

It's No Problem to be Polite: Change in Apparent Time in Responses to Thanks

An ostensible tendency of young people to use the phrase *no problem* as a response to *thank you*, instead of *you're welcome*, is a frequent topic of complaint from prescriptivists and language peevers; remarks like “it feels like a culturally significant obliteration of the difference between giving and demanding” (Noë 2015) are not atypical. Despite the public attention, however, this variable has been the subject of remarkably little variationist research; and what empirical research has been conducted on responses to thanks in English (e.g., Schneider 2005, Mulo Farenkia 2012, Rüegg 2014, Bieswanger 2015) has used relatively small data sets and ignored the possibility of change in progress.

This paper reports a rapid and anonymous study of responses to thanks, with data collected by 74 undergraduates in Toronto as an assignment for an introductory sociolinguistics class. Students were instructed to ask strangers in various parts of the city for directions to nearby locations, and, upon being given directions, to say *thanks*, *thank you*, or *thank you very much* in order to elicit a response. A total of 1,537 elicitations were conducted in this way (including 281 elicitations that yielded no spoken response); data are analyzed using Rbrul (Johnson 2009).

Overall, 31% of responses are *no problem* and 41% are *you're welcome* (including related variants such as *no prob* and *you're very welcome*). As expected, change in apparent time toward *no problem* is observed; an increase in estimated speaker age by 10 years corresponds to a decrease in log-odds of *no problem* by approximately 0.45.

There is a significant interaction between age and the degree of elaborateness of the thanks expression. For younger speakers, *thanks*, *thank you*, and *thank you very much* all have about the same effect, each eliciting *no problem* around 40% of the time. For older speakers, *no problem* remains as a response to *thanks* but is strongly disfavored by the more elaborate expressions; among speakers over 35, this factor is the strongest predictor of *no problem*. *No problem* may be contrasted in this regard with responses like *okay* and *uh-huh* (collectively about 13% of spoken responses)—variants whose overt function is to merely acknowledge the act of thanking rather than resolve the social indebtedness of the thanker (Schneider 2005, Bieswanger 2015). These mere acknowledgements are strongly favored by *thanks* and disfavored by *thank you very much*, and this conditioning does not interact with age or weaken over apparent time.

The interaction between age and thanking expression may explain the intensity of the negative attention *no problem* attracts in popular media: older speakers appear to use *no problem* as a less polite variant than *you're welcome*, suitable principally as a response to more perfunctory expressions of thanks; younger speakers have no such restriction. The change in progress, therefore, is not merely a constant-rate change in the frequency of one variant over another, but a functional change in the level of politeness associated with the variant; as a response to thanks, *no problem* is changing from perfunctory to polite.

References:

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