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Patterns of thanking in the closing section of UK service calls: marking conversational macro-structure vs managing interpersonal relations

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1 Introduction

This paper investigates different patterns of usage of conventionalized thanking formulae in the closing section (as defined in Levinson 1983: 317) of a corpus of UK service calls. Details of the patterns found are provided in sect. 3 below.

Existing research on the pragmatics of thanking is sparse, and with the exception of Aston (1995), Jautz (2013), and Woods et al. (in press), its use, whether in closings or elsewhere, has rarely been the central focus of those previous studies that do discuss it. However, one observation that has been made by several scholars (e.g. Hymes 1971, Clark & French 1981, Button 1987, Aston 1995, Aijmer 1996, and Jautz 2013) is that thanking, particularly in contemporary British English, appears to have a macrostructural function of signalling a coordinated exit from an interactional episode. In other words, thanking tokens may function as pre-closing markers (Schegloff & Sacks 1974: 246).

Although he mentions it only in passing, and does not adduce any data, Hymes (1971: 69) notes that “British ‘Thank you’ seems on its way to marking formally the segments of certain interactions, with only residual attachment to ‘thanking’ in some cases.” To Aijmer (1981: 52ff), thanking tokens may function as “discourse markers”, more specifically “closing signals” or “floor-leaving devices”. She describes thanking at the end of telephone calls as a social ritual displaying alignments and commitments (Aijmer 1981: 61), and as “almost mandatory” at the end of business-related telephone calls (Aijmer 1981: 59). In other words, when thanking formulae appear towards the end of spoken interactions in institutional settings in particular, they are seen by these scholars as having to a large extent been bleached of their original semantic content (i.e. gratitude, indebtedness) and having become further pragmaticalized (Erman & Kotsinas 1993) as conventional, i.e. largely arbitrary, markers of the macro-structural development of episodes of interaction.

The position of Aston (1995) and of Woods et al. (in press) affords a somewhat greater role to the source illocutionary value of thanking. Thus, for Aston (1995: 57) the main point of thanking in the closing section of service interactions is “to demonstrate [participants’] final alignment in a common frame of reference and a shared satisfactory role-relationship”. The findings of Woods et al. (in press), which appeared online after the present study was originally submitted for publication, are largely compatible with Aston’s. To these authors, expressions of thanks in the closing section of the medical helpline calls in their data base function as what they call an “endogenous indicator of satisfaction”. Through their use of the notion of satisfaction, these studies provide a bridge between the expression of gratitude and the macrostructural function of preparing to close the conversation. Neither, however, considers potential differences between different patterns of thanking.

A semi-experimental study by Clark & French (1981), based on calls to a US university switchboard, does look briefly at specific patterns of thanking. The study shows that the more “personal” a call becomes in terms of three parameters (one or more telephone numbers requested; simple *vs* complex information requested; and whether or not the operator makes mistakes), the more likely it is that a “strong” expression of gratitude (i.e. *thank you very much*) will be used in preference to a “weak” expression (i.e. a simple *thank you*) in the closing section (Clark & French 1981: 11). Moreover, the use of strong expressions of gratitude correlates with an increase in the exchange of terminal greetings, which in the US context are not normatively produced in this type of call (Clark & French 1981: 12). The authors conclude that telephone closings should not be studied in isolation from the rest of the calls of which they are part, in as much as their form is responsive precisely to what has preceded them in the “body” of the call.

My object of interest in this study is consonant with Clark & French’s (1981) conclusion: the focus of the analysis proposed below is thus not how closings as such are achieved in these calls, but rather how the use of one specific pattern of thanking at the end of a call, as opposed to another possible pattern, appears to reflect aspects of that call which precede the closing section. While my data suggest that thanking in the closing section is overwhelmingly the norm in this type of call in the UK context, several different and unevenly distributed patterns are found (see sect. 3 below). Consideration of the different types of issues raised in the calls, as well as micro-analysis of the talk within them, suggest that the use of any specific pattern is responsive both to antecedently given role relationships and to local contingencies in the management of interpersonal relations (Goffman 1967, Brown & Levinson 1987). In consequence, I will argue that when used in the closing section of these calls, thanking formulae do retain illocutionary value. Indeed, because the illocutionary value of thanking overlaps with that of apologizing (Coulmas 1981), certain patterns of thanking used in some of the calls appear to convey an implicit apologetic stance on the part of either caller or agent. While thanking tokens also undoubtedly do perform a pre-closing function, they should thus not be categorized as a type of discourse marker in the first instance.

2 Data, context, and methodology

The data on which the analysis is based consist of 94 telephone calls made to a UK housing association by tenants or prospective tenants, or, in a few cases, family or friends representing (prospective) tenants. A housing association is a non-profit organization which manages social housing. Available accommodation is allocated based on need, so tenants will tend to be comparatively socially disadvantaged, e.g. unemployed or low-income workers, disabled, elderly and/or benefit recipients.

In the calls that make up the corpus for this study, a variety of topics are broached, ranging from neutral inquiries and requests, to complaints about the organization or third parties, but most of the calls can be characterized as involving the presentation of some form of trouble

(Emerson & Messinger 1977) related to the caller's (prospective) tenancy. The association that provided the data has its own locally-based call center, where incoming calls are answered by the first available agent. In most cases, this agent will attempt to deal with the issue that has prompted the call, but some calls may be redirected to staff outside the call center, occasionally at the explicit request of the caller. Unlike many contemporary UK businesses, this organization does not provide agents with detailed scripts for how to handle incoming calls of different types, but only with a brief set of general guidelines, emphasizing such things as showing empathy and patience, refraining from responding emotionally, and helping callers to prioritize their issues. Importantly, no guidance whatsoever is given on the use of thanking, nor on appropriate ways of bringing calls to a close.

In any form of institutional interaction, participants will crucially enact certain institutional roles, which come with specific rights and obligations attached to them.¹ The degree of precision and detail with which genre-appropriate behavior is defined will, of course, differ according to the particular institutional context. Thus, formal courtroom interaction, for instance, is very highly codified in terms of who is entitled/required *vs* prohibited from doing and saying what at any given time. In contrast, interaction between customers and sales personnel in a small neighborhood shop is considerably less so.

The calls studied in this paper fall towards the latter end of the spectrum. The basic distribution of roles can be summarized as follows: Calls by (prospective) tenants to the organization are expected to be prompted by issues directly relating to (future) tenancy, i.e. callers are constrained to introducing topics relating principally to their rights and obligations *vis-à-vis* those of the housing association, and secondarily to tenancy-related issues where no legal rights or obligations may exist, but where the organization may reasonably be expected to be in a position to offer help and/or advice. The latter type of issue evidently constitutes a grey zone, where negotiation may be called for. In so far as the topics introduced by callers comply with these constraints, agents are expected to respond competently. A competent response does not necessarily include producing a ready solution to a given problem, but may for instance consist in referring the caller to an appropriate colleague or third party.

In addition, both parties are by default expected to behave in a neutrally polite way towards one another. No particular form of politeness, i.e. negative *vs* positive (Brown & Levinson 1987), appears to be normative in this context, however. Both forms are amply instantiated in the data, although the behavior of the agents tends to be situated somewhat further along the negative-politeness end of the spectrum than that of the callers.

Thus, in this paper, calls where any topics broached by the caller are contextually appropriate in the above sense, where contributions by both parties are in accordance with their

¹ This is not meant to imply that I subscribe to what Heritage & Clayman (2010: 21) call the "bucket theory" of context, whereby interactants simply fit their behavior to a predetermined context. On the contrary, I strongly believe, in line with CA researchers, that institutional contexts are to a large extent constituted in a bottom-up fashion, being enacted through the verbal and nonverbal behavior that takes place within them.

respective roles, where agents display competence in dealing with the issue, and where no misunderstandings occur, will be considered to display what Aston (1995: 71) calls “role alignment” between caller and agent. When tenants or agents deviate to a greater or lesser extent from this, there is deemed to be (temporary) “role misalignment”.

Initially, patterns of thanking found in the data base were identified and quantified. The study is concerned only with conventionalized thanking formulae occurring in the (pre-)closing sections of calls, so thanking tokens found in other parts of the calls have not been considered in the analysis. Similarly, expressions of gratitude and/or obligation which are not conventionalized thanking formulae (e.g. *that’s very kind of you!*) have been excluded. The formulae investigated are thus of four types, largely corresponding to the categories used in Okamoto & Robinson (1997):

- (i) colloquial forms (*ta’, cheers*),
- (ii) minimal standard forms (*thanks*),
- (iii) standard forms (*thank you*)
- (iv) expanded forms (*thanks/thank you + booster and/or reason for thanking, e.g. thank you very much for your help*).

Overall, the use of standard and expanded forms is clearly dominant in this corpus, although more so among the callers than among the agents, who tend to prefer (minimal) standard forms. Unsurprisingly, only callers produce colloquial forms.

In a subsequent stage, pragmatic micro-analysis of each individual call was carried out, incorporating notions from conversation analysis (e.g. Schegloff 2007, Sidnell 2010), as well as notions from sociopragmatics, pertaining to face and face threat (Goffman 1967, Brown & Levinson 1987). More detailed analyses will be provided in sect. 4 below.

3 Basic patterns found

The data suggest that the use of conventionalized thanking formulae is very much the norm in UK service calls of this type, a mere five calls (5.3%) exhibiting no conventional thanking tokens at all in the closing section. In the 89 calls (94.3%) that do contain thanking tokens in the closing section, three basic patterns of thanking are found, whose uneven distribution across the corpus as a whole suggests that they may not be interactionally equivalent:

The first pattern will be referred to as “unilateral thanking”, as only one of the interactants produces a conventional thanking token in the closing section. Unilateral thanking is found in a total of 30 calls (31.9%). It may be initiated by either the caller (designated as C in all the excerpts reproduced below), as seen in l. 1 of (1) below, or more rarely, by the agent (designated as A), as in l. 3 of (2):

- (1) 1 C: okay *thank you* [*very much*
 2 A: [all right no problem
 3 C: bye
 4 A: bye (05-14-15-39-05)

- (2) 1 A: all right so I'll do that for you now
 2 C: all right
 3 A: all right *thanks a lot* [b bye, bye
 4 C: [bye now (05-14-12-04-17)

The second pattern has “reciprocal thanking” over two turns, i.e. one of the interactants produces a conventional thanking token, and the interlocutor produces such a token in the following turn. There is a total of 45 calls (47.9%) exhibiting this pattern in the data base. As with unilateral thanking, reciprocal thanking over two turns is most frequently initiated by the caller, as in (3) below, but agents do sometimes take the lead, as in (4):

- (3) 1 C: @@ no problem I'll try again tomorrow *thank you*
 2 A: =okay then, *thank you*
 3 C: =bye no[w
 4 A: [by:e (07-09-15-50-40)
- (4) 1 A: all right lovely *thank you very* [*much* [by:e
 2 C: [okay *th[ank you* by:e (07-09-15-27-23)

The third and final pattern is one where reciprocal thanking is produced over three or more turns. In such cases, one interactant initiates thanking, receives a thanking token in return, and subsequently produces an additional token in a third turn. In a few cases, the non-initiating party may themselves produce yet another token in the fourth turn. A total of 14 calls (14.9%) show this pattern. A caller-initiated example is found in (5) below and an agent-initiated one in (6):

- (5) 1 C: all right no worries *thanks a lot* [love
 2 A: [bye *thank you*/
 3 C: [**cheers* bye*
 4 A: [bye (05-14-12-14-34)
- (6) 1 A: right (0.8) not a problem then madame (.) [*thank you very MUCH*/

- 2 C: [okay then [=thank you\
 3 A: [all right/ (.)
 4 C: =[thanks a lot b bye
 5 A: =[okay then\
thank you thanks\
 bye (05-14-12-24-13)

While reciprocal thanking over two turns is the pattern most frequently used overall, there seem to be differences in the use of the basic thanking patterns according to the content of the calls, which call for qualitative microanalysis. Thus, for instance, in four of the five calls that have no thanking in the closing section, the tenants are calling to complain, and in three of these calls the trouble is presented as attributable to an identifiable representative of the organization. On the other hand, the highest proportions of unilateral thanking are found in calls where either no trouble is broached at all, or the organization is not responsible for it. Finally, calls in which a trouble is presented as either caused by an unidentified representative of the organization or as one that has non-human causes, but which the organization is responsible for addressing, feature the highest proportions of reciprocal thanking. Microanalysis of the calls will be pursued in greater depth in sect. 4 below.

Callers produce exactly 2/3 of the total number of thanking tokens in the data, and – as might be expected – they are overwhelmingly the initiators of thanking. Nevertheless, we find thirteen instances (14.6%) where such thanking is either produced by the agent alone or where agents do not wait for callers to produce thanks before doing so themselves. This is on the face of it an unexpected result, independently of whether the proffering of thanking tokens is seen as principally expressing gratitude or as serving to initiate closing of the interaction. Thus, if the point of a service call is to request information, trouble-shooting or some other form of action from the call taker, then politeness theory (Brown & Levinson 1987) would suggest that, to the extent any gratitude or indebtedness is felt and/or expressed at all, it should be on the part of the caller. To the extent that thanking tokens function as pre-closing markers, we would similarly expect thanking to be initiated by callers rather than agents, in as much as it is normally “caller’s business to stick in possible endings” (Sacks 1995: 364). Sect. 4.4 below therefore takes a closer look at calls featuring agent-initiated thanking.

4 Correlations between patterns of thanking and the nature and content of the calls

Starting with the majority of calls in which thanking is initiated by the caller, I will now look at the three patterns identified above in turn. Following that, in sect. 4.4, I will look at calls in which thanking is initiated either by the agent, or by both interactants simultaneously, i.e. those calls where the agent’s thanking cannot be seen as being in response to prior thanking by the caller. The aim is to support the idea that the choice of one pattern rather than another is not arbitrary, but rather fairly systematically reflects what has occurred in the calls prior to initiation of the closing section.

4.1 *Calls featuring unilateral thanking on the part of callers*

The most striking fact revealed by the qualitative analysis of the data base is that unilateral thanking on the part of callers is associated exclusively with calls that are interactionally “unmarked”, in the sense that they are non-conflictive and exhibit role alignment (cf. sect. 2 above) between caller and agent throughout.

Unilateral thanking is proffered by callers in 28 out of 30 cases.² It appears that, in these cases, where the issues raised by the tenants have been competently and swiftly dealt with, occasionally even in ways which go beyond the expectations projected by the callers, agents do not perceive the need to reciprocate any thanks offered, but prefer to respond by ritually minimizing any implied imposition on themselves by the use of formulae such as “no problem”,³ cf. l. 2 of (7) below (already adduced as (1) in sect. 3 above):

- (7) 1 C: okay thank you [very much
2 A: [all right *no problem*
3 C: bye
4 A: bye (05-14-15-39-05)

In some cases, callers produce more than one thanking token, typically in separate turns. One feature that may have prompted multiple thanking tokens in a number of instances is that in those calls the agent has in some sense gone above and beyond the call of duty, either by spontaneously offering information or advice at a level of detail not projected by the caller’s query, or by acceding to one or more special ancillary requests in addition to dealing with the main issue. That is, for instance, the case in (8), in which a turn-initial high-grade assessment (Antaki 2002) and an expanded thanking formula is offered by the caller (l.1), in addition to the repeated thanking token in l. 3:

- (8) 1 C: *BRILLiant Excellent*, thank you [very much
2 A: [all right then/, you welcome
3 C: right thank YOU (05-14-15-19-11)

Although speculative, this explanation is in line with the findings of Clark & French (1981) concerning the uses of strong vs weak expressions of gratitude, cf. sect. 1 above.

² The two instances that are produced by agents will be discussed in sect. 4.4 below.

³ The notion of minimization of imposition here is predicated on the assumption that the illocutionary force of thanking lies at least in part in acknowledging that the speaker has in some way imposed upon the hearer.

In other cases, the production of multiple thanking tokens may serve to convey an implicitly apologetic stance on the part of the callers. While this suggestion may seem surprising at first sight, it is justified by the close relationship that obtains between the speech acts of thanking and apologizing (Coulmas 1981), both of which imply that the speaker (or someone for whom they are entitled to speak) has been the source of some imposition on the hearer, and both of which aim to restore interactional harmony and balance between the parties. In one such case, for instance, the caller has made an appointment with a plumber through the organization just moments earlier, and is calling again to change that appointment because she has become aware of a clash in her diary. In this type of case, there is a sense in which, although the caller's problem is in legitimate need of organizational troubleshooting, it was nevertheless preventable and thus arguably represents some inconvenience to the organization.

Finally, two cases of multiple unilateral thanking seem to be attributable principally to the fact that the first thanking token is either overlapped by the agent or followed by an unrelated, misplacement-marked (Schegloff & Sacks 1974: 258), question, which briefly reopens the conversation.

In one call, (9) below, thanking seems to be pursued by the agent:

(9) 1 A: ...I'll get her to call you back within twenty-four hours

2 C: all right love

3 A: all [right/

4 C: [bye

5 A: (.) no [problem

6 C: [°thanks° (05-14-15-25-36)

The closing section in (9) is remarkable for the fact that the agent produces the minimizing uptake "no problem" (l. 3), in response not to a thanking token of the part of the caller, but rather to a terminal greeting. Only after the first (highly recognizable) element of this minimizer is a minimal standard thanking form produced *sotto voce* by the caller (l. 6). Notice that, in l. 1, the agent formulates an action plan, which embodies a promise to the caller. While thanking is not required in response to such a promise, it would nonetheless be in order. Instead, the caller produces a pre-closing passing turn (Schegloff & Sacks 1974: 246) confirming mutual understanding. In l. 3, the agent repeats the caller's expression, but with rising intonation, which seems to function as a request for reiteration of confirmation, possibly accompanied by an expression of thanks. This request is, however, overlapped by the caller's terminal greeting in l. 4. Such a greeting being the first part of an adjacency pair, the micropause marked by the agent in l. 5, and her production of the unrelated minimizer "no problem" instead of a terminal greeting token, constitutes an unexpected, hence dispreferred, response (Heritage 1984: 266f). It seems plausible that it is this dispreferred

nature of the agent's response which serves to finally trigger the caller's thanking token in l. 6.

4.2 Calls featuring caller-initiated reciprocal thanking over two turns

A total of 35 calls feature caller-initiated reciprocal thanking over two turns. Overwhelmingly, these calls are interactionally "marked" in some way.

Thus, fifteen calls exhibit some form of role misalignment (cf. sect. 2 above) between caller and agent. In (10) below, for instance, the agent is unable to answer the caller's query and eventually has to refer him to a different agency. Notice that the manner in which the agent does so is very tentative (cf. the italicized modal verbs and hedges in ll. 1 and 3):

- (10) 1 A: yeah *apparently it might* be worth speaking to them to see what the letter says [...] yeah they *should* be able to tell you where it's up to
- 2 C: <h> are they open now <h>
- 3 A: =erm, they *should* be yeah *I'd imagine so*
- 4 C: =okay thank you
- 5 A: =all right no problem thank you (07-09-15-35-00)

In (11) below, while the organization does assume a troubleshooting role, the agent makes it fairly explicit that this should be understood by the caller as a favor extended to her as a new tenant (l. 1), and that her request to have her cooker repaired is strictly speaking illegitimate, because maintenance of that cooker is formally her own responsibility (l. 7):

- (11) 1 A: ...I've spoken to our senior electrician *he said because that you're quite a new tenant there >h< he can ac[tually go round himself and have a look >h<*
- 2 C: [yeah
- 3 A: erm [he did say erm: that with the cookers er p provided in these flats=
- 4 C: [okay
- 5 A: ='cause we don't normally as I said norm- pro[vide cookers=
- 6 C: [yes
- 7 A: =erm 'cause you've been provided with a cooker in that flat that that cooker is *when you signed up for the property it becomes your cooker >h< so then it becomes your responsibility* (07-09-15-07-28)

In addition to these fifteen calls, four calls show evidence of role misalignment in previous interactions between the caller and the organization. In one such case, for instance, the tenant

is calling about a tradesperson who has not shown up for an appointment. Upon verification by the agent, the tradesperson in question turns out to be on vacation. The caller is clearly distressed by this news. The misalignment consists in an error having been made by the agent making the appointment. It is thus, in these calls situated at a somewhat higher level, pertaining to the recent history of interactions between the tenant and the organization.

Calls featuring mutual caller-initiated thanking over two turns may also exhibit other forms of interactional markedness, however. Five calls feature openly negative assessments of the organization or its representatives and/or show signs of incipient conflict, as in (12) below. In this call, the tenant wants the organization to commit to repairing her faulty boiler within 24 hours (l. 1). The agent, however, resists making such a commitment, observing that lack of hot water does not count as an emergency (l. 2) and that central heating is an issue only in winter (ll. 4-5); as the call takes place in summer (referred to by “these months” in l. 5), this counts as a refusal to comply with the caller’s request. The caller has difficulty accepting that refusal and each participant insists on the legitimacy of their position over several turns (cf. ll. 6-9):

(12) 1 C: we we’ve got no hot water *can someone come out today or tomorrow mor/ning*

2 A: =e:r *they don’t class hot water as an emergency*

(0.7)

3 C: what about having no central hea/ting

4 A: they do: if it’s winter months

(0.4)

5 A: but *not, during these months*

(1.0)

6 C: *even though I’ve had lot of problems with my boiler before you can see on my record that I’ve had complaints and [compensation*

7 A: [I can see that yeah but *they don’t offer that at this time of year*

(1.0)

8 C: well I suppose that’s it for Wednesday morning then/ so *what am I supposed to do for hot water and central heating then* >h< I mean I obviously don’t need the central heating but one X hot water

9 A: yeah but *they don’t class hot water as an emergency AT ALL (07-09-15-31-05)*

Three calls contain suggestions by the agent that the caller may in fact be responsible for a state-of-affairs which the latter is presenting as a “no-fault” trouble. Such a suggestion is exemplified in l. 2 of (13) below:

(13) 1 C: right the other things a:re [...] and I've got three that have completely come off I don't know why:

2 A: >h< right e:rm it's just that when you don't report them when it happens, yeah >h< and you end up doing it in a job lot like this *they then suspect that there is a reason for it and they may recharge you* (10-01-15-38-17)

In one further call, (14) below, the caller is pre-emptively asserting competence in ll. 4 and 6 (cf. Heritage & Sefi 1992: 402ff), possibly in an attempt to head off any potential suggestions that she may be responsible for the trouble by having neglected to check whether her fuse box switches were set correctly. The emphatic stress on “nothing” in l. 6 and the agent's placating response in l. 7 both suggest that the latter hears it as such.

(14) 1 A: when you say it's not WORKING what is it not /k/ coming up from the pull CORD or

2 C: =the CORD's not coming on the LIGHT's [not coming on=

3 A: [right

4 C: =I've checked the switches and everything [and, the flip switch=

5 A: [yeah

6 C: *it's NOTHING to do with that* [so:

7 A: [no problem *okay* (05-14-15-56-54)

One call is difficult to interpret, as the underlying reason for the call is evoked in only the most implicit terms:

(15) C: ...HE PHONED ME (.) and ah said what he >h< that *Jack⁴ was under erm a a bit of a misapprehension about something* so (07-09-15-48-54)

The agent is unable to put the caller through to the member of staff he wishes to speak to, but promises him a call back before the end of the day. This is striking, as the organization otherwise works with a 24-hour call back policy, and it may suggest that the agent is aware of a problem which is not stated within the call itself.

In all these cases, reciprocal thanking on the part of the agents can arguably be heard as oriented towards marking a symbolic restoration of interpersonal harmony prior to the

⁴ It goes without saying that this and all other proper names contained in the data (whether names of people or of geographical locations) have been changed to protect the anonymity of the speakers.

termination of the call, thus displaying overlap with the core function of apologies (Coulmas 1981, Murphy 2015).

Four calls have unusual features that are more interactionally positive. In (16) below, although calling to complain that her new gate has not yet been painted, the tenant overtly and spontaneously displays both an orientation to the interests of the organization (ll. 1 and 3) and a sense of personal responsibility for the future maintenance of the new gate (l. 5). She can thus be said to index a sense of reciprocity, a feature which is found in only one other call in the data base, and which may plausibly be said to be acknowledged by the agent via the mutual exchange of pre-terminal thanking.

(16) 1 C: ...it's just obviously it's gonna erm (.) it's all right NOW 'cause it's relatively new and the weather's okay but *if it doesn't get done *at some point** (.)
[it's just gonna rot isn't it

2 A: [yea:h I think it's BEST just to get it done sooner rather than [leave it till late 'cause a lot of our tenants just end up leaving it=

3 C: [yea:h that's
what I'm thinking

4 A: =and then ring us like a year later and it's like well {smiling voice} (.) it's gonna be a bit of a hard job

[...]

5 C: ...*I know it's my responsibility going FORWARD* (.) but I thought the first one would be down to Midcity [to do

6 A: [right (.) YEAH you would have thought so (05-14-15-58-34)

In one call, after pre-closing turns have been exchanged, the caller reopens the conversation to express concern about what will happen next and whether her trouble can be addressed in a timely fashion. The agent affiliates (Lindström & Sorjonen 2013) with her concern through the use of collaborative turn construction (Lerner 2004) and does his best to reassure her. Just prior to the end of the call, he emphatically reciprocates her thanks, which may, in this context, be heard as further reassurance that her problem will now be dealt with.

The third such call features a small monologue – unique of its kind within the data base – in which the agent comments jokingly and affiliatively about what she sees on her computer screen while booking a requested repair, at one point explicitly apologizing for the slowness of the booking process. Backchanneling (Yngve 1970) by the caller takes the form of laughter and minimization.

Finally, one call features such effusive gratitude on the part of the caller both prior to and within the closing section (ll. 1, 3, 5, 7) that it would intuitively seem almost crass for the agent not to offer reciprocal thanks (l. 8):

- (17) 1 C: *THANK you very much* (.) [yeah that's fine (.) THAT's fine
2 A: [okay/ (.) so between twelve and two thirty
this ThursDAY
3 C: THIS Thursday [*thank/ you* (.) *thank you very much*
4 A: [yeah and I'll (.) I'll FIND out who's done the work on your
PIPE your gutter [and I'll need to contact them
5 C: [ah a:h right VERY kind darling (.) *thank
you* [*very much *thanks**
6 A: [okay/ no PROBLEM
7 C: so have a good day [*THANK you* (.) b- bye bye bye
8 A: [*thank* (0.3) *thank you* bye (05-14-15-11-59)

Two calls with mutual caller-initiated thanking over two turns do not appear to have problematic or otherwise unusual interactional features and thus remain unexplained.

4.3 *Calls featuring caller-initiated reciprocal thanking over three or more turns*

The data base contains a total of thirteen calls in which the callers initiate a mutual exchange of thanks spanning three turns or more. Like most of the calls discussed in the preceding section, these all feature some form of interactional trouble. In ten of the thirteen cases, moreover, the callers either initiate conflict/misalignment or may, in one case, be made to feel that they are inconveniencing the agent. Arguably, therefore, their reiteration of thanks in the third turn may serve to index an apologetic stance.

One call contains a rare episode of open conflict between caller and agent, concerning the time frame within which the tenant is entitled to expect a call back from another member of the organization's staff:

- (18) 1 A: >h< we DO HAVE a twenty-four hour CALL BACK policy so he should
call you back by this time tomorrow at the very latest
2 C: >h< {annoyed tone} some time to/MOR\ROW >h<
3 A: no [I didn't say SOME TIME I said BY THIS TIME TOMORrow >h<
4 C: [^but this was like^

5 A: at the very latest so eh [between this be[tween ^/\now^

6 C: [right ['cause THAT GUY said that someone was gonna call me back and they haven't done and [you know my house is just a disaster

7 A: [/w/ I can't er well I'm not going to overpromise you and say yes he'll call you back in an hour because it's a twenty-four hour call back policy >h< he COULD call you back in an hour but he could call you back at this time tomorrow >h< as long as it's within twenty-four hours I CAN'T CHASE him >h< but I what I can say is that he will give you a call back in THAT TIME

(.)

8 C: {click} right 'cause that's what I was told last week by this lad who came out and had a look at it, and left

9 A: right he did say half an hour but I'm not saying half an hour because that's just impossible >h< because other people have workloads as well you see... (10-01-15-57-32)

The conflict is subsequently resolved, and the agent goes on to produce several turns that explicitly affiliate with the caller's frustration.

Two further calls contain incipient caller-initiated conflict in the form of either openly negative assessments of the organization or turns that can be heard as implicitly querying the agent's competence. In both cases, the agents eventually manage to convince the callers of the correctness/justifiability of their own or the organization's position.

Three calls feature non-native-speaking callers whose imperfect mastery of English repeatedly hampers mutual understanding and alignment between themselves and the agents. Thus, in (19) below, the caller appears in l. 4 to have misheard the agent's "meant to be on the tenth of May" (l. 3) and is corrected by the agent in l. 5. Almost immediately following that, the caller misinterprets the agent's confirmation question in l. 9 (itself a reformulation of the question in l. 7) as a statement, as shown by her uptake in l. 10 (where the preceding 1.2 second delay suggests processing difficulties on the part of the caller):⁵

(19) 1 A: 'cause [you did have an appointment

2 C: [>h< (.) so there is a (.) there is appoint er: someone will come end of the May/

⁵ It might be argued that calls featuring non-native interactants should be removed from the data, as we cannot know that the thanking patterns of these speakers are similar to those of native British speakers. I have chosen to keep these calls in, as they do not seem to be out of line with what is found in the remaining calls.

3 A: NO it was *meant to be on the TENTH of May*

(2.0)

4 C: *the mainTE/nance*

5 A: (0.3) *the TENTH* (1.2) the ten

6 C: yeah

7 A: the tenth of May someone was meant to come out to you but that *ha have they not/ attended*

8 C: (0.3) no

9 A: *no NO-one's been out so far*

10 C: (1.2) okay (05-14-12-10-24)

One additional call similarly contains multiple instances of minor misunderstandings and requests for repetition of information already provided by the agent, despite the tenant being in this case a native speaker.

In two calls, the tenants express themselves with a degree of directness that could be heard as borderline rude. In (20) below, the caller maintains the directness displayed in 1. 3 and 1. 7 throughout. Asking to speak to a particular agent about a routine repair and being hearably put out when that person is not available (cf. 1. 3) is highly marked behavior in this corpus. In addition, just prior to the closing section, the caller requests a confirmation letter, a type of request which is equally unusual in connection with repair bookings. Together, these behaviors may suggest a distrust of the organization which is not otherwise warranted by the contents of this particular call, in which both her request for the repair and that for the confirmation letter are granted without hesitation. In the closing section itself, the caller's initial thanking turn contains an expanded thanking form ("thank you very much") which is responded to in kind by the agent ("thanks a lot"). This and the production of a third thanking turn by the caller may tentatively be explained as acknowledging that the agent's response on this occasion has exceeded the caller's initially negative expectations:

(20) 1 C: can I speak to De/bra please

2 A: erm no she's not she's LEFT for the day now I'm afraid

(0.6)

3 C: *right it'll have to do then*

(0.5)

4 A: all [right what's your

5 C: [two twenty three Monmouth Road

6 A: okay how can I help

7 C: *my toilet seat needs fixing* (05-14-15-49-21)

One call has misalignment on several dimensions. The main reason for the call is the apparent breakdown of the tenant's boiler. As this boiler is still under warranty with the company that installed it, the agent abdicates organizational responsibility for troubleshooting, but offers to transfer the caller through to that company. Just as the agent is about to do so, the caller introduces a second topic to do with his rent. The agent initially offers to send an email to his rent officer, asking for a call back. After verifying the tenant's phone number, and confirming that she'll send the email, she abruptly backtracks and asks if she may help him with his query, thus potentially making the rent officer's intervention redundant. The caller enquires about some extra money he has paid into his rent account, but which has not shown up on his statement. To this the agent twice offers to "have a QUICK look for you now". The prosodic emphasis on the adjective is noteworthy: the caller's query appears to be of a rather routine nature, and based on other calls in the corpus, there does not seem to be any reason why the agent could not respond adequately to it. This way of phrasing her offer may therefore suggest that she is not keen for this call to be prolonged. That interpretation is supported by several features of the subsequent interaction, which is reproduced in (21):

(21) 1 A: ...and then we've received one seven five and forty yes we have

2 C: you have

(0.4)

3 C: [ri:ght well

4 A: [we have received it [s that oKAY/

5 C: [what I want to do is I want to pay a oner toDAY (.) to make
up for a bit of the arrears from last [wee- last

6 A: [sure

(0.6)

7 A: are you wanting to make a payment over the phone ^\NOW

8 C: (0.4) no not I'll go POST [office

9 A: [at the post office that's fine

(0.5)

10 A: okay [well what I'll

11 C: [yeah XX when I pay that hundred can you tell me what I'm LEFT with now then

12 A: if you pay it [well your CURRENT balance is a hundred and fifty three pounds and fourteen pence in arrears

13 C: ['cause I want

(0.3)

14 C: [yeah

15 A: [that's your current balance

16 C: so: [and there's not/

17 A: [and then BEARing in MIND it's not added this week's rent on either with it being Monday (.) it it'll be on the account tomorrow (0.3) so THAT's [not including this week's rent

18 C: [right

(1.4)

19 C: okay

20 A: okay (.) erm [I'm gonna transfer you through now Mister Gray okay=

21 C: [I know

22 A: ='cause we're not allowed to come out to your boiler it's still under warranty so (.) [I'll transfer you through to Company Name o\kay/

23 C:[°XX° =thank you

24 A: thank [you

25 C: [thank you bye

26 A: =*no problem* (05-14-12-19-26)

After the agent has performed a first check of the caller's account, the latter asks for clarification, which he receives (l. 1). He then starts up anew (l. 3), but is overlapped by the agent who in l. 4 repeats what she's just told him, followed by a question "is that okay" (notice the emphatic stress on "oKAY") designed to check the hearer's understanding and acceptance of the information provided. In the context of an institutional call like this one, an affirmative answer is likely to be closing implicative (Levinson 1983: 317). In overlap with this question, however, the caller states his intention to pay in some more money (l. 5). This is probably intended to function as a pre-expansion (e.g. Sidnell 2010: 95ff) designed to

guide the agent's interpretation of his subsequent question in l. 11, "a oner" in l. 5 being hearable as a synonym of "that hundred" in l. 11. In l. 7, the agent, however, seems to interpret his statement of intent as an indirect request to pay that money over the phone. When the caller disconfirms that interpretation, the agent starts up a turn (l. 10) whose beginning, "okay well what I'll" is formally identical to that of the earlier turn in which she proposes to put him through to the boiler company. In overlap with this, the caller produces his question, further developing the topic of what is currently in his rent account (l. 11). What sounds – due to the rising intonation pattern – like an attempt to ask an additional question in l. 16 is cut short by the agent in l. 17, who expands on the answer she has already given, twice using emphatic stress at the start of her turn, possibly with a view to emerge as the floor holder. Upon the caller's uptake, she immediately restates her intention to put him through to the boiler company, rushing through several transition-relevance places (Sacks et al. 1974: 703) in ll. 20 and 22. Notice that she neglects to verify whether the caller might have other issues that he wants to discuss, even though such verification seems to be normatively performed by agents prior to initiating closings in this corpus. Several aspects of the agent's behaviour in this call may thus arguably conspire to make the caller feel that he is somehow inconveniencing her.

In two calls, the agents find themselves in the position of having to explicitly apologize on behalf of the organization, because the callers have previously been given incorrect information about relatively urgent utility-related repairs. In both cases, the agents moreover explicitly affiliate with the tenants' concerns and offer either promises of immediate action or advice on what to do if there are further problems.

The multiple thanking turns found in the last call in this group are perhaps best explained as triggered by the interactants' seeming difficulty in coordinating their exit from the conversation, cf. (22) below. The "no that's it thank you" in l. 2 is fairly clearly closing-implicative (Levinson 1983: 317), but the rising intonation on the overlapping initial "er o/kay" reponse from the agent in l. 3 suggests that she is still engaged in establishing closing-implicativeness at that point. As her turn emerges into the clear, her micropause and "right then" suggest that it is only at that point that she realizes the interactional import of l. 2. In support of this, the caller's laughter token in l. 4 (which is otherwise unmotivated here) may indicate that she senses some confusion on the agent's part. L. 4 as a whole constitutes a passing turn to which the agent responds in kind, followed by "thank you for calling", which even more clearly indexes her readiness to terminate the call. With a smiling voice, the caller produces a new passing turn and reiterates her thanks whereupon terminal greetings are exchanged over three turns, as opposed to the two that are standard in the corpus:

- (22) 1 A: so that's booked in for you is there anything else I can do for/ you
 2 C: >h< no no that's it [thank you
 3 A: [er o/kay (.) right then
 4 C: @ okay

- 5 A: okay [thank you for calling
6 C: [{smiling voice} all right thank you
7 A: b bye [b bye
8 C: [b by:e by:e
9 A: bye (07-09-15-06-16)

4.4 *Calls featuring agent-initiated thanking*

Three calls in which agents initiate thanking are reminiscent of (9) in sect. 4.1 above, in that these calls feature unproblematic role alignment and the agents seem to be pursuing thanks that are not immediately forthcoming on the part of the callers. Indeed, in one case, the agent's thanking remains unilateral:

- (23) 1 A: ...so I'll just send over another message and let her know
2 C: okie dokie
3 A: all right so I'll do that for you now
4 C: all right
5 A: all right *thanks a lot*
6 C: [bye now
7 A: [b- bye, bye (05-14-12-04-17)

As in (9), the agent formulates an action plan implying a promise in l. 1. This is acknowledged by the caller in l. 2, but does not receive thanks. The agent then produces a preclosing turn confirming mutual understanding ("all right" in l. 3) followed by a reformulation of the action plan/promise. In l. 4, this receives renewed acknowledgement but no thanks from the caller, at which point the agent seems to give up and produces an expanded thanking token herself in l. 5, upon which terminal greetings are exchanged in overlap.

A fourth call is not dissimilar in structure. However, this is a complaint call, where the caller – a prospective tenant – has been offered a property in which she appears to have been interested, but has somehow been put on record by her housing officer as having refused the offer. The agent is unable to get through to the housing officer and promises the caller that she will send him a message requesting a call back within 24 hours. Although the caller's behavior is in no way confrontational, she does come across as (understandably) dissatisfied. In the closing section, reproduced in (24) below, she answers minimally (ll. 2 and 4), and as a result the agent is perhaps prompted to offer thanks immediately prior to her terminal

greeting (l. 5). The lack of a pause following this thanking token dispenses the caller from responding to it as such, and gives it a somewhat apologetic ring which also seems to be present in other instances of agent-initiated thanking in the data base (cf. sect. 4.1 above for the overlap between thanking and apologizing).

(24) 1 A: ...okay like I say he's got twenty-four hours to ring you back

2 C: (.) okay

3 A: all right then

4 C: 'kay

5 A: thank you b-bye (05-14-15-22-35)

In two calls that have agent-initiated mutual thanking over two turns the tenants appear quite upset and each produces several forceful negative evaluations of the organization's performance, a couple of which are exemplified in (25)-(26):

(25) C: ...*you've got a cheek* for even asking me for it this month >h< I'm gonna pay it OBVIOUSly but >h< *to go over two weeks without hot water is DIS,GUSTing* (07-09-15-36-17)

(26) C: the mistake happened with the, the WOMAN, who RANG me up and *was REALLY rude/ and REALLY horrible/* initially to book today's appointment 'cause *if ^SHE'd^ had done her job properly* then this would have, wouldn't have happened, *she didn't, she was ^NASTY^ she was ^HORRIBLE^...* (05-14-11-55-02)

The contents of a third call are strongly suggestive of negligence on the part of an agent who took a previous call from the tenant, but appears to have forgotten to log the tenant's request for a call back, even though the tenant has a series of rather urgent problems with her current accommodation.

In two calls, in which tenants request to be put through to a named member of staff, the agents come across as more than usually concerned to mitigate their failure to connect the caller (cf. ll. 1 and 3 in (27) below). In (27), the tenant's mention of urgency in l. 2 suggests an unstated trouble whose nature the agent is likely to be aware of, in as much as agents routinely bring tenants' account information up on their computer screens at the very beginning of a call:

(27) 1 A: I can't get through to Corinne but *she's /k/ quite good at getting you know when we send her a request to call tenants back* and I know that *on the fifth she did try and ring you and left a message* [then there's a problem with your phone

2 C: [yeah just that XX me yeah *it's quite urgent* as well she just spoke to me so I'm sure she might get back to me if you leave her a message

3 A: yeah *if you don't mind me doing that because I can't get through to her now*
shall I get her to call you on 555-5555/ (07-09-15-27-23)

In the second call, the agent is prompted to give a second, more detailed account of her failure to connect the tenant by the latter's request that he be contacted despite being out of the office. It is clear that the tenant has already previously attempted to contact him without success.

In a final call featuring agent-initiated thanking over two turns, the tenant calls in to request repairs to the outside of his property and to his back fence. Once appointments have been booked for these, he continues by producing a very indirect, interactionally pessimistic request (Brown & Levinson 1987: 136) for additional fencing to be put up (l. 2):

(28) 1 A: ...that's booked on as well is there anything else I can help you with/

2 C: that's fine at the moment *'cause I DON'T think er, we've got any chance of getting erm (1.3) er fencing (0.5) to go round the back (0.6)* where it joins on to [(0.8)

3 A: [sniffs]

4 C: er:m (0.9) Norwood Lane/

5 A: no [h< at the moment {cough cough}, {cough}. {cough} excuse me

6 C: [no

(0.6)

7 C: that's fine

8 A: at the moment they're erm, *they had to prioritize fencing so, er people with /a/ small children on, REALLY main roans roads like Dean Road*

9 C: mhm

10 A: if the fencing's down at the front, they would be prioritized at the moment

[, to get THEIR fencing sorted first=

11 C: [yeah

12 A: =and then, [and then they'll go from there I mean we're rePAIRing fencing if damaged,

13 C: [mhm

14 A: when we can [, but as far as getting NEW fencing or,

15 C: [right

16 A: PUTting fencing where there isn't any fencing already, it's not very COMMON to be honest at the moment (05-14-15-54-24)

Prior to the excerpt in (28), the tenant has done quite a bit of interactional work to demonstrate his own responsible stance *vis-à-vis* the repairs he is requesting, describing how he has attempted to deal with each of them himself before calling. Just shortly before initiating the exchange above, he has mentioned his young son's increasing mobility as a central reason for requesting the fencing repairs. In l. 8, the agent seems to be orienting to this when she mentions families with small children in her equally indirect refusal of this new request. Notice that her account of the refusal is couched in terms of what the current priorities of a referentially rather vague "they" are. This works to distance the agent from responsibility for the refusal.

Again, the tenant mentions concern for his son, following which he proposes to put up fencing himself, indirectly inquiring about the acceptability of such a plan to the organization (l. 1 in (29) below):

(29) 1 C: ...and I'm I'M looking at getting fencing myself anyway e:rm (0.5) *I'd I'd have to obviously organize that with yourSELVES 'cause (0.5) you don't like us putting fencing up (0.7) do you*

2 A: pardon

3 C: *you, nobody likes, US putting fencing up without contacting you FIRST do they/ (05-14-15-54-24)*

Notice how his indirect request for permission is framed as a hedged claim to knowledge about and acceptance of the organization's preferences (ll. 1 and 3). Both the proposal and the request for permission thus reinforce the image this caller has been presenting of himself as a particularly responsible tenant. In her response, the agent appears to be sensitive to this: while she is not in a position to give the tenant the permission he seeks, her advice that he should seek it in writing is mitigated, and she does her best to offer reassurance that permission is likely to be granted (l. 4 in (30) below). Notice, however, her shift from the third to the first person plural in l. 1 when putting the organization's position to the caller. It seems likely that the /w/ in the self-repair "...then /w/, I imagine they're..." projects a sentence with a first-person plural subject, which is then repaired as a hedged 3rd person plural statement. The agent is thus again declining personal responsibility. When the caller responds in a way that can be heard as presupposing acceptance of his proposal, the agent restates her mitigated advice to seek written permission in l. 4:

(30) 1 A: erm *we* do like you to get permission but as you, to be honest I mean *our* budget for fencing is quite low and so if [if TENANTS want to do their own FENCing then /w/, I imagine *they*'re quite PLEASED

2 C: [right

3 C: okay [that's fine that's fine yeah we'll start saving for that

4 A: [you know, BUT *as I say* *there wouldn't be a problem with that at all* but, yeah *they do like you to get, /r/ write in* and let us know first (05-14-15-54-24)

Against this background, the agent's initiation of thanking in the closing section can be heard as having a similar apologetic quality to what has been found in other instances of agent-initiated thanking in the corpus.

The one call that has agent-initiated thanking over more than two turns ends in a rather unusual manner, as seen in (31):

(31) 1 A: okay *I'll arrange for someone to come out to /j/ erm to give you a call to make-* to confirm that appointment for you [then

2 C: [yeah well *they CAN'T give me a CALL* so
[‘cause they don't have my number

3 A: [/r/ >h< can I have your number then
please/

4 C: er NO

5 A: erm

(1.6)

6 A: no/

7 C: no

8 A: so (.) *we will need to WRITE to you then* to con[firm that appointment

9 C: [yeah if you could WRITE to me
please

(1.2)

10 C: >h< I don't like me number registered in (.) with people

(0.6)

11 C: only you know close friends

(0.8)

12 C: family

(3.5)

13 C: I I think there's a note on there that I've (.) I've /ri/ I ALWAYS refuse to give my phone number

14 A: right

(0.6)

15 A: not a problem then madame (.) [thank you very much (.) [all right/ (.) okay then (.)=

16 C: [okay then [thank you (.) thanks a lot=

17 A: =[thank you (.) thanks

18 C: =[b- bye

19 A: bye (05-14-12-24-13)

In l. 1, the implicative verb construction (Karttunen 1971) “arrange for someone to give you a call” used by the agent routinely presupposes that the organization will be able to give the tenant a call back, but that presupposition is overtly challenged by the tenant in l. 2. Such challenges to the preceding speaker’s presuppositions are highly interactionally marked (a fact which is probably enhanced in this case by the presupposition being a culturally anodine one) and the agent initially seems to interpret it as merely an indirect way of reminding him to get her number, which he requests accordingly (l. 3). His request is, however, met with a blanket refusal in l. 4. Refusals are standardly dispreferred second pair parts (Heritage 1984: 266f), yet this particular instance is cast in what is essentially (apart from the slight initial hesitation) a preferred format. The agent appears taken aback by this and after a 1.6 second gap, he echoes the refusal in an interrogative prosodic format (l. 6). The caller confirms her refusal in a fully preferred format in l. 7. The agent then requests confirmation that an alternative course of action is what the caller wants (l. 8), which he gets, again in a preferred format, in l. 9. The 1.2 second gap following the tenant’s confirmation may be heard by her as indexing some confusion on the part of the agent, because at this point she retrospectively produces one of the standard components of dispreferred turns, namely an account of her refusal to provide her phone number (l. 10). When her account is received by silence, she three times adds further elements to it (“only close friends”, l. 11, “family”, l. 12, and “I think there’s a note on there...”, in l. 13), the third of which reveals that her challenge to the agent’s presupposition in ll. 1-2, and the marked format of her refusals in ll. 4 and 7 may have been due to an expectation that the agent would be aware of her attitude on this issue. That the agent initiates thanking in this case may thus be heard as acknowledgement that he is in some way responsible for the preceding misalignment, and thus as having an apologetic quality.

Finally, two calls have simultaneous thanking on the part of agent and caller. Both of these feature extended negotiation between caller and agent about what can be done and when, and

in both, the pre-closing exchange of passing turns is followed by a brief pause where the agent may possibly be waiting for the caller to produce thanks, cf. the 0.3 second gap between ll. 3 and 4 in (32):

- (32) 1 C: yeah it's fine [*I'll stay in X*
 2 A: [all right okay
 3 C: all right then
 (0.3)
 4 A: [thank you bye bye
 5 C: [thanks goodbye

These two calls are thus in some sense intermediate between the first set of calls discussed in this section, where agents appeared to be in pursuit of thanks from the callers, and the second set, where agent thanking was argued to fulfil an implicitly apologetic function.

5 Conclusion

The overwhelming presence of thanking tokens in the closing sections of the calls in the data base clearly gives some credence to the idea that, in contemporary British English, and perhaps particularly in telephone calls, thanking serves to index imminent closing (Hymes 1971, Button 1987, Aston 1995, Aijmer 1996, Jautz 2013). That, in turn, might suggest that, when used in the closing section of calls, thanking formulae are largely empty of semantic content, and have instead become further conventionalized as a subtype of discourse markers.

However, the patterns of variation observed above suggest that such an analysis would be premature, and that the specific ways in which thanking formulae are deployed in closings are responsive to local contingencies in the management of interpersonal relations (Brown & Levinson 1987), a conclusion that is also supported by the findings of Clark & French (1981).

In sum, the analyses offered in this paper suggest that unilateral thanking is favored in interactionally unmarked calls. It is this configuration which corresponds most closely to Aston's (1995: 57) view of the role of thanking in the closing of service interactions. In contrast, mutual thanking correlates mainly with the presence of interactional problems of various kinds, or, in a few cases, with features that are not problematic as such, but simply interactionally marked given the nature of the activity type (Levinson 1979). Moreover, when thanking is initiated by agents rather than by callers (as is the default), it is frequently hearable as conveying an apologetic stance.

In other words, there seems to be a kind of rough scale, such that unilateral thanking on the part of callers correlates with interactional unmarkedness of the call as a whole, while increasing interactional markedness results in rounds of thanking, reciprocal thanking over

two turns being one step up from unilateral thanking, and reciprocal thanking over three or more turns being implemented in calls that are particularly marked. Presumably because callers are in the vast majority of cases calling to request some form of action of the organization, be it merely verbal (as in the providing of information or advice) or more substantive, they appear to be normatively expected to initiate thanking. This means that agents are able to implicitly communicate the afore-mentioned apologetic stance merely by virtue of being the ones who initiates thanking in the closing section, but without uttering an actual apology token.

Participants thus seem to orient to different thanking patterns as devices which may be used either to mark the preceding interaction as an instance of “business-as-usual” or, if such is not the case, to restore interpersonal harmony or index awareness that aspects of the preceding interaction have otherwise deviated from situational expectations. Using thanking for this purpose can be seen as a well-motivated adaptation to the particular institutional context in which these calls take place. On the one hand, as noted in sect. 2 above, the callers are socially and economically disadvantaged tenants with a manifest interest in not jeopardizing the adequate and affordable accommodation that has been allocated to them by the organization. The agents, on the other hand, are comparatively low-paid workers in a relatively precarious market, working in an environment where calls are routinely recorded and monitored by management. Arguably, thus, both callers and agents have a clear motivation for developing interactional mechanisms that allow them to locally engage in and/or resolve various kinds of interpersonally sensitive activities without overtly flagging up these activities to third parties as potentially or actually problematic.

Transcription conventions

[beginning of overlap	/.../	phonetic transcription
=	latching	X	inaudible syllable
(.)	micropause	°...°	soft speech
(n.n)	pause timed in seconds	*...*	fast speech
CAPS	prosodic emphasis	^...^	loud speech
:	lengthening of preceding sound	<h>	audible outbreath
/	rising intonation	>h<	audible inbreath
\	falling intonation	@	laughter token
,	level intonation	<i>Italics</i>	feature commented on in the main text

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