

Thanks responses in three socio-economic settings: A variational pragmatics approach



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Abstract

In this paper I investigate thanks responses from a variationist perspective. Although both their form and frequency have been said to differ according to both the variety of English and the formality of the situation (cf. Farenkia, 2012; Schneider, 2005; Aijmer, 1996; Leech and Svartvik, 1994; Edmondson and House, 1981), this variation has yet to be quantified through the analysis of naturally occurring speech. I analyze variation along the socio-economic scale in Los Angeles, California in both the form and frequency of verbal thanks responses and whether the type of favor affects the form or frequency of thanks responses. In order to do this, I take a function-to-form perspective to analyze discourse from restaurant service encounters in nine restaurants of three different price ranges. The results of this study show that there is variation in the frequency and use of thanks responses. Forms of *you're welcome* are only used in the more formal and expensive restaurants, never in the informal and inexpensive ones. Additionally, verbal thanks responses are found 50 percent more frequently in the expensive restaurants than in the inexpensive ones. Finally the type of favor that most frequently receives a verbal thanks response does differ among the three price ranges of restaurants.

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1. Introduction

In this paper I look at variation in the use of thanks responses in three socio-economic settings in Los Angeles. Verbal thanks responses in English have been said to be infrequent in comparison with their frequency in other languages (Edmondson and House, 1981:166; Leech and Svartvik, 1994:173; Aijmer, 1996:40). Moreover, the use of thanks responses, such as *you're welcome* and *my pleasure*, has been said to differ between varieties of English (Edmondson and House, 1981:166, 173; Aijmer, 1996:78). Motivated by these claims, Schneider (2005) set out to quantitatively investigate the variation of thanks responses in three varieties of English. He began quantifying this through the use of experimental research. Quantitative research on thanks responses based on naturally occurring speech, however, has yet to be conducted. In this study I investigate thanks responses in naturally occurring speech in Los Angeles, California in order to see how frequent verbal responses are, which forms are used and whether the forms are as “standardized” as posited in previous studies.

More specifically this study aims to investigate whether variation in the form and frequency of thanks responses is present on a socio-economic level in English. In order to investigate this, a corpus of naturally occurring restaurant service encounters containing discourse from restaurants along the socio-economic scale will be used. In conducting this

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research, I intend to contribute to the growing discourse on whether the sociolinguistic variable can be extended to research in pragmatics and to present a viable method for conducting research in variational pragmatics on a socio-economic level.

The following section (Section 2) contains an overview of relevant literature on the status of variational pragmatics as a new and important field of research. Section 2.1 outlines past research on thanks responses, all of which points to the variation of thanks responses among varieties of English or in relation to the formality of the context. In Section 2.2 methodological considerations for variational pragmatics research are discussed and are followed by an overview of the data collection procedure of and participants in the present study. The findings comprise Section 3. First, the distributions of the types and tokens of thanks responses are presented along with an analysis of upgraders, multi-heads and support moves. Second, an analysis of thanks responses in relation to the favors that initiate thanks will be provided. This is then followed by a discussion in Section 4 in which my findings are related to those of previous studies.

2. Pragmatic variation: theoretical and methodological considerations

The study of language variation on the phonological level has received a great amount of attention as phonological variables have three advantageous characteristics. They are used frequently, their distribution is highly stratified and they are structurally “integrated into the larger system of functioning units” (Labov, 1972:8). Pragmatic variation, in contrast – despite an awareness of its existence and importance (cf. Wolfram and Schilling-Estes, 2006:93–101) – has received little attention. This is, perhaps, in part due to three factors. First, the lack of agreement on how to classify variables above the phonological level has caused debate. According to Dines (1980:15) “variables may be postulated on the basis of *common function in discourse*” (original emphasis). In contrast Pichler (2013:41) aims to “[...] constitute variables by virtue of the fact that their respective variants are derived from the same linear string of components [...] the variants of these variables differ from each other in terms of their morpho-phonological encoding”. Second, this lag in variationist research in pragmatics can also be attributed to the difficulty in closing the set of all the possible variants of one variable (cf. Buchstaller, 2009; Cheshire, 2005; Pichler, 2010, 2013; Terkourafi, 2011). Third, eliciting many pragmatic features, such as speech acts, out of socio-linguistic interviews is challenging, which makes collecting data suited to variational pragmatic research difficult. Additionally, Kasper (2008:286) posits that one of the greatest difficulties in using authentic data is obtaining comparable data.

Despite the lingering methodological questions, Schneider and Barron (2008:3) argue that “the general lack of a pragmatic perspective in the investigation of language variation is [...] a serious shortcoming”. They postulate that pragmatic variation is conditioned by both macro-social factors (e.g. region, social class, ethnicity, gender and age) and situational micro-social factors (e.g. power and social distance) (Schneider and Barron, 2008:16, 18). Additionally, they propose that pragmatic variation be studied on five different levels, each comprising different areas of pragmatic study:

1. Formal: discourse markers, hedges and upgraders
2. Actional: speech-act realization and modification, (im)politeness, (in)directness
3. Interactional: sequential patterns and adjacency pairs
4. Topic: content appropriateness, raising and abandoning of topics
5. Organizational: turn-taking phenomena, pauses, overlaps, backchanneling (Schneider and Barron, 2008:20–21).

Much research has been conducted on these five levels over the last three decades in cross-cultural pragmatics research (i.e. among different languages). Cross-cultural research has shown that the form, frequency and appropriateness of speech acts are affected by cultural values and habits (cf. Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Wierzbicka, 1985). Knowing how and when to use a certain form of a speech act is strongly linked to one’s own cultural frame of reference.

In this early wave of cross-cultural pragmatic research, most languages were taken as homogeneous wholes, despite the awareness of national and even sub-national variation on a phonological level. More recently, studies have been conducted which investigate what Schneider and Barron (2008) have termed “intra-lingual pragmatic variation” (i.e. differences among national varieties of the same language). Just to name a few, Barron (2005) looks at offers comparing usage in Irish English and English English using a free discourse completion task. Using a multi-task questionnaire, Schneider (2005) analyzes thanks responses and small talk, comparing usage in Irish English, English English and American English. Jautz (2008, 2013) analyzes expressions of gratitude in British English and New Zealand English on radio-talk shows using the British National Corpus (BNC) as well as the Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English (WSC). From these examples, it can be seen that studies in variational pragmatics, to date, have drawn on both experimental data (i.e. Schneider, 2005 and Barron, 2005) and corpora/naturally occurring speech (i.e. Jautz, 2008, 2013). All of these studies show the existence of pragmatic variation among national varieties of English.

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