age range. The distribution between sexes is the same in the three groups: 29 male informants and 46 female informants.

GROUP OF INFORMANTS	LANGUAGE	SPEAKERS	NUMBER OF INFORMANTS
I	British English	Native	75 (29 M + 46 F)
II	Peninsular Spanish	Native	75 (29 M + 46 F)
III	English	Non-native	75 (29 M + 46 F)

Table 2. Description of the group of informants

3.2. RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

The data for this study were elicited by means of a discourse completion test. Such a research instrument was used to ensure cross-cultural comparability. The test is composed of five socially differentiated situations which vary in terms of the interlocutors' relationship, that is to say, on the dimensions of dominance or social power and social distance or familiarity. Therefore, this instrument has allowed us to investigate not only the similarities and differences in the realization patterns of expressions of gratitude between native and non-native speakers of English, but also the effect of social factors on those realization patterns.

The situations are as follows:

S1 You are at the university with a friend of yours. You have to hand in a paper the following day, but your computer is not working. Your friend lends you his/her portable computer.

S2 You are in the university refectory. You are going to pay for your lunch and you discover that you have no money. One of your teachers, who is queuing behind you notices this and lends you 5 pounds.

S3 You are at home. A stranger rings the bell and brings you a folder in which your name and address appear. You had lost the folder and he/she found it at a bus stop.

S4 You are at the university bus stop. A teacher you have never met before offers to give you a lift. Since you do not know whether the last bus has already left, you accept his/her offer.

S5 You are in class taking notes. Your pen suddenly stops working. A class mate sitting next to you notices and lends you a pen.

As has been mentioned before, the five situations vary with regard to the social relationship between the interlocutors across the dimensions of social distance or familiarity and social power or dominance. Social distance is a binary variable in this case, that is to say, either the interlocutors know each other, in which case there is no social distance (–SD), or they have never met, which implies the existence of social distance (+SD). The variable of social power, in turn, also has two possible values: hearer’s dominance (S<H) or equal power between speaker and hearer (S=H). Like in Bonikowska (1988), Trosborg (1995) and Sasaki (1998), the situations have been designed in such a way that the informants—all of them university students in a western society— would find them familiar and everyday situations. In order to avoid the artificiality implied by the adoption of a role that would be completely alien to students—as that of a company manager, teacher or boss in an office—, in the present study we have chosen not to include situations in which the speaker had to adopt a power position with respect to the hearer. In this connection, Hernández Sacristán (1999: 59) states that, if situations which would be foreign to the informants were included, the effort of metapragmatic reflection demanded from them would have to do, therefore, not with what the informant would say in a given situation, but with what he/she thinks that an interlocutor A would say to an interlocutor B in the situation described. This would obviously affect the reliability of the data obtained, since, if there is a difference between what somebody really says in a situation and what he/she thinks that he/she would say, the difference will be greater when the answer corresponds to what somebody thinks somebody else would say in a given situational context. Table 3 shows the relationship between speaker (S) and hearer (H) across the two social dimensions previously mentioned and with respect to the degree of imposition of the action.

Thanking situations	Social distance	Dominance	Degree of imposition
S1 Computer	–SD	S = H	+
S2 Lunch	–SD	S < H	+
S3 Folder	+SD	S = H	+
S4 Lift	+SD	S < H	+
S5 Pen	–SD	S = H	–

Table 3. Description of the situations proposed in the discourse completion test

4. THANKING STRATEGIES

Among the strategies used to express gratitude different levels may be distinguished, which range from the most direct, or *Illocutionary Force Indicating*

Devices (IFIDs), to the indirect strategies, which combined with an *IFID*, may also be used as supportive moves to the nuclear act in an expression of gratitude.

The fourth level or category corresponds to the direct strategies, grouped under the common label *IFID*, or *Illocutionary Force Indicating Device*. Within this group different strategies may be established. Each of those strategies is associated to a particular register. Thus, in English two types of *IFID* which are clearly linked to a colloquial register may be used to express gratitude. It is the case of *cheers* and *ta*. In Spanish there is not an equivalent form, a reason which explains why the percentage of use of this strategy is obviously 0 %. In 17.3 % of the expressions of gratitude produced by the English native speakers a colloquial *IFID* has been used, whereas in the group of the English non-native speakers this percentage descends to 1.6 %. The differences between one group and the other are therefore statistically significant. These differences between native and non-native speakers are due to the fact that these colloquial forms are closely connected to the type of language spoken in informal situations and are, consequently, forms which tend to be acquired in the country where the foreign language is spoken and which are not normally taught in the classroom. Besides, the fact that no equivalent forms exist in Spanish also explains this difference in behaviour between native and non-native speakers, since in this case positive transfer from Spanish to English is not possible. As can be observed in example (3), these colloquial *IFIDs* may be intensified by means of adverbs.

- (1) *Cheers* mate. I won't nick it. (I/9/5)¹
- (2) Oh, *cheers*, man. Nice one. I'll buy you a drink or something. (I/53/1)
- (3) *Ta* very much. (I/15/5)
- (4) *Cheers*, mate. (III/30/5)
- (5) *Ta!* (III/72/5)

Another *IFID* also associated to a colloquial register, although less informal than the previous ones, is the English formula *thanks*, which has no clear equivalent in Spanish either. The differences between English native and non-native speakers are also statistically significant in this case. Whereas English native speakers have used this *IFID* in 47.7 % of their expressions of gratitude, non-native speakers have done it only in 26.9 %.

- (6) *Thanks* very much. It was very kind of you to come all this way and bring it back. (I/4/1)

¹ The relevant linguistic item or sequence appears in italics. In the code system used to identify the examples, the first number represents the group of speakers (I: English native speakers, II: Spanish native speakers, and III: English nonnative speakers), the second number (from 1 to 75) represents the informant, and the third number (1 to 5) refers to the situation.

- (7) *Thanks* a lot. I'll give it back to you as soon as possible. (III/13/1)

The following IFID, *thank you* in English and *gracias* in Spanish, unlike the previous ones is not associated to an informal or colloquial register. It is the unmarked thanking strategy and the commonest one in the three groups of informants. Nevertheless, a considerable divergence across them may be observed, from 90.1 % of use of this IFID in the Spanish speakers to 30.4 % in the English native speakers, through 64.5 % in the English non-native speakers. The differences across the three groups are, therefore, statistically significant. The fact that the Spanish native speakers make use of this IFID in a much higher percentage is logical, since Spanish does not possess colloquial IFIDs to express gratitude. In the case of non-native speakers, the percentage of use of this IFID is much higher than that of the native speakers, since the former, due to the reasons which have been already stated, employ the colloquial IFIDs less frequently. In addition, as has been already said, *thank you* is the unmarked IFID, that is to say, the speaker assumes a lower risk if he/she uses this expression than if he/she employs an expression too informal or colloquial, which could be considered not appropriate in certain contexts. Due to this possibility, when a speaker is not sure whether his/her relationship with his/her interlocutor allows him/her to use an informal expression or when a non-native speaker does not master the social norms which apply in the target culture, the sense of prudence may lead him/her to opt for the unmarked form which will be able to be accepted in any situational context without causing any type of conflict. The following three examples illustrate the use of this thanking strategy.

- (8) *Thank you* very much, I will get the money back to you first thing tomorrow. (I/3/2)
- (9) Oye, *gracias*, te debo una. (II/2/1)
- (10) *Thank you* very much. I will give it back to you tomorrow. (III/51/2)

Finally, *performative statements* have also been included within the category of illocutionary force indicating devices. They are statements which contain a performative verb which indicates the illocutionary force of the act of thanking. The English native speakers have not resorted to a performative statement in any of their expressions of gratitude. The English non-native speakers have expressed gratitude by means of a statement of this type on two occasions, but such statements would not probably sound natural to the ears of an English native speaker. Finally, Spanish native speakers have been those who have used performative statements more frequently, particularly in 3.2 % of their expressions of gratitude. This group of informants statistically differs from the other two groups in this case.

- (11) *Se lo agradezco* mucho; si no hubiera llegado usted puede que aún estuviera esperando el autobús. (II/55/4)

- (12) It is marvellous. I thought I would never find it. *I give you a lot of thanks.*
(III/46/3)

5. EXTERNAL MODIFIERS IN THE EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE

The illocutionary force of an expression of gratitude can be modified not only by means of the recourse to internal modifiers, but also by means of supportive moves or external modifiers. In the same way as internal modifiers, supportive moves always have the function of intensifying the illocutionary force. Most of the supportive moves which have been identified in the expressions of gratitude produced by the informants of this study have also been used on some occasions as indirect thanking strategies. We are going to consider now, however, those cases in which they go with some type of IFID, in which case their function is to reinforce the illocutionary force of the nuclear act. No statistically significant differences have been observed across groups of informants with regard to the use of external modifiers. The percentages of expressions of gratitude which contain some external modifier range between 72.3 % in the group of English native speakers and 68.5 % in the group of Spanish native speakers. Only those external modifiers which present statistical differences of use between English native and non-native speakers will be focused on in this section.

The supportive move called *praise to the action* —by means of which the speaker recognizes that he/she has been benefited from the hearer's action and implicitly is praising the doer of that action— has been that which has been used most frequently by Spanish native speakers and English non-native speakers, respectively in 20.8 % and 21.9 % of their expressions of gratitude. The informants of these two groups significantly differ from the English native speakers, who have resorted to this supportive move in 12.5 % of their expressions of gratitude.

- (13) Thanks. *That's a great help.* (I/5/1)
- (14) Cheers. *You've really helped me out.* (I/28/1)
- (15) Gracias, *me acabas de salvar la vida, en esa carpeta tenía todos los apuntes de matemáticas.* (II/4/3)
- (16) Muchas gracias, *me has hecho un gran favor.* (II/68/3)
- (17) Thank you very much. *You have made me a great favour.* (III/16/4)
- (18) Thanks a lot, *I don't know what I would have done without your help.*
(III/51/1)

The speaker may opt to praise the hearer directly with the intention of intensifying his/her expression of gratitude. Routine formulas of a hyperbolic nature

are frequently used in English, such as *You're a lifesaver*.² In complimenting his/her interlocutor, the speaker is indicating that the former has done an effort to carry out an action from which the speaker has benefited and that anybody would not be ready to do that. English native speakers—with 16.2 % of expressions of gratitude which contain a *praise to the person*—significantly differ from the informants of the other two groups. In the Spanish native speakers and the English non-native speakers the percentages are respectively 6.7 % and 8 %.

- (19) Cheers, *you're an absolute lifesaver!* (I/1/1)
- (20) Thanks a lot, *that's really kind of you.* (I/4/1)
- (21) *¡Qué guay que eres!* Te lo devolveré tan pronto lo termine. Gracias. (II/25/1)
- (22) Muchas gracias. *Ha sido muy amable.* (II/22/4)
- (23) Thank you very much, Tom. *You're a good friend.* (III/5/1)
- (24) Thanks a lot, *it's difficult to find people like you nowadays.* (III/28/3)

6. CONCLUSIONS

The main purpose of this paper has been to explore some characteristics of the speech act of thanking in English both as a native and as a foreign language. As has been shown, probably the most relevant difference between native and non-native speakers of English with regard to the production of expressions of gratitude has to do with the use of colloquial strategies. This is an aspect directly related to the pragmatics of a language, that is to say, the use of that language in particular contexts. Although it has been traditionally disregarded in the foreign language classroom—in which the emphasis has been placed on other fields such as grammar or vocabulary—, pragmatics seems to be gaining ground due to certain aspects, such as the communicative approach to foreign language teaching or the growing interest in pragmatics as a field of study in itself. To become communicatively competent in language learning implies not only the progressive enrichment of linguistic knowledge but also developing the ability to use linguistic forms that are appropriate to the socio-cultural context in which communication takes place. Communicative language learning and teaching can therefore not be understood but in the light of pragmatics. Nor can the functional bias of

² About the use of hyperbolic statements and their relation with politeness, Leech states the following: "There will naturally be a preference for overstating polite beliefs and understating impolite ones" (Leech 1983: 146).

communicative language syllabuses be approached without a reference to speech act theory.

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