

Lingue e Linguaggi  
Lingue Linguaggi 19 (2016), 197-220  
ISSN 2239-0367, e-ISSN 2239-0359  
DOI 10.1285/i22390359v19p197  
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# RESPONDING TO GRATITUDE IN ELICITED ORAL INTERACTION

## A Taxonomy of Communicative Options

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**Abstract** – This study explores responses to gratitude as expressed in elicited oral interaction (mimetic-pretending open role-plays) produced by native speakers of American English. It first overviews the literature on this topic. It then presents a taxonomy of the head acts and supporting moves of the responses to gratitude instantiated in the corpus under examination, which considers their strategies and formulations. Finally, it reports on their frequency of occurrence and combinatorial options across communicative situations differing in terms of the social distance and power relationships between the interactants. The findings partly confirm what reported in the literature, but partly reveal the flexibility and adaptability of these reacting speech acts to the variable context in which they may be instantiated. On the one hand, the responses to gratitude identified tend to be encoded as simple utterances, and occasionally as complex combinations of head acts and/or supporting moves; also, their head acts show a preference for a small set of strategies and formulation types, while their supporting moves are much more varied in content and form, and thus situation-specific. On the other hand, the frequency of occurrence of the responses to gratitude, their dispersion across situations, and the range of their attested strategies and formulations are not in line with those reported in previous studies. I argue that these partly divergent findings are to be related to the different data collection and categorization procedures adopted, and the different communicative situations considered across studies. Overall, the study suggests that: responses to gratitude are a set of communicative events with fuzzy boundaries, which contains core (i.e. more prototypical) and peripheral (i.e. less prototypical) exemplars; although routinized in function, responses to gratitude are not completely conventionalized in their strategic or surface realizations; alternative research approaches may provide complementary insights into these reacting speech acts; and a higher degree of comparability across studies may be ensured if explicit pragmatic and semantic parameters are adopted in the classification of their shared object of study.

**Keywords:** responses to gratitude; reacting speech acts; role plays; strategies; formulations.

## 1. Introduction

The fulfillment of interpersonal and transactional goals takes place through the cooperation of participants to an interaction. They exchange information, negotiate options and expectations, and more generally perform relational work through their complementary contributions to discourse. The adequacy (i.e. degree of understandability, effectiveness, appropriateness) of the discourse they produce when engaged in a joint communicative/transactional activity indeed depends on their joint work in accordance with their complementary interactional roles. At a minimum, their coordinated interactional task involves an initiating move by one participant (i.e. a bid for a given type of interaction/transaction) and a responding – and possibly concluding – interactional move by the other participant (i.e. its acceptance and validation). This kind of two-move exchange tends to characterize routinized and low-cost interactions. More elaborate exchanges occur when the participants have a high stake in the interaction and/or when its topic or goal is loosely defined. A highly conventionalized two-move interaction is typical

of the thanking exchange.

A thanking exchange minimally consists of an act of thanking and the response to it. The act of thanking is the verbal reciprocation of benefits received, which is meant to cancel the thanker/beneficiary's social indebtedness to the thankee/benefactor, usually through reference to the pleased acceptance of the benefit. The response to gratitude is the verbal ratification of the appropriateness and adequacy of thanking, which marks the exchange of benefits as concluded to both parties' satisfaction. This verbal reaction, therefore, restores the ritual balance and maintains social harmony between the interactants.

In this paper I propose to shed light on the communicative practices of reacting participants in thanking exchanges when these are elicited under experimental conditions. I first offer an overview of the literature on responses to gratitude. I then investigate the instantiation of responses to gratitude in elicited oral interaction by classifying their strategies and formulations according to explicit pragmatic and semantic parameters. Next, I report on their frequency of occurrence and combinatorial options across situation types. The findings show that responses to gratitude display varied, and at times elaborate, realization patterns, mostly in line with those reported in previous studies, but partly not previously attested. In the end, I argue that responses to gratitude have more and less prototypical instantiations; that their varied realization correlates partly with the type of data examined and partly with the research approach adopted; that the adoption of complementary research approaches favors a more accurate and comprehensive description of pragmatic data, whose degree of variation and complexity is not necessarily immediately apparent; and that explicit descriptive definitions of strategies and formulations favor the comparability of findings across studies.

## 2. Literature Review

The social import of reacting speech acts is testified by studies on, for instance, compliment exchanges (e.g. Bu 2010; Cirillo 2012; Ishihara 2010; Mustapha 2011) and request exchanges (e.g. Brodine 1991; García 1992; García 1993; Ifert, Roloff 1996). While not as extensively studied as other reacting speech acts, responses to gratitude have also been examined in various languages from different perspectives in both spontaneously produced and elicited data. Below I report the main findings of these studies, which outline the strategies, structure, encoding, situational variability and socio-psychological perception of responses to gratitude.

### 2.1. Main Strategies

Several scholars have directed their attention to the identification of the strategies for performing responses to gratitude. Although the terms used to label them differ across studies,<sup>1</sup> findings consistently report that one or more of three main strategies recur, namely: a) Minimizing or denying (the magnitude of) the object of gratitude to the favor-doer (e.g. *No problem*), b) Expressing a favorable disposition, that is, indicating the

<sup>1</sup> Responses to gratitude are called *Continuation patterns*, *Reactive responders*, *Minimizes*, *Thanks minimizers*, *Thanking responders*, *Responses to thanks*, *Thanks responses*, *Gratitude acknowledgements*, *Réactions au remerciement* ('reactions to thanks') or *Aufhebungsakte* ('compensation/repair acts') by other scholars.

willingness to be at the thankers' "service" (e.g. *You're welcome*; *Je vous en prie* 'You're welcome') and c) Expressing pleasure at providing the benefit (e.g. *My pleasure*; see Edmondson, House 1981; Coulmas 1981; Aijmer 1996; Farenkia 2012; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1997, 2005; Ameka 2006; Ohashi 2008a, 2008b).

Additional strategies mentioned in the literature include: Expressing deference (e.g. *I am your most humble servant*; *Your servant*; Jacobsson 2002; *à votre service* 'at your service'; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2009); Offering to do the favor again (e.g. *Feel free to ask me again*; Katz et al. 2007); Expressing general willingness to re-do the favor (e.g. *Anytime*; Katz et al. 2007); Signalling that the favor is a one-time event (e.g. *Just this once*; Katz et al. 2007); Suggesting reciprocation (e.g. *You owe me*; Katz et al. 2007; *Tu ferais mieux de me donner en coup de main à ton tour* 'You had better give me a hand in return'; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2005); Calling into question the motivation for thanking (e.g. *Mais non, c'est Pierre qui a tout préparé!* 'But no, it's Pierre who has prepared everything!'; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2005; Russian *Da chto tam* 'For what?'; Curikova 2008); Reciprocating by thanking (e.g. *Thank you*; Jung 1994; Aijmer 1996; Wong 2010; Schneider 2005; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1997, 2005; Ohashi 2008b; Ouafeu 2009); Recognizing the object of gratitude as a benefit (e.g. *Yeah*; Coulmas 1981; Ouafeu 2009; Schneider 2005); Expressing the positive emotional impact of the exchange (Russian *Rad(a) chto vam/tebe ponravilos* 'Glad you liked it'; Curikova 2008); Leaving the hearer the option whether to accept the favor (e.g. Swedish *Var sä god* 'Please'; Aijmer 1996); Responding non verbally (e.g. *Mhmm*; Jung 1994; Ouafeu 2009; nod of the head or shrug of the shoulders; Edmondson, House 1981; facial or bodily gestures; Jung 1994; smiles; Ohashi 2008b; nods; Ouafeu 2009; nods and smiles; Curikova 2008); Expressing good wishes (Curikova 2008; Ouafeu 2009); and Not responding at all (Ouafeu 2009).

The analysis of gratitude response strategies therefore suggests that gratitude responses typically serve to restore social harmony by bringing the exchange to a close, but also that this is not always the case: for instance, Suggesting reciprocation calls for a further contribution from the interlocutor for harmony to be restored, while Not responding signals that this has already been achieved.

## 2.2. Structure

Some scholars have pointed out the potential semantic and structural complexity of responses to gratitude.

Analysing role-play data, Edmondson and House (1981) first specified that responses to gratitude may include not only head acts (e.g. *No trouble*), but also supporting moves sustaining or replacing them (e.g. *I enjoyed doing it actually*). Similarly, in his data on Canadian English collected by means of discourse completion tasks (DCTs), Farenkia (2012, 2013) noticed that, although much less frequent than single-head act responses to gratitude, multiple-head act ones also occurred, and that supporting moves tended to accompany head acts rather than to occur on their own. In a study carried out in restaurant service encounters, Rüegg (2014) also observed that some responses to gratitude included more than one head act (e.g. *Yeah, absolutely*), and that a minority included supporting moves like good wishes and offers.

Along the same lines, in his elicited data relevant to Irish, English and US English varieties, Schneider (2005) observed that most responses to gratitude were realized through a single interactional move, typically comprising only the head act (86.5%), which could, however, be internally modified and possibly include two or more co-heads (18%); he also identified head acts occurring with supporting moves (9.9%), and

supporting moves occurring alone (3.7%), the dispersion of patterns being similar across the English varieties considered. In addition, Schneider classified the strategies of response-to-gratitude supporting moves attested in his data, which included: Negotiating a follow-up meeting or repetition of the event (e.g. *We should do this again*), Offering opportunity for reciprocation/remuneration (e.g. *You can buy me one next time*), Offering more of the same or something else (e.g. *Want some more?*), Expressing joy (e.g. *I enjoyed the chat*) and Other.

Curikova (2008) similarly pointed out that emphatic English responses to gratitude (e.g. *The pleasure is/was all mine*) are possibly accompanied by comments (e.g. *It's good to see you so happy*), compliments (e.g. *You look beautiful in it*), wishes (e.g. *The same to you*) and symmetrical inquiries (e.g. *And how are you?*), or replaced by reassuring remarks (e.g. *Oh please, Harry, it's nothing*).

Research on the structure of responses to gratitude has thus revealed that this reacting speech act is often encoded in a single-unit utterance, but that it is occasionally expanded into a more elaborate realization comprising multiple head acts or a head act with supporting moves.

### 2.3. Encoding

Studies have also described the variable encoding of responses to gratitude.

In particular, Schneider (2005) made a three-way distinction between the strategies of responses to gratitude (i.e. conventions of means), their lexico-semantic formulation types (i.e. types of conventions of form), and the realization forms of their formulation types (i.e. specific instantiations). For example, the Minimizing the favor strategy is described as comprising several formulation types, namely *OKAY*, *NO PROBLEM*, *DON'T MENTION IT* and *DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT*, and the formulation type *OKAY* is shown to include such specific realization forms as (*It's/ that's/ You're*) *Okay/ OK/ O.K./ ok*, (*Its'/ That's*) *Alright, It's fine, Great and Grand* (pp. 116, 121; original emphasis). The differentiation between strategies, formulation types and realization forms was also adopted in Farenkia (2012).

Other scholars, instead, preferred a two-way distinction between strategies and specific realization forms: for example, Jung (1994) included under his Acceptance strategy the formulas *You're (very welcome)*, *Mhmm, Sure, My pleasure* and *O.k.*.

Finally, others broadly classified various strategies into larger classes; for example, Curikova (2008) classified English responses to gratitude into phatic (e.g. *You're welcome, My pleasure*) vs emphatic (e.g. *You are very (very) welcome, The pleasure is/was all mine*).

In conclusion, research findings in this area display a high degree of variability: scholars identify only partly overlapping encoding options for responses to gratitude, label them in a heterogeneous fashion, and group them under different(ly labeled) strategies.

### 2.4. Situational Variability

Several studies have shown that not all responses to gratitude are (perceived as) situationally equivalent.

First of all, the very frequency of occurrence of responses to gratitude correlates with contextual parameters such as the data collection procedure, the language (variety) investigated and the formality of the situation in which they are uttered. Thus responses to gratitude appeared to be uncommon in corpus data (e.g. 8% in Wong 2010; 1% in Aijmer

1996) and spontaneously produced data (e.g. 21% in Rüegg 2014), but common in elicited data (e.g. 98.6% in Schneider 2005); also, they were reported as more frequent in English than Russian (Curikova 2008), and less frequent in English English than in Irish or US English (Schneider 2005, p. 112); finally, for instance, Rüegg (2014) noticed that in spontaneous interactions in California restaurants in the upper, middle and lower price ranges, responses to gratitude were infrequent overall (21%), but also that their frequency and the types of favors triggering them differed across the socio-economic settings considered.

More interestingly, different types of response-to-gratitude strategies were found to occur in different settings or were perceived as appropriate to different circumstances such as the goal or type of interaction, and the relationship between the interlocutors.

Thus, for instance, Jung (1994) reported that the Reciprocity strategy (e.g. *Thank you*) occurred in the case of the mutual exchange of benefits, as in commercial transactions or interviews, that the Non-verbal gesture strategy served to avoid interrupting the thanker, while the No response strategy was associated with the thankee's negative mood, the interlocutor's socially distant relationship, the previous expression of ritualized greetings or compliments or the previous use of thanking as a closing formula. Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2001, 2005) also pointed out how responses to gratitude are optional after small ritual thanks such as during meals, and replaced by reciprocal thanking in commercial interactions, where a relationship of mutual indebtedness is conceptualized as an exchange of favors. Aston (1995) noticed that in Italian bookshop encounters, responses to gratitude served to achieve participant role alignment in problematic situations: that is, they were uttered by shop assistants who had been thanked for their failed attempt to remedy their inability to comply with the customer's request, and they were meant to ratify the outcome of the interaction as mutually acceptable. Curikova (2008) observed that responses to gratitude (e.g. *You're welcome*; Russian *Ne za shto* 'It's nothing') signal that the benefactor's gratitude has been noticed and accepted, especially after the provision of a benefit solicited by the beneficiary, and that their degree of elaboration mirrors that of the thanking expressions they react to. Coulmas (1981) clarified how responses to gratitude that recognize the object of gratitude or indicate that it was gladly provided are inappropriate in the case of immaterial benefits (e.g. compliments), benefits that one cannot claim credit for (e.g. wishes), benefits relevant to situations unpleasant for the addressee (e.g. in the case of condolences) or non-indebting benefits, which are paid for (e.g. in service encounters).

Psycholinguistic studies have also revealed that responses to gratitude are context-informed communicative choices. For example, Colston (2002) showed that emphatic responses to gratitude (e.g. *Whenever you need one*) were considered more subject to misinterpretation, more polite and more indicative of esteem toward the addressee than literal ones (e.g. *Don't worry about it*); similarly, Katz et al. (2007) revealed that the former were considered less likely to be employed with high-cost favors and more likely to be remembered than the latter.

The appropriateness of different responses to gratitude to different addressees has also been pointed out. For instance, Ouafeu (2009) showed that in Cameron English a response to gratitude occurs after thanking for a gift or offer provided by a superior benefactor. Similarly, Farenkia (2012) observed how in Canadian English such strategies as Expressing pleasure, Expressing appreciation and Returning thanks were most common in the high-power and high-distance situation. Ohashi also showed that social distance affects thanking behavior. In particular, Ohashi (2008a) described how, in Japanese, the traditional way of achieving the debt-credit equilibrium in a thanking episode involves

Credit denigration on behalf of the benefactor between non-intimate interactants, while Expressing gladness, possibly accompanied by humor, is more typical between intimates. Similarly, Ohashi (2008b) revealed that in conversations between students, benefactors' responses to gratitude included non-verbal strategies (e.g. smiles), reciprocal thanks and back-channelling devices.

Additionally, contextual variables have been found to play a role in the *encoding* of the responses to gratitude. One relevant contextual variable is the formality of the situation. For instance, Farenkia (2012) reported that in Canadian English, multiple-move responses to gratitude were most common in the high-power and high-distance situation. Also, in his (2013) study on Canadian and Cameroon English, he noticed a concentration of multiple head-act responses to gratitude as well as a more frequent use of address terms in the formal and distant situation.

Another relevant variable is the language, or language variety, considered. For instance, Schneider (2005) found that his Irish data diverged from the US and English English data, being characterized by a more varied use of realization types, an extensive use of multiple head acts, internal modification and external modification of head acts, and also by specific pragmalinguistic choices and supporting moves. Ouafeu (2009) reported the frequent occurrence of the Acknowledging thanking strategy in Cameroon English, (i.e. in the specific formulation *Yes*), and attributed it to the influence of the preferred strategies in the local languages. Farenkia (2013) noticed different preferences in strategies, formulation types, and their situational dispersion in Canadian vs Cameroon English.

Still another relevant contextual variable is the functional comparability of responses to gratitude with other reacting speech acts also adhering to the socially approved norms of generosity and modesty. Coulmas (1981) may have been the first to signal the strong cross-linguistic affinity between benefit-denying responses to gratitude and responses to apologies, due to the fact that thanks implying indebtedness of the beneficiary resemble apologies where the offender recognizes their own indebtedness. Along the same lines, Engel (1988) observed how in German, responses to gratitude include both short expressions (e.g. *Bitte, bitte!* 'You're very welcome') and longer ones (e.g. *(Aber) es war ja nicht der Rede wert!* '(But) it isn't really worth mentioning') that are appropriate after both thanks and apologies, besides others which are suitable responses only after gratitude (e.g. *Ich habe es (doch) gern getan* 'I (really) did it with pleasure / It was really my pleasure'). Similarly, Kerbrat-Orecchioni (1998, manuscript) pointed out how benefit-denying formulae (e.g. *De rien* 'It's nothing', *Pas de souci* 'No worry') can also occur as reactions to apologies, and that benefit- or offence-minimizers after thanks or apologies are attested across languages (*Don't mention it* in English; *De nada* 'It's nothing' in Spanish; *Zonder dank* 'Without thanks' in Dutch).

As hinted at above, the interplay of the above factors is evident in cross-linguistic/cultural studies. For instance, Schneider (2005) showed how the Irish, English and US English varieties and the formal vs informal situations considered in his study were characterized by different frequencies of occurrence and realization types of given response-to-gratitude strategies and their supporting moves. Also, Farenkia (2013) noticed that his Canadian and Cameroon datasets showed different discursive profiles. The Canadian data mostly instantiated the Minimizing the favor strategy and the *No problem* realization type; had more varied specific realizations of each type; had an equal dispersion of positive and negative politeness strategies; and used more varied supporting moves. The Cameroon data mainly exemplified the Expressing appreciation strategy and the *Welcome* realization type; preferred positive politeness strategies; used a higher

number of more varied address terms; and included invocations to God among the specific realizations of the Returning thanks strategy. He also found differences in the situational dispersion of the strategies and their linguistic realizations as well as in the use and the length of supporting moves.

Overall, the different occurrence patterns of response-to-gratitude strategies and formulations across situations signals that these speech acts count as socially meaningful, and not merely ritualized, communication.

## **2.5. Summary and Implications**

Previous studies have highlighted several aspects of responses to gratitude. First of all, responses to gratitude are attested cross-linguistically. Second, their frequency of occurrence and instantiations vary across languages, cultures and situations. Third, they share a core of strategies, which include: Minimizing/Denying (the cost of) the object of gratitude, Expressing a favorable disposition and Expressing pleasure at providing the benefit, although additional strategies are also instantiated. Also, they vary in their degree of elaboration (e.g. they may include multiple head acts and/or supporting moves) and lexical-morphological encoding (i.e. the same strategy may comprise various formulation types, each of which may include multiple formulation realizations). Finally, although conventionalized in function and encoding options, responses to gratitude are not desemanticized reactions to given interactional prompts, since their content and formulation are not perceived, or treated, as equivalent in meaning and effectiveness across contexts. Therefore, responses to gratitude appear to display variable, and at times elaborate, realization patterns regarding their context of use, phrasing and content.

The variety of the findings reported in the literature depends only in part on the attested variable instantiations of responses to gratitude; in fact, it is also related to the different research approaches adopted across studies: the goals of the research (e.g. descriptive, comparative-contrastive, hypothesis-testing); the slant of the research (e.g. corpus-based, experimental: productive, experimental: perceptive, argumentative, field-based); the language varieties and interactional contexts considered; the data examined (historical vs present-day corpus data, DCT vs made-up data, spontaneously produced vs specially produced vs elicited interactional data; written vs oral data, cross-linguistic/cultural vs intra-linguistic/cultural data); and the functional and lexico-semantic classification of responses to gratitude presented (e.g. classification of realization types are sometimes based on lexical criteria only (e.g. Rüegg 2014), others on both lexical and semantic criteria (e.g. Schneider 2005)).

In particular, research on responses to gratitude in English is mostly based on written, and especially DCT, data, with only two studies considering spontaneous interactive data (Jung 1994, who examined data collected from TV and through the ethnographic method; Rüegg 2014, who examined recordings of spontaneously produced thanking exchanges); also, no extensive investigation has been based on role-play data, with the marginal exception of Edmondson and House (1981); finally, the classification schemes of responses to gratitude presented in previous studies lack explicit definition/identification criteria of strategies and formulations (e.g. clear guidelines for identifying a response to gratitude within a turn, for distinguishing a head act from a supporting move, for assigning a given discourse segment to a given strategy or realization type, or for subsuming a given realization type under a given strategy are not provided), and the result is that very similar instantiations of responses to gratitude are classified differently in different studies.

This paper investigates the realization of responses to gratitude in English by examining elicited oral interaction. My goals are the following: a) to elaborate a classification scheme of strategies and formulations of responses to gratitude based on explicitly stated parameters; b) to ascertain how often different types of response-to-gratitude strategies and formulations, and their combinations, occur in elicited role-play data; and finally, c) to describe the dispersion of response-to-gratitude strategies and formulations across situations varying in the interactants' social distance and power relationships.

### 3. Method

To examine responses to gratitude, I first collected data by means of mimetic-pretending, open-ended role plays (Kasper 2000, p. 288) meant to elicit thanking exchanges. As simulations of interactions, mimetic role plays approximate spontaneous discourse – participants take on roles that may differ from their own identity, but are free to develop the interaction as they like – and make it possible to elicit specific types of communicative behavior under partially controlled evoked situational conditions. I then analyzed the responses to gratitude instantiated in the data by means of a classification scheme that draws on Schneider (2005), but whose strategies and formulation types are described on the basis on explicitly formulated criteria.

#### 3.1. Participants

In April and May 2012, twelve university students (aged 17-24, 7 females and 5 males) of the University of California at Berkeley, native speakers of American English, were recruited for this study by means of a generic invitation to English native speakers to take part in a half-hour linguistic experiment in exchange for a small monetary reward. The invitation was posted on the bulletin board of the phonology lab where the recordings were going to be made, and also circulated via email by the lecturers of two undergraduate classes among their students. An on-line form was set up where interested participants could sign up, in pairs, for the time slot that best worked for them.

#### 3.2. Instrument

The data collection instrument comprised 36 written descriptions of scenarios from which each participating dyad performed six role plays. Each scenario represented two interactants in the roles of beneficiary vs benefactor, and thus likely to trigger – although not explicitly calling for – the realization of acts of thanking. These descriptions included adaptations of communicative situations found in the literature of the speech act of thanking (Eisenstein, Bodman 1986; Held 1996), but mostly outlined real-life events experienced by me as a participant or witness. The scenario descriptions were relevant to different role-relationships in terms of the addressees' social distance (close (-D) vs distant (+D)) and degree of power (equal (=P) vs subordinate (-P) vs superior (+P)), while the level of imposition (i.e. cost or magnitude of the benefit) was kept constant (i.e. high). The reason for this was that I considered it more likely that a high-cost benefit would prompt the participant playing the role of the beneficiary to produce an act of thanking. Overall, six sets of scenario descriptions were assembled. These were meant to elicit acts of thanking addressed to -D and =P addressees (set A: 15 scenarios); +D and =P addressees



(set B: 5 scenarios); -D and -P addressees (set C: 5 scenarios); +D and -P addressees (set D: 3 scenarios); -D and +P addressees (set E: 5 scenarios); and +D and +P addressees (set F: 3 scenarios). Each scenario description comprised distinct prompts for the roles of thanker/beneficiary vs thankee/benefactor, identified as Speaker A and Speaker B in the prompts, respectively. Sample scenario descriptions are reproduced below, one per set.

Scenario TH-O1-A5: “Maths exam” (Set A: thanking -D and =P addressees)

Speaker A: *A friend helped you to study for a demanding maths exam. A few days ago you sat the exam and received a good mark on it. Today you call up your friend to let her/him know.*

Speaker B: *You helped a friend prepare for a demanding maths exam. He/she was supposed to take it a few days ago. Today you receive a call from him/her.*

Scenario TH-O1-B3: “Flat tyre<sup>2</sup>” (Set B: thanking +D and =P addressees)

Speaker A: *You are driving home. Suddenly you hear a strange noise, so you stop the car to check what it is, and realize that you have a flat tyre. Thankfully, at that moment a cyclist/biker/motorist rides/drives past, and sees that you need help. He/She stops and helps you change the tyre. You are relieved and feel extremely grateful.*

Speaker B: *You are driving/cycling home. You see a car stopped on the shoulder and a man/woman trying to change a tyre. You stop to give a hand, and together succeed in the job.*

Scenario TH-O1-C4: “Business trip” (Set C: thanking -D and -P addressees)

Speaker A: *You are the CEO of a company. A few days ago you left on a business trip abroad. Your secretary planned it in every detail, as usual, and everything went smoothly. Now you are back and you see your secretary.*

Speaker B: *You work as a secretary to the CEO of a company. A few days ago he/she left on a business trip abroad. You planned it in every detail, trying to be as efficient as possible. Now your boss is back.*

Scenario TH-O1-D1: “Croatian holiday” (Set D: thanking +D and -P addressees)

Speaker A: *You spent five wonderful days in Croatia. You were a paying guest in a private home. Your host/hostess did all he/she could to make you feel at home. You are now taking your leave.*

Speaker B: *You rent out rooms to tourists in Croatia. A guest who has spent five days in your home is now about to leave. You got along well with each other.*

Scenario TH-O1-E5: “Summer course” (Set E: thanking -D and +P addressees)

Speaker A: *You are a university student. You have just come back from Spain where you spent an exciting and productive month attending a language course. Your mother/father paid for the trip, accommodation and course. He/She has come to pick you up at the airport and you have a present for him/her.*

Speaker B: *Your son/daughter has just come back from Spain where he/she spent an exciting and productive month attending a language course. You paid for the trip, accommodation and course. You have driven to the airport to pick him/her up.*

Scenario TH-O1-F1: “Office hours” (Set F: thanking +D and +P addressees)

Speaker A: *You are a university student. You do not attend classes steadily. You have gone to your professor’s office hours to ask for clarifications about a topic he/she has already covered in class. This is a professor you don’t know very well apart from seeing him/her in the large lecture hall. He/She spends a full hour going over the topic with you. Now you are about to leave.*

Speaker B: *You are a university professor. A student comes to your office hours asking for clarifications on a topic you have already covered in class when he/she was absent. This is a student you don’t know very well apart from seeing him/her in the large lecture hall. You spend a full hour going over that topic with him/her. Now he/she is about to leave.*

<sup>2</sup> The scenario description presented to the study participant had the term *tyre* in its British spelling.

### 3.3. Procedure

During each elicitation session, in pairs, participants were presented with the six sets of scenario descriptions (A, B, C, D, E and F), one at a time, and were asked to choose from each set a scenario that they both felt comfortable with. More specifically, for each of sets A, B and C, one member of each pair was asked to read to him-/herself the prompts for Speaker A, and pre-select one; then, the other member of the pair would silently read their complementary prompt relevant to the same scenario, and either confirm the selection of the scenario or ask their partner to make an alternative choice until an agreement was reached. The roles were then reversed for sets D, E and F. This way, each member of the pair had an opportunity to make the first choice half of the time, and to ratify or reject their partner's first choice the rest of the time.

After having chosen the first scenario, the participants were invited to imagine themselves in the situation described therein and interact accordingly; they were also instructed on how to use the recording equipment – since they would be left alone in the recording booth – and told to call me back once they were finished so that I could present them with a new set of scenarios for them to consider. The procedure was therefore repeated five more times, so that new scenarios could be selected and new interactions recorded. The only difference was that, while participants were reminded to enact each new scenario as if they were personally experiencing the situation described therein, instructions on how to use the recording equipment were not repeated. Given the scenario selection procedure (see above), the participants took turns playing the roles of the initiating and the reacting interactants.

The participants were given no time limit to complete the task and no indication as to the expected duration of their exchanges, but they were told that they could redo any of the exchanges, delete any of their recordings or more simply opt out of any part of, or the whole, task. Clarification questions about the goal of the study, if any, were answered only at the end of the whole recording session.

Thirty-six dialogues<sup>3</sup> were recorded in a sound-proof booth and later transcribed by a university lecturer, an English native speaker, and proofread by me. The transcripts revealed occasional problematic aspects of the interactions: some interactants had not followed the instructions; others had not realized thanking exchanges or had produced implausible discourse characterized by contradictions or irrelevant remarks. However, since the goal of this study was not to analyze the staged realization of thanking exchanges, but rather local instances of responses to gratitude, I chose to examine only the parts of the transcripts where some genuine thanking was instantiated independently of other considerations. I therefore disregarded four dialogues: two from Set A, one instantiating ironic thanking, the other including no thanking exchange; one from set E, including no thanking exchange, and one from Set F, in which the thanking formula used only signaled the closing of the conversation. The material considered for this study thus consists of the transcripts of 32 elicited role-play interactions (slightly under 9,000 words).

A sample transcript is provided from Scenario description TH-O1-A5 “Maths exam” (see above). In the examples that follow, bold highlights the expressions of gratitude and italics highlights the responses to gratitude.

<sup>3</sup> Seven were relevant to set A; six to set B; six to set C; six to set D; five to set E; and six to set F. During one elicitation session, I made a mistake in submitting the scenario descriptions to the participants, inadvertently replacing set E with set A. As a result, one pair of participants recorded two interactions relevant to set A, but none relevant to set E.

Transcript TH-O1-A5-01 “Maths exam” (added emphasis)

A: Hey Emma, **I just wanted to thank you for helping me study for that hard math test I had a couple of days ago, I got a really good grade on it so, I appreciate your help.**

B: *Oh you're welcome Rosina, I was happy to know that you wanted my help and, I'm always here to help you out with that kind of stuff.*

A: So do you have anything that you want me to do as a favor in return?

B: Maybe you could help me with my English test?

A: Ok, sounds good!

B: Alright, talk to you later.

A: Bye!

### 3.4. Data analysis

The first step in my analysis involved identifying instances of responses to gratitude with a view to developing a classification scheme for them. First, I searched the transcripts for gratitude expressions (e.g. *Thanks, I appreciate it, I'm grateful, I owe you*) together with their objects of gratitude, if mentioned (e.g. *Thank you for the present!*; TH-O1-A1-01); I also considered their supporting moves, if present (e.g. *Thank you! Wow, it's really nice, I like the color!*; TH-O1-A1-01), and disregarded, instead, other conversational verbal action, if any, realized in the same turns (e.g. [*Um, yeah.*] *Thanks. [So where are you from? Well, I guess you're from here, right?]*; TH-O1-B5-02: disregarded turn segments in square brackets).

Next, I examined the content of the turns immediately following those containing expressions of gratitude. I identified gratitude responses in the turn segments conveying replies *relevant* to the expressions of gratitude, namely, those which made reference to the benefit and/or its circumstances, manifested a positive attitude towards either, and/or provided some motivation for the positive attitude expressed. Instead I disregarded turn segments encoding other types of conversational action. I regarded as a response-to-gratitude head act the turn segment that minimally, by itself, successfully concludes, or could successfully conclude, the gratitude exchange by expressing acceptance of, or a comment on, the gratitude expression or the benefit exchange originating it; instead, I regarded as a supporting move of the response to gratitude the turn segment that possibly expands on the head act with additional circumstances about the benefit exchange or about the thankee's reaction to it. For instance, the response to gratitude *Yeah. See you* (TH-O1-D1-02) only contains the head-act response *Yeah* as a relevant conversational contribution, while the response *Oh, I'm, I'm glad you had a good time staying here. You know, we love having you kids come through here, you know, and see our country, and visit around, so yeah, you're welcome back any time. Tell your friends* (TH-O1-D1-01) contains the head acts *Oh, I'm, I'm glad you had a good time staying here* and *so yeah, you're welcome back any time*, and the supporting move *You know, we love having you kids come through here, you know, and see our country* as relevant material.

The following transcript contains three thanking exchanges. In the last thanking exchange, no relevant response to gratitude is instantiated.

Transcript TH-O1-C3-01 “Babysitting” (added emphasis)

B: Hi Mrs Shee, I see that you're back.

A: Hey, Wan. Hey **so thanks for er, babysitting my er, child.**

B: *Oh. Not a problem. Charlotte has been (mild laughter) really great today.*

A: Oh, really? [I hope...]

B: [We had] a lot of fun.

- A: Oh, I hope she's not too much trouble for you.  
 B: No, absolutely not.  
 A: Ok, um... oh! Wait! Is you, are you, you, is your paycheck due in today?  
 B: Oh yeah.  
 A: Um... ok, so let me take my wallet and... yeah.  
 B: **Thank you very much, Mrs Shee.**  
 A: *Oh, you're welcome.*  
 B: [Mmm hmm]  
 A: [Um,] **thank, thank you again for... helping**, um, like I hope you can like, help us babysit, um, Charlotte... in the future.  
 B: *Of course. I really enjoy... babysitting her.*  
 A: Ok, cool. Bye.

The next step of my analysis involved classifying the responses to gratitude. To this end, by adapting Schneider's (2005) model, I classified each instantiation in terms of a) strategies, that is, functions; b) formulation types, that is, broad lexico-semantic notions; and c) specific realizations, that is, surface formulations. The strategies are identified through explicit descriptive definitions that specify the functions performed by the speaker; the formulation types encode the key term or notion relevant to sets of specific realizations, or identify their relevant semantic fields; and the specific realizations are the actual instances (i.e. tokens) of responses to gratitude. I applied the above tripartite classification scheme to both the head acts and, where present, the supporting moves of responses to gratitude.

The final step of my analysis involved determining the frequency of occurrence of strategies and formulation types of response-to-gratitude head acts and supporting moves in the overall corpus, mapping their dispersion across the scenario sets, and describing their combinatorial options in given turns.

## 4. Results

This section reports on the strategies and formulations used to respond to expressions of gratitude, their dispersion and frequency, and their correlation with the interlocutors' varying degrees of power and distance. The first two types of findings are described in separate sub-sections, while the third is integrated throughout as the results for the datasets are discussed.

### 4.1. *Strategies, formulation types and specific realizations of responses to gratitude*

The analysis of responses to gratitude in the corpus led to the identification of their strategies and linguistic encoding. In what follows, strategies appear in roman type, formulation types in roman type in square brackets, and specific realizations in italics.

#### 4.1.1. *Head acts*

Five head act strategies are instantiated in my corpus, which I list below in alphabetical order.

The first strategy, Agreeing/Confirming, ratifies (the validity of) the previous gratitude expression by confirming the provision of the benefit and acknowledging the receipt and adequacy of thanking. It is encoded through the [yes] formulation type, which

comprises the following realizations: *Yes; Yes, yes; Yeah; Yeah, yeah yeah; Ok; Ah, Sure* and *Mmh mmh*.

A second strategy is Positive evaluation, which expresses the thankee's view on or attitude toward the benefit. It comprises two formulation types: [emotional impact] and [aesthetic appreciation]. The former conveys how the thankee feels as a result of learning of the positive effect of the benefit, and its specific realizations include the use of adjectives of emotional experience like *glad* and *happy* (e.g. *Glad to hear that; I was happy to know that you wanted my help*). The latter is characterized by the use of adjectives that rate the previously mentioned benefit as good (e.g. *It was nice meeting you too*).

Another strategy is Making the other feel good. It shows that the interlocutor is accepted as a partner through the expression of the commitment to be of help to them. The relevant formulation type is [welcome], realized as *You're welcome* or variations thereof (e.g. *You're welcome back any time*).

Minimizing indebtedness is the strategy that reassures the addressee about their need to reciprocate, presumably as a result of the benefit not being considered (too) costly. Its formulation type is [no problem], and its realizations are *No problem; Oh, it, no problem* and *No worries*.

Reciprocating is the strategy through which the thankee manifests a symmetrical positive reacting attitude toward the thanker, by claiming for him-/herself the role of a co-beneficiary. Its formulation type is [thanks], and its realization is *Thank you* or variations thereof (e.g. *Thank you for being such a great mentee*).

Finally, when an act of thanking is not followed by a relevant response (see dialogue transcript TH-O1-C3-01 above), the No directly relevant response strategy is instantiated. This comprises several formulation types: [not responding], that is uttering nothing, which has no specific realization; [responding to a supporting move of thanking], that is providing a relevant reply to an expansion of the thanking head act (e.g. *Really? I thought you wouldn't like this artist, but you know, it was on sale so I just got it*), [responding to another segment of the previous turn], that is providing a relevant reply to a non-thanking interactional move (e.g. *I'm from here*); [continuing with the ongoing topic] of the conversation as if the thanking act had not temporarily interrupted it (e.g. *The view was lovely, I loved the beach*); [reorienting the interaction] by introducing a new topic (e.g. *Do you have a ... tire patch?*), [closing the conversation] with a leave-taking formula (e.g. *Bye!*) and [other], for example when the response is ellipted (e.g. *I*) or inaudible and therefore unclear, or when the reaction is non-verbal (i.e. laughter).

#### 4.1.2. Supporting moves

The data also exemplifies five main strategies in the supporting moves. These enrich the meaning of the head acts, but are less conventionalized, and thus more varied in their encoding.

Offer is the strategy that indicates the speaker's willingness to make something available to the addressee or that signals the addressee's opportunity to access or receive a product or service. Two formulation types encode this strategy, namely [I will] and [you can], realized as possibly modalized statements encoding the notions of 'willingness/commitment' and 'possibility/permission', respectively (e.g. *I'm always here to help you out with that kind of stuff; Of course you're, you're welcome to come over any time you want*).

The Good wish/Desire strategy conveys the speaker's desire for something good to

happen affecting either the interlocutor and/or him-/herself. The formulation types are [may X be so] and [may X happen], referring to positive expectations about situations and events, respectively, as in the following specific realizations: *I hope your headache is better; I hope to see you again soon.*

Through the Concern/Interest strategy, instead, the speaker inquires about or checks the suitability and likeability of the benefit being talked about. The relevant formulation types are [was X the case?] and [did X happen?], relevant to positive situations and events, respectively (e.g. *I hope you, enjoyed our company and our little, cabin in the mountains*).

Downplaying the benefit is a strategy that minimizes the perceived magnitude of the benefit. The formulation types, [good] or [obvious], suggest that the speaker classifies the benefit as enjoyable rather than burdensome or as provided as a matter of course rather than as a special favor, respectively (e.g. *She's such a good kid!; that's, you know, that's...part of my job*).<sup>4</sup>

The Background strategy provides contextualizing information about the benefit provided. It comprises three formulation types: [history], which indicates how and under what circumstances the benefit was provided (e.g. *I didn't actually leave it there, I had er, the secretary, er, leave it because you weren't in when I came by*); [previous knowledge], which refers to shared experiences, thus hinting at the social closeness between the interlocutors (e.g. *I knew you liked durians and starfruit*); and [preferences], which encodes the speaker's general emotional motivation for acting generously (e.g. *You know, we love having you kids come through here*).<sup>5</sup>

More than one head-act and/or supporting-move strategy may occur in the same response to gratitude. Such complex responses to gratitude include two groups: a combination of two or more head acts (e.g. *Yeah, glad to help; Thank you! No problem*) and a combination of one head act and at least one supporting move (e.g. *Oh, it's no problem at all. I hope your headache is better*).

#### 4.2. Frequency and dispersion of strategies and formulation types

An additional goal of the study was to report on the frequency of occurrence of strategies and formulation types of responses to gratitude and their supporting moves in the overall corpus, and determining their dispersion across the scenario sets.

As Table 1 shows, out of 76 thanking episodes identified, 46 (i.e. 60.2%), include responses to gratitude (i.e. on average, about 1.4 per dialogue transcript), their dispersion being fairly similar across the scenario sets (on average, 7.6 per set). 30 exchanges (30.8%) show no response that is directly relevant to expressions of gratitude (i.e. lack of verbal responses, responses relevant the gratitude expression supporting moves or other conversational material).<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Unlike the Minimizing indebtedness head-act strategy, which addresses the imbalanced outcome of the exchange, this is less conventionalized in its formulations, and its function is to assess the benefit, its provision or its recipient.

<sup>5</sup> The function of the last formulation type is to raise the beneficiary's awareness of how the benefit came about, and so it is not part of the Downplaying the benefit strategy, which assesses the provision of the benefit.

<sup>6</sup> P and D values refer to the addressee. P = social power; D = social distance. <sup>a</sup>One token of the No directly relevant response strategy occurs in a turn that also contains response-to-gratitude head act strategies. <sup>b</sup>The token of the No directly relevant response strategy occurs in a turn that also contains response-to-gratitude head act strategies.

Dataset	A	B	C	D	E	F	Total
Interlocutor relationship	=P, -D	=P, +D	+P, -D	+P, +D	-P, -D	-P, +D	
No. of dialogue transcripts	5	6	6	6	4	5	32
Total no. of words	1,299	1,673	1,547	1,433	1,376	1,368	8,696
Thanking exchanges	15	18	12	14	9	8	76
No. of words in the thanking exchanges	142	272	326	278	255	236	1,509
Responses to gratitude	8	8	9	7	7	8	46
Instances of No directly relevant response	7	10	3(-4) <sup>a</sup>	7	2	(1) <sup>b</sup>	30

Table 1  
Frequency of thanking episodes and responses to gratitude across datasets.

Table 2 shows the frequency of occurrence of the strategies and formulation types of response-to-gratitude head acts across the datasets. The five strategies have fairly comparable, but not identical, frequencies of occurrences (i.e. 12 to 15 tokens each). On the one hand, Positive evaluation, Making the other feel good and Minimizing indebtedness are attested across all the scenario sets; on the other, Agreeing/Confirming is attested in all sets except set C, and Reciprocating is attested in four sets (i.e. C, D, E and F). The most frequent formulation types are [yes], [welcome] and [no problem], together accounting for 73.1% of the data. The least frequent ones are [aesthetic appreciation] and [thanks], attested in only 10.0% of the data, while an intermediate frequency value is registered for [emotional impact] (16.9%). Their total number is higher than the total responses to gratitude because some responses exemplify more than one formulation type and/or strategy.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> P and D values refer to the addressee. *P* = social power; *D* = social distance. <sup>a</sup>One response to gratitude contains two head acts. <sup>b</sup>Two responses to gratitude contain two head acts. <sup>c</sup>One response to gratitude contains three head acts.

Strategies	Formulation types	Datasets and interlocutor relationships						Total
		A (=P, -D)	B (=P, +D)	C (+P, -D)	D (+P, +D)	E (-P, -D)	F (-P, +D)	
Agreeing/ Confirming	[yes]	3	2	0	2	5	2	14
Positive evaluation	[emotional impact]	1	2	2	3	1	1	10
	[aesthetic appreciation]	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
Making the other feel good	[welcome]	4	3	2	3	1	1	14
Minimizing indebtedness	[no problem]	1	1	4	2	3	4	15
Reciprocating	[thanks]	0	0	1	1	1	1	4
Total		9 <sup>a</sup>	9 <sup>a</sup>	9	11 <sup>bc</sup>	11 <sup>bc</sup>	10 <sup>b</sup>	59

Table 2

Frequency of strategies and formulation types of response-to-gratitude head acts across datasets.

The frequency of occurrence of supporting moves is reported in Table 3. All datasets exemplify one or more supporting-move strategies and formulation types. However, none instantiates them all. Only sets B and C include tokens of three strategies. The other sets include tokens of just one or two. Except in one case in set B, each response to gratitude contains only one move. The low figures in Table 4 are due, on the one hand, to the overall relatively low number of supporting moves instantiated in the datasets, and on the other hand, to the highly differentiated encoding of supporting moves, which are much less conventionalized, and thus much more original, than the head acts.<sup>8</sup>

Strategies	Formulation types	Datasets and interlocutor relationships						Total
		A (=P, -D)	B (=P, +D)	C (+P, -D)	D (+P, +D)	E (-P, -D)	F (-P, +D)	
Offer	[I will/ you can]	1	2 <sup>a</sup>	0	0	0	0	3
Good wish/ Desire	[I hope]	0	1 <sup>a</sup>	1	0	0	0	2
Downplaying the benefit	[Good/ obvious]	0	0	2	0	1	0	3
Background	[History, knowledge, preferences]	0	1	2	1	0	0	4
Concern/ Interest	[Was X the case? Did X happen?]	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total		1	4	5	1	1	1	13
Combinations		0	1	0	0	0	0	1
No. of responses to gratitude containing supporting moves		1	3	5	1	1	1	12

Table 3

Frequency of response-to-gratitude supporting moves across datasets.

<sup>8</sup> P and D values refer to the addressee. *P* = social power; *D* = social distance. <sup>a</sup>Two supporting moves (i.e. Offer and Good wish/Desire) occur in the same response to gratitude.



As Table 4 shows, complex response-to-gratitude head acts are much less frequent than simple ones: they occur in 23.6% of all thanking episodes, and account for 39.1% of all responses to gratitude. The head-act-plus-supporting move realization pattern is twice as frequent as the multiple-head act pattern (i.e. 66.6% vs 33.4%), and instantiated in all the datasets. Such complex responses to gratitude are attested in 26.0% of all responses to gratitude, and in 15.7% of all thanking episodes. They occur the most frequently in set C.<sup>9</sup>

Complex responses to gratitude	Datasets and interlocutor relationships						Total
	A (=P, -D)	B (=P, +D)	C (+P, -D)	D (+P, +D)	E (-P, -D)	F (-P, +D)	
Two head acts	0	0	0	1	1	2	4
Three head acts	0	0	0	1	1	0	2
One head act + one supporting move	0	1	4	0	0	1	6
One head act + two supporting moves	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Two head acts + one supporting move	1	1	1	1	1	0	5
Total	1	3	5	3	3	3	18

Table 4  
Frequency of complex responses to gratitude across datasets.

Table 5 shows the dispersion of different structures of head-act-plus-supporting-move responses to gratitude across the datasets, and their position with respect to the response-to-gratitude head acts in the turns.

Structure		Datasets and interlocutor relationships						Total
		A (=P, -D)	B (=P, +D)	C (+P, -D)	D (+P, +D)	E (-P, -D)	F (-P, +D)	
No. of components	One	1	1	5	1	1	1	10
	Two or more	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Total	1	2	5	1	1	1	11
Position relevant to the head act	Before	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	After	1	1	5	0	1	1	9
	Before + After	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
	Between	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
	Alone	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total	1	2	5	1	1	1	11

Table 5  
Structure and sequencing of supporting moves in responses to gratitude across datasets.

Most tokens of response-to-gratitude supporting moves include a single move (90.9%) and a majority (81%, i.e. nine times) are found after the head acts (e.g. **Oh it's no problem at all, I hope your headache is better!**; head act in bold). However, they can also occur in between head acts (e.g. **Yeah. Our, er, grocery store has some pretty exotic fruit... I'm**

<sup>9</sup> P and D values refer to the addressee. P = social power; D = social distance.

*glad you enjoyed it*”; head acts in bold) or around them (e.g. *Of course you’re, you’re welcome to come over any time you want. It was nice meeting you too and I hope to see you again soon*; head act in bold). The multiple-head act pattern is found in sets D, E and F. It may be realized as a combination of two head acts (e.g. *Thank you! No problem*) or three (e.g. *Yeah* (both laugh). *You’re really welcome, no problem*). On the other hand, combinations of supporting moves with no head acts are never instantiated. Therefore, responses to gratitude are infrequently instantiated, seldom occur in combinations, and response-to-gratitude supporting moves always accompany response-to-gratitude head acts.

## 5. Discussion

The present study was meant to gain insights on English responses to gratitude from data collected through a procedure that differs from those described in the literature, namely the elicitation of open role-play interactions in American English. The approach involved developing a taxonomy of response-to-gratitude strategies and formulation types, which is based on the role play data itself, and which includes explicit definitions of strategies, as well as of formulation types, when two or more of these are subsumed under the same strategy.

First of all, the study shows that in the data examined, responses to gratitude occur as relevant replies to acts of thanking 60.2% of the time. Thus, their frequency of occurrence is much higher than that reported in studies based on spontaneously produced data (e.g. corpus-based, Aijmer 1996; self-recorded material, Rüegg 2014), but a little less frequent than that reported in studies on elicited written data (Schneider 2005; Farenkia 2012, 2013). This suggests that the data collection method may influence the amount of data collected: the more spontaneously produced language behavior is, the less frequent the instantiation of the phenomenon under study; role-play data, which is elicited, but not as closely monitored as during a DCT, is therefore likely to display intermediate frequency values, as in this case. Unlike what attested in previous studies, the number of token responses to gratitude does not show remarkable differences across the datasets (see also below about the dispersion of tokens of specific response-to-gratitude strategies and tokens of complex response-to-gratitude structures): this may be due to the fact that in the “fictional, recreated” context of a role play, the degree of social distance from and power differential with the interlocutor might not be perceived as directly relevant to the participants as is the case in spontaneous communication.

The application of an explicit coding scheme has made it possible to trace a profile of the occurrence of responses to gratitude in the corpus. In general, the response-to-gratitude strategies and formulation types identified in this study are similar to those described in previous literature, but differ in both number and kind, especially with regard to their supporting moves.

In particular, it appears that a) four head-act strategies attested in the literature are also instantiated in my datasets, but also that b) a strategy not previously identified, namely Positive evaluation, is exemplified, and that c) a strategy often mentioned in previous studies, namely Expressing pleasure, is not attested at all (cf. Schneider 2005, p. 116). This suggests that role-play data is comparable as well as complementary to other types of data in the range of response-to-gratitude strategies that it can exemplify.

The analysis of the data has shown that the range of strategies instantiated is, overall, less varied than the previous literature indicates (e.g. there are no instances of

such specific formulations as *My pleasure; Anytime; Don't mention it; You owe me; That's all right; Of course; Great; Ok; You got it; Absolutely*) except, of course, for the specific formulations relevant to the newly identified strategy, namely Positive evaluation. Findings have also revealed that the No directly relevant response strategy displays a variable realization pattern, including at least six clear different formulation types.

The strategies and formulations of responses to gratitude identified in my datasets partly overlap with those mentioned in previous studies; this is the case, for instance, of the Positive evaluation head-act strategy ([emotional impact], e.g. *Glad to hear that*) in relation to Schneider's (2005) Expressing joy supporting-move strategy (e.g. *I enjoyed the chat*; cf. also *I enjoyed doing it actually* in Edmondson, House 1981), and also the Offer supporting-move strategy ([you can/ I will]; e.g. *I'm always here to help you out with that kind of stuff*) in relation to Schneider's (2005) Offering more of the same or something else supporting-move strategy (e.g. *Want some more?*), Farenkia's (2012, 2013) Offering further help supporting-move strategy (e.g. *I'm here if you ever need help*), and Katz et al.'s (2007) Offering to do the favor again response-to-gratitude head act strategy (e.g. *Feel free to ask me again*). Similarly, my Background, Good wish/Desire and Concern/Interest supporting-move strategies resemble Farenkia's (2012) Comment, Wish/Hope and Empathy supporting-move strategies, respectively. On the other hand, other supporting-move strategies like Negotiating a follow-up meeting/repetition of the event (Schneider 2005), Offering the opportunity for reciprocation/remuneration (Schneider 2005) – which corresponds to what Farenkia (2012) calls *Request* – Joking/Joke (Farenkia 2012, 2013) and Promise, Suggestion/Advice (Farenkia 2013) are not exemplified in my data.

No prominent lexico-semantic encoding pattern can be identified for the supporting moves; this is due both to the low number of their occurrences and the variety of strategies realizing them, which tend to be context-specific (Schneider 2005, p. 113).

Preferences for certain strategies and formulations – which are only partly comparable to those in previous studies – may be related to several factors: the language variety spoken by the study participants; the specific contexts of interactions invoked in the scenario descriptions; the classification scheme adopted, whose explicit definition criteria determine a redistribution of some formulation types under strategies, and of some specific formulations under formulation types; and, in the case of supporting moves, the inevitable heterogeneity of encoding not completely conventionalized, ancillary communicative acts.

Of the five strategies and six formulation types encoding the head acts in the responses to gratitude, four strategies and as many formulation types (i.e. Agreeing/Confirming: [yes], Positive evaluation: [emotional impact], Making the other feel good: [welcome], Minimizing indebtedness: [no-problem]) account for the majority of the data, and are instantiated in virtually all the datasets. All of these are also attested in previous studies; however, only the last two are similarly attested as frequent in previous findings; in fact, Agreeing/Confirming: [yes], which is marginal in previous studies, is very frequent here, and appears to take the place of Expressing pleasure, a strategy not instantiated in my data (see above), but frequently attested in other studies (cf. Schneider 2005, p. 116; Rüegg 2014, p. 28). The dispersion of the tokens of the above strategies across datasets only reveals two general trends: a) Positive evaluation and Making the other feel good are not favored with –P addressees, while b) Minimizing indebtedness and Reciprocating are not favored with =P addressees. However, the figures are too low to allow meaningful cross-dataset comparisons. At the same time, one can observe that these findings differ from Farenkia's (2012) in this respect, on the one hand, and that they

cannot be compared with Rüegg's (2014), on the other, since this scholar considers the dispersion of responses to gratitude across situations differing in degree of formality and in relation to the favors the thanking exchanges are about.

As in previous studies, the occurrence of complex responses to gratitude is also attested both in the form of multiple head-acts and combinations of head acts and supporting moves. More specifically, complex responses to gratitude are much less frequent than simple ones, although not to the same extent (i.e. more frequent than in Schneider 2005 and Farenkia 2013, but less frequent than in Farenkia 2012), and in particular the multiple-head-act encoding option is less frequent than the head-act-plus-supporting-move one, in line with Schneider (2005) and Farenkia (2012, 2013). Partly in line with my original expectations and Farenkia's (2013) findings, most complex responses to gratitude are addressed to +P, but not necessarily +D, interlocutors; this is, however, in contrast with Schneider (2005), who found that most supporting moves occurred in the so-called informal situation – but actually characterized by the small magnitude of the benefit – and with Farenkia (2012), who found them to be fairly equally frequent with -D and +D, but =P, addressees. However, the low number of response-to-gratitude tokens collected in this study does not make it possible to carry out a serious statistical analysis.

The supporting moves in complex responses to gratitude tend to realize single-move strategies, and occur almost exclusively after the head act – as attested in previous studies – but never occur by themselves, unlike what reported in Schneider (2005) and Farenkia (2012, 2013).

Overall, therefore, the data shows that most responses to gratitude are encoded as simple expressions consisting of the head act only, but also that they are occasionally internally elaborate, and that their structure and content is comparable, but not identical, to those described in previous studies, especially with regard to the classification of their encoding options and their dispersion across situations. Their frequency of occurrence is much higher than that reported in corpus-based studies (e.g. Aijmer 1996; Rüegg 2014), but a little less frequent than that reported in DCT studies (Schneider 2005; Farenkia 2012, 2013). This lack of complete convergence (cf. Ouafeu's 2009, and Farenkia's 2013 on Cameroon English) suggests that the use of different data collection procedures may offer complementary views of the same phenomenon (cf. Schneider 2005, p. 11), and also that responses to gratitude may be “more creative and less standardized than previously thought” (Rüegg 2014, p. 29). However, the low number of responses to gratitude collected does not make it possible to sensibly investigate the possible correlation between different strategies and/or formulation types and situational variables, an issue that is instead addressed in previous studies.

## 6. Conclusion

This study, which has looked at the realization of responses to gratitude in an elicited role-play context within one variety of English, has provided further evidence in support of previous findings, confirming that these speech acts are preferably encoded as simple utterances, which realize one of a small set of strategies, and less frequently as combinations of strategies or a strategy plus support material. The data, however, has also revealed that the frequency of occurrence of responses to gratitude, their dispersion across situations, and the range of their attested strategies and formulations differ in part from those reported in previous studies. The discussion has pointed out some of the reasons for

the lack of complete convergence in the data. This is to be ascribed to the different research parameters adopted in the various studies, mainly different data collection methods, categorizations of strategies and formulation types, and eliciting situations. The similarities of the present findings with those most commonly attested in previous ones, on the one hand, and the situational variability of their instantiations across studies, on the other, suggest two interrelated considerations, one relevant to the object of study, and the other the method of its analysis.

First, it appears plausible to conceptualize responses to gratitude as a set of communicative acts with fuzzy boundaries, which comprise core (i.e. more typical) and peripheral (i.e. less typical) members in terms of their strategic, verbal and structural resources. Indeed, the strategies instantiated in my data overlap with those attested cross-linguistically, since they reproduce a few of the most frequent ones, but also illustrate others that are not similarly shared across studies. Similarly, in this study, each formulation type under a given strategy comprises a few slight phraseological variations on a common, central lexico-semantic notion. Finally, most of the responses to gratitude described here reproduce a specific structural pattern (i.e. the head act followed by one supporting move), while various minor “deviations” from it are also attested.

Secondly, complementary findings originating from alternative research approaches may offer multi-faceted insights into these speech acts, which would not otherwise come to the fore; for example, the context-specificity, and thus variability, of supporting-move strategies becomes more evident when the same communicative function is considered in relation to a *variety* of communicative scenarios. That is, speakers appear to know how to adapt a recurrent communicative goal to varying situations with creative functional, semantic and formal solutions. This in turn suggests that variant realizations of responses to gratitude are not fully predictable from their highly conventionalized nature: that is, even if they are routinized social constructs, are probably uttered below the level of interactants’ consciousness (Rüegg 2014, p. 18), and conform to a small inventory of preferred strategies and encoding options, their internal variation is worth exploring, and can be the object of L2 teaching (Gesuato, in press).

A more comprehensive and revealing picture of responses to gratitude could be traced if the findings from various studies could be reliably and systematically compared. But this would require the adoption of similar conventions in the classification and description of data. The coding scheme presented here is so far only applicable to the data taken into consideration; however, it presents explicit criteria for identifying the functions and formulations of gratitude responses. This makes it possible to check whether the classification is motivated and well-grounded (cf. Schneider 2005, pp. 105, 107) and to test its suitability in accounting for additional interactional material. The analysis of new data in the future may lead to the recognition and classification of further strategies, formulation types and/or specific realizations, and/or to a more precise description of strategies and formulation types, and thus to an expansion or refinement of the coding scheme itself.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> For example, the [welcome] formulation type might come to comprise additional specific realizations of the notion of ‘willingness to be of help’, which are mentioned in other studies, such as *Anything for a friend; Whatever you need; Whenever you like*. Similarly, the Offer supporting-move strategy could end up including a specific realization mentioned in the literature like *I’m always here when you need me*.

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**Acknowledgments:** The author would like to thank Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig and two anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this paper.

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