

THAI WAYS OF RESPONDING TO AN EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE

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1. Introduction

Responding to an expression of gratitude is a complicated act. According to Brown and Levison's theory of face (1987), the thankee's dilemma is whether or not s/he should say something to minimize the debt. Even though the indebtedness minimization strategy helps make the thanker feel better and maintain the smooth relation, there might be some situations where the thankee would rather not adopt the strategy.

In the present study, I shall examine how Thai speakers respond to an expression of gratitude. Do they always respond to the act of thanking? What do they say to minimize the debt? And when they prefer not to reduce the debt, what are the responding strategies they adopt? What are the widely adopted responses in Thai? Are status and social distance—the two sociological variables in Brown and Levinson's weightiness formula—related to how Thai speakers respond to the act of thanking?

2. Method

Naturally occurring conversation is, of course, the best source of data. However, waiting for responses to thanks to crop up in free interactions is too time-consuming. For the present study, the Discourse Completion Test (DCT) is adopted for data collection. The 122 respondents who are students at Chulalongkorn University were asked to fill in the third pair part of the adjacency pair:

A request

The first pair part: An action that satisfies the request

The second pair part: An expression of gratitude

The third pair part: A response of thanks

The questionnaire includes short descriptions of four different situations—responding to a high status teacher, a close friend, an acquaintance, and a stranger. The respondents were asked whether or not they would respond to an expression of gratitude and if they choose to, what would they do or say. The four situations read:

Situation 1/2/3: A teacher/a close friend/a classmate asks you to help type a paper. When the work is done, s/he says /khǝ:pkhun/ 'thank you'. What would you do?

Situation 4: A stranger got lost on campus. S/he asks you to take her/him to the university bookstore. When you get there, s/he says /khǝ:pkhun/ 'thank you'. What would you do?

3. Results and discussion

It is found that most of the respondents chose to respond to the act of thanking even though they were told that they may choose not to reply. Only two decided to ignore when the thanker is a stranger. They wrote: /mây tǝ:p/ and /chǝ:y chǝ:y/ 'not respond' or 'be silent'. When the thanker is a higher status or a friend, a few respondents preferred not to respond to the expression of gratitude. However, they did not totally ignore the thanker. They said /pay la ná/ and /rî:p pay/ 'I've got to go/I'm in a hurry' to end the interaction with their friend and *waay* as they left their teacher.

Let us now consider the expressions given by those who chose to reply. Eisenstein and Bodman (1993) note that English speakers sometimes prefer long and creative forms to express their gratitude. An expression of gratitude might consist of 4 utterances—complementing + thanking + expressing indebtedness + expressing an inability to articulate deep feelings. Little has been done on what Thai speakers say to express their gratitude. But for the response, the present study reveals that the respondents prefer a short form. Most of their responses contain only one utterance. About 14% consist of two utterances. Less than 1% contain 3 utterances. These longest forms are found only in responding to a teacher. For example,

mâypenray khâ + nũ: kamlang wâ:ng + nũ:chô:phim dûay khâ
 ‘Not at all. I don’t have anything to do now. And I love typing.’

The responses elicited can be classified into 4 groups. To put it another way, the respondents responded to the act of thanking in 4 ways. The 4 methods are: minimize the debt, use a playful remark to put the thanker at ease, indicate that the act of thanking is accepted, and state a complaint. In the following section, let us examine these 4 ways of responding in Thai.

3.1. The 4 ways of responding to an expression of gratitude

3.1.1. Minimize the debt

Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that expressing thanks is threatening to the speaker’s face because it is an acceptance of a debt to the hearer. To make the interaction less face-losing, the thankee might say something to reduce the debt. It is found here that the respondents adopted 6 indebtedness minimization strategies shown hereunder.

Strategy 1: The thankee says that the request did not cause her/him any trouble.

The most popular form in every situation is

/mâypenray/ ‘not at all’

Other widely adopted forms are:

/mây lambà:k ʔaray/ ‘It’s not troublesome at all./
 /mây lambà:k lə:y/ You didn’t cause me any trouble.’

/ngâ:y mâ:k/ ‘Very easy.’

/saba:y yù: lă:w/, ‘It’s really alright. I can
 /saba:y mâ:k/ handle it.’

/r̥i:ang lék/ ‘I can handle it.’

/nítnɔ̌y/ ‘Not much trouble.’

Some expressions do not say yet imply that the thanker did not cause much trouble.

/wâ:ng yù:/ 'I have nothing to do now.'

/mây mi: ʔaray tham phɔ:di/ 'I have nothing to do now.'

/raw phim rew/ 'I type fast.'

Strategy 2: The thankee provides a justification for the thanker's request to help.

/kô: thə: phim mây pen/ 'Because you can't type.'

/man yəʔ thə: phim khon
diaw mây wǎy rɔk/ 'Too much work.
You can't type it all by yourself.'

/nay cula: tha:ng
man sápsɔ:n/ 'The campus road is tangled.'

Strategy 3: The thankee says that the thanker's request is beneficial to her/him.

/dâ:y fɪk phim pay dūay/ 'I can also practice typing.'

/dâ:y ʔà:n nga:n khô:ng
ʔaca:n dūay khâ/ 'I got a chance to read your
paper.'

/dâ:y cháy we:la: wâ:ng
hây pen prayò:t khâ/ 'I got a chance to make use of
my free time.'

Strategy 4: The thankee says s/he is not of any help (thus, the thanker does not own her/him).

/nũ: phim chá: dūaysám
pay khâ/ '(I'm not of any help.) I
typed too slowly.'