‘THANK YOU’: HOW DO CONVERSATIONALISTS IN HONG KONG EXPRESS GRATITUDE?

Winnie Cheng

1. INTRODUCTION

The functional value of thanking has been examined over the years (see, e.g. Searle, 1969; Coulmas, 1981; Wolfson, 1981; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, 1995; Herbert, 1986; Mey, 1993; Jung, 1994; Stenström, 1994; Aston, 1995; Jacobsson, 2002; Wichmann, 2004). In Searle’s (1976) typology of speech acts, thanking is a paradigm case of an expressive which expresses a psychological state (the others being representative, directive, commissive and declaration). Thanking is considered to be an expression of gratitude or appreciation. As Searle (1969: 65) puts it, ‘When I thank someone, I imply that the thing I am thanking him for has benefited me (or was at least intended to benefit me)’. The functions of thanking include expressing genuine gratitude and, in the ritual role of closing service encounters (Hymes, 1971), stating appreciation and establishing and maintaining a polite and friendly social atmosphere (Leech, 1983). Stenström (1994) finds that the most frequent realisations of <thanks> in the London-Lund Corpus of Spoken English are, in descending order of frequency, ‘thank you’, ‘thanks’ and ‘thanks very much’. Other linguistic realisations include ‘thanks a lot’, ‘thanks awfully’, ‘thanks very much indeed’, ‘thank you so much’, ‘thank you very much’ and ‘thank you very much indeed’.

Previous studies on thanking have investigated a range of speech events in different contexts of communication. Herbert (1986), for example, examines a corpus of 1,062 compliment responses, by undergraduate students over a three-year period (1980–1983). With reference to Pomerantz (1978), Herbert (1986) distinguishes 12 types of compliment responses, which are grouped into 3 categories: agreement, non-agreement and other interpretations. Thanking is found primarily in
agreement, which includes Pomerantz’s appreciation token, comment acceptance, praise upgrade, comment history, reassignment and return. Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) survey native and non-native English speakers in the United States, and compare their thanking behaviours. They find that thanking, typically in the ritualised forms of ‘thanks’ or ‘thank you’ said to a bus driver or a cashier, is used to show gratitude, to compliment on someone and to signal the end of a conversation. They also find other speech acts, such as complimenting, reassuring and expressing surprise and delight, preceding or following thanking.

Jung (1994) identifies the basic functions of thanking and the responses to thanking in American English, namely, to express appreciation of benefits and to enhance rapport between interlocutors. Jung (1994) finds that thanking is also used in conversational opening and closing, topic changing, leave-taking and offering positive reinforcement. Jung also finds thanking function to express dissatisfaction or discomfort indirectly, often in sarcasm. Jung identifies six types of response to thanking, namely, acceptance, denial, reciprocity, comment, non-verbal gesture and no response. Aston (1995) examines the use of thanks in two corpora of naturally occurring service encounters between shop assistants and customers, recorded in English and in Italian bookshops in the mid-1980s, and finds that all the encounters involve a request of some kind, and often close with a sequence involving thanks.

Nakata (1989) compares English and Japanese apologies and thanks collected in movie and TV drama scenarios, based on a database of 400 apologies and 400 thanks in both English and Japanese. Nakata (1989) finds that Japanese are more likely to thank for voluntary assistance offered by the hearer, and to apologise for someone close to themselves than English speakers, and that Japanese thanking expressions include more versatile expressions that can be used both for apologies and for thanks, such as ‘sumimasen’ (Kimura, 1994). After analysing audiotaped conversations between a housewife in Tokyo and people she interacted with for a week, recorded in 1984, Kimura (1994) identifies five functions of ‘sumimasen’, as request marker, attention-getter, closing marker, regret marker and gratitude marker. Ide (1998) examines the functional and contextual meanings of ‘sumimasen’ in different public settings in Japan, and adds two more functions for ‘sumimasen’: sincere apology and quasi-thanks plus apology. Suggesting that the seven functions of ‘sumimasen’ can overlap with each other, Ide (1998) argues that ‘sumimasen’ functions not only in a remedial and supportive manner in discourse, performing pragmatic and ritualistic functions that extend beyond conveying the semantic meaning of regret or gratitude, but also as one of the ritualised formulae used in Japanese society to facilitate public face-to-face interaction.

Schauer and Adolphs (2006) explore the similarities and differences between the data obtained from a discourse completion test (DCT) (House and Kasper, 1987; Blum-Kulka et al., 1989) and corpus data (the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse in English, CANCODE). Their study compares a DCT with 8 scenarios with 16 native speakers, focusing on the expression of gratitude, and concludes that the DCT data contain a greater variety of interactional formulaic