

THAI WAYS OF RESPONDING TO AN EXPRESSION OF GRATITUDE

Natthaporn Panpothong
Chulalongkorn University

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 dūay 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 yéʔ 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 khô/ 'I got a chance to read your
paper.'

/dâ:y cháy we:la: wâ:ng
hây pen prayò:t khô/ '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 khô/ '(I'm not of any help.) I
typed too slowly.'

/nũ: phim chá: tham hây	'I kept you waiting for a long
ʔaca:n tɔŋ ɾɔ: na:n/	time because I typed too
	slowly.'

Strategy 5: The thankee says it is her/his pleasure to help (thus, the thanker does not have to feel indebted to her/him).

/nũ: yà:k chûay khâ/	'I would like to help.'
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/raw temcay chûay/	'I'm willing to help.'
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/yi:ndi: khâ/	'My pleasure.'
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Some respondents showed their willingness to help by offering to help more.

/mi: ʔi:k máy ʔaw ma:	'Do you have more? I can do
ʔi:k kô: dâ:y/	it for you.'

/thâ: ʔaca:n mi: ʔi:k riak	'If you have more (to type),
nũ: dâ:y lə:y khâ/	just let me know.'

/khra:w nâ: mi: hây chûay	'If you need my help again,
ʔi:k bô:k dâ:y ná/	let me know.'

Strategy 6: The thankee asks the thanker to pay back.

The act of requesting within the theory of politeness is face-threatening to the hearer. That the thankee asks the thanker to do or give her/him something in return appears impolite. However, the act of requesting here is used as indebtedness minimization strategy. The thankee tries to make the thanker feel less indebted by telling her/him that s/he can pay back. In most of the examples, the thankee says /lă:w hă:y kan/ or /hă:y kan/ 'Then the debt is clear' after making a request. For example,

/liang mǔ:pîng sǎ:m má:y	'Give me three pieces of
lă:w hă:y kan/	barbecued pork. Then, the
	debt is clear.'

/pha: pay liang khâ:w lă:w hă:y kan/	‘Treat me a meal. Then, the debt is clear.’
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/wáy khra:w nâ: chûay raw lă:w kan/	‘You can help me in return some other time.’
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We have looked into what Thai speakers say to reduce the debt and make the interaction less face-threatening to the thanker. Let us now turn to another way of responding which also helps minimize face-threats and create a friendly interaction.

3.1.2. Use playful remarks to put the thanker at ease

In the theory of politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987), jokes and humorous remarks are considered to be a positive politeness strategy. The reason is that they can promote intimacy and solidarity and, in intimate relations, the danger to face-threats becomes minimal. Takehuro (1998) studies jokes in English and Japanese. Her comparative study reveals that Japanese speakers use jokes to smooth stiff conversation. In the present study, it is found that humorous remarks are used to put the thanker at ease and create a relaxing atmosphere. Let us consider some examples of playful responses.

/ʔaw khâ:câ:ng ma: dûay lở: lên nâ:/	‘Give me my wage. Just joking!’
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/mă: ʔaw ma: ɾ: chiaw ná/ phû:t lên nâ/	‘Oh! You brought it here to wait for my help. Just joking!’
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/chán pen khondi: yâ/	‘I’m a generous person.’
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/cingcay r̥:plà:w/	‘Are you sincere (when you say thank you)?’
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Since these expressions can be mistaken as serious remarks, the speakers need some cues to indicate they are playful. The speakers in the first two examples say they are just joking to

be certain that their expressions will not be misinterpreted as a serious request and a real complaint. The last two examples are less overt. The last one sounds like a sarcastic remark. However, the respondent wrote down she intended it to be humorous. Friendly atmosphere or tones of voice are required in the last two expression; otherwise they might be taken as a self-praise and a sarcastic question. That humorous remarks need friendly context might explain why this type of response is only found in responding to a close friend in the present study.

3.1.3. Indicate that the act of thanking is accepted

The shortest forms of response found in the data elicited are /khâ/, /khráp/, /câ/, /câa/, /ʔɪ:/, and /ʔə:/ 'yes'. These forms are alternatives for those who do not want to say anything to minimize the debt.

There appears to be another case where this type of response is preferred. To some respondents interviewed later, they feel very awkward and could not think of an appropriate response when their teacher expressed indebtedness to them. They are afraid they might say something that would make their teacher feel offended. Thus, the shortest response seems to be the safest and the best way to end this awkward interaction.

3.1.4. State a complaint

Some respondents who chose to say /mâypenray/ 'not at all' wrote down: /thî:cing ngùtngit/ 'In fact, I feel irritated.' However, there are a few who decided to be direct rather than polite. Instead of saying something to make the thanker feel less indebted, they expressed their frustration to regain emotional balance. We have seen an example of a playful complaint in the previous section. Let us now look at examples of serious complaint.

/thə: nî nâ: bɿa/

'You're boring.'

/ʔaray nîa yəʔ yáʔ/

'What do you have here?
Too much work.'

/phim con m̄fay/

'My hands are sore from
typing your paper.'

/nâ: ca b̄ð:k lûangnâ:/

'You should have asked me
(to help) earlier.'

The first example 'You're so boring' is the most face-threatening complaint found in the data. It is the only example where the speaker criticizes the thanker directly. In other cases, the speaker expresses her/his frustration caused by the request rather than focuses on the thanker. Olshtain and Weinback (1993) point out that stating a complaint related to the unacceptable act but not directly the hearer helps lower the risk of damaging the friendly relation between the speaker and the hearer. I believe this is the reason why most of the respondents here who chose to complain did not mention the thanker directly.

It is not unexpected that this type of response is not found when the thanker is a teacher. The fact that the face-threatening act of complaining can cause embarrassment and anger (Leech 1983, Olshtain and Weinbach 1993) seems to be an apparent explanation.

In some of the examples we have considered, status and social distance appear to play a role in determining the thankee's strategy choice. For example, humorous remarks are preferred only when the thanker is a close friend while complaints are not found when the thanker is of a higher status. In the following section, let us look more closely how these two factors are related to Thai speakers' strategy choice.

3.2. The four situations compared

Notice that 4. State a complaint and 1.2 The thankee provides a justification for the request are found in the three situations where the thanker is of an equal status but not in responding to a higher status. On the other hand, 1.3 The thankee says the request is beneficial to her/him and 1.4 The thankee says s/he is not of any help are adopted only when the thanker is a higher status.

	a teacher	a close friend	an acquaintance	a stranger
1 Minimize the debt				
1.1 The thankee says the request did not cause her/him any trouble	X	X	X	X
1.2 The thankee provides a justification for the request		X	X	X
1.3 The thankee says the request is beneficial to her/him	X			
1.4 The thankee says s/he is not of any help	X			
1.5 The thankee says s/he is willing to help	X	X	X	
1.6 The thankee asks the thanker to pay back		X	X	
2 Use playful remarks to put thanker at ease		X		
3 Indicate that the act of thanking is accepted	X	X	X	X
4 State a complaint		X	X	X

Table 1: Different types of response found in the four situations

This indicates that one of the factors that determine how Thai speakers respond to the act of thanking is status. It is not unpredicted that the act of complaining is not found in responding to a teacher since in Thai culture this is a situation where a high level of politeness is expected.

Unlike complaining, which is highly face-threatening in every situation, that the thankee provides a justification for the request is face-saving when the thanker is of an equal status. But when the thanker is a teacher, this type of response might be offending because a teacher in Thai culture does not need any excuses to ask his/her student to help. This is an explanation why this type of response is not found in responding to a teacher.

A high level of politeness also explains why 1.3 and 1.4 are only preferred when the thanker is a teacher. These two types of responses might sound hypocritical when the thanker is of an equal status. However, they appear to be appropriate in responding to a teacher.

Another factor considered in the present study is social distance. Obviously, a request to pay back is illogical when the thanker is a stranger. A choice whether or not to use a playful remark also depends on social distance. It is found that playful responses are preferred only when the thanker is a close friend. That this type of response is not found when the participants are distant might be because they can be easily misinterpreted as serious remarks when there is no friendly atmosphere and cohesive relationship.

If we compare Situation 2 Responding to a close friend and Situation 3 Responding to an acquaintance, the only difference from Table 1 is that humorous remarks are used with a close friend but not an acquaintance. Let us look into more details—the percentage of various forms adopted which might allow us to see other differences between the two situations.

It is found that the most preferred response in every situation is /mâypenray/ ‘not at all’. However, the form is adopted less frequently when the thanker is a close friend.

Responding to a teacher	49.10%
Responding to a close friend	41.80%
Responding to an acquaintance	56.04%
Responding to a stranger	58%

Table 2. The percentage of /mâypenray/ adopted in the four situations

According to some of the respondents interviewed later, the form is highly ritualized and not really expressive. It is proper when responding to someone they are not close to. Yet, when the thanker is a close friend, they prefer to be more expressive and creative.

Let us now turn to the second preferred forms found in the four situations. While /khâ/, /khráp/, /câ/, or /câ:/ 'yes' is the second preferred in responding to an acquaintance and a stranger, these forms are adopted less often in responding to a close friend. The second popular when the thanker is a close friend are /nítñɔ̌y/, /r̥f̥aŋlék/, and /cípcɔ̌y/ 'Not troublesome. I can handle it.'

Responding to a teacher	'yes'	24.01%
a close friend	'Not troublesome. I can handle it.'	24%
an acquaintance	'yes'	20.56%
a stranger	'yes'	27.6%

Table 3. The second preferred forms in the four situations

Table 2. and Table 3. allow us to see that /mâypenray/ 'not at all' and /khâ/ or /khráp/ are adopted less frequently when thanker is close to the thankee. While /mâypenray/ is a spontaneous reaction to an expression of gratitude and does not really convey any meaning to some respondents, /khâ/ or /khráp/ only indicate that the act of thanking is accepted. These forms might be preferred when the thanker is distant. However, when the thanker is a close friend, some respondents would rather sound more expressive.

We have examined how the two sociological factors—status and social distance—are related to the thankee's choice. There are, of course, other factors such as the length and complexity of the thanker's turn that might determine how Thai speakers respond to the act of thanking. If the thanker says more than /khɔ̌:pkhun/ to show that s/he is really very grateful, the thankee might hesitate to complain even though s/he is annoyed.

In the next section, I would like to talk more about /mâypenray/—the most popular response to thanks in Thai. The form is adopted by about half of the respondents in every situation. There are some remarks given by the respondents I interviewed that are worth discussing.

4. More about /mâypenray/

The popular response /mâypenray/ comes from /mâypen⁷aray/ which literally means 'It doesn't cause me anything'. The form has become an automatic response to an expression to gratitude. To some respondents, it does not really convey any meaning. That is why it is dispreferred by some respondents when interacting with a teacher or a close friend.

There is another group of respondents who disprefer /mâypenray/ for a different reason. Contrary to the first group, they do not think the expression is only a spontaneous response and has no meaning. To them, replying with /mâypenray/ implies that the teacher is indebted. That is the reason why they think the form is an impolite response. Since they feel that students are supposed to offer help to their teachers or satisfy their teachers' requests, they prefer other types of responses such as offering to help more or saying that they are not of any help.

However, the other half who adopted /mâypenray/ have an opposite view. Some who were interviewed agree that the expression implies the thankee is indebted to the thanker. Yet, they do not have the impression that the response is impolite. It is, on the other hand, a polite way of responding since it reduces the teacher's debt. To them, it is not unacceptable to say that a teacher owes a student a favor.

To summarize thus far, the respondents have different judgements on whether or not /mâypenray/ is an appropriate response when interacting with a teacher. It is anxious to know how teachers perceive /mâypenray/ as a response to their expression of gratitude to students.

Six lecturers in the department of Thai, Chulalongkorn University, I interviewed agree that /mâypenray/ is not a tactful response even though they know that the students intend to be polite. That a student replies with /mâypenray/ means she can reduce the teacher's debt and thus suggest that s/he is of a higher status in the context. A lecturer points out to me that not only as a response to thanks, /mâypenray/ as the second pair in other contexts is sometimes inappropriate. An example to illustrate this point is:

A student came to see her teacher about a term paper. The teacher was busy. So, she told the student to come back later. The student said /mâypenray khâ/ 'It's OK'.

We might be reluctant to refuse and feel bad if we have to refuse because the act of refusing is face-threatening to the hearer. From the student's point of view, /mâypenray/ here might make the teacher feel less guilty after saying 'no' to her. But from the teacher's point of view, since she is of a higher status, she has a right to reject the student. Therefore, to the teacher, /mâypenray/ here is improper because it implies that the teacher is not supposed to say 'no'.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I attempt to answer two questions: What do Thai speakers say in response when someone expresses the feeling of gratitude to them? And are the two sociological variables—status and social distance—related to how Thai speakers respond to an expression of gratitude?

It is found that most of the respondents do not ignore the thanker but rather say something in response. The four ways of responding are 1. Minimize the debt, 2. Use playful remarks to put the thanker at ease, 3. Indicate the act of thanking is accepted, and 4. State a complaint.

The variables of status and social distance appear to play an important role in determining the respondents' strategy choice. The study reveals that playful remarks are only found in responding to a close friend whereas saying that the request is beneficial and that the thankee is not of any help are only found in responding to a teacher.

/mâypenray/ is the most popular form in every situation. Yet, it is found less often in responding to a close friend. This is due to the fact that some respondents feel the form is only a spontaneous reaction and does not convey any meaning. They prefer to be more creative and expressive when interacting with their close friend. However, there is another group of respondents who have an opposite view. To them, /mâypenray/ does convey

some meaning. It implies that the thanker is indebted to the thankee. Because of this implication, some respondents prefer other responses to /mâypenray/ when the thanker is a higher status teacher.

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