

Original Paper

Thank You: A Study of the Types and Functions of Speech Acts

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Abstract

"thank you" is the most frequently used language of thanks in modern Chinese, which is often used to implement the speech act of thanks. It is not only a polite expression, but also involves more complex language functions and social significance. Starting from the speech act theory, this study examines the types of the speech act of "thank you". The results show that in Chinese, "thank you" mainly shows several speech act types, such as gratitude, rejection, politeness and so on. With the help of the analysis of corpus data, the study also shows the frequency of "thank you" in different contexts, and it is concluded that "thank you" is used to express gratitude most frequently, followed by refusal, politeness, mantra, irony, expulsion, order, reminder, and finally warning and threat. On the one hand, this study provides empirical support for understanding the speech act of "thank you". On the other hand, it can also provide reference for cross-cultural communication and language teaching.

Keywords

Thank you, thank, Speech act

1. Introduction

In daily communication, "thank you" is a very common speech act used to express gratitude, recognition or apology. As a polite expression, "thank you" can not only convey the speaker's positive emotions, but also lubricate interpersonal relationships in social interaction. However, although "thank you" is very common in language use, its speech act types and manifestations in different contexts are still worthy of in-depth study. In Mandarin, the common words of thanks are "thank you", "hard work" and so on. Usually, the party receiving the help expresses gratitude to the party providing the help, and the other party often responds with humble words (Lv Yongbing, 2015).

Speech act theory believes that speaking consists of two parts, one is used to convey information, and the other is directly used to do things, that is, speaking is doing things, and communication activities are composed of a series of speech acts (Liu Yunting, 2008). Speech act theory, as the core paradigm to explain the function of language communication, profoundly reveals the internal unity of discourse and behavior. Austin classified speech acts into five categories. The first category is adjudication; The second category is the power exerting category; The third category is commitment; The fourth category is expression; The fifth category is the logical category - the process of making discourse fit the argument

and dialogue (Austin, 1962).

Thanks belong to the fourth category of expression, which expresses the speaker's psychological attitude or state, such as joy, sadness, likes or dislikes. For example: Thank you so much, but for your help, I really don't know what to do. This sentence shows that the speaker is grateful for the help of others.

Through the observation of 1000 pieces of "thank you" spoken language corpus in the Chinese Linguistics Research Center (CCL) corpus of Peking University, I noticed that the expression of "thank you" not only played a central role in the implementation of the speech act of thanks, but also widely participated in the realization of other speech acts. The following content will analyze and discuss the expression of "thank you" with specific examples.

2. The Types of Speech Acts Directly Implemented by "Thank You"

A short sentence with the verb "thank you" as its core is a common polite expression of gratitude in modern Chinese. Its language expression structure generally has two usages: one is to describe the actual situation, and the other is to reflect the form and meaning of the language itself (Li Yufeng, 2023), the expression of "thank you" presents significant meta linguistic properties, and its core function is to directly represent the speech form "thank you" and the speech acts it performs.

When a person expresses gratitude to others, it means that he has noticed that others have helped him. The current social code of conduct is that once others have helped you, you have the responsibility to thank him. For example: (1) "Mr. Ma, thank you!" (two horses); (2) "That's nice! I'm here to thank the fourth grandma!" (four generations in one room, Part 1- perplexity) through the above cases, it shows that people are used to the speech act of "thank you". The following focuses on the types of indirect speech acts implemented by "thank you".

3. The Types of Indirect Speech Acts Implemented by "Thank You"

The speaker realizes other speech acts by using "thank you", which is actually an indirect speech act. According to Searle, in indirect speech acts, the reason why the speaker can convey other meanings beyond or different from the literal meaning of the discourse mainly depends on the background knowledge shared between the speaker and the listener. This shared knowledge includes both linguistic information and non-verbal information, and also requires the listener's general analysis and reasoning ability (He Ziran, Chen Xinren, 2002). Thank you is just a language form to express gratitude, but whether it has other meanings in specific communication still needs the judgment of both the speaker and the hearer.

Under this premise, "thank you", as a part of discourse, can also be said to be a "verbal means", and its role is actually functional and service. It cannot exist alone, but must cooperate with other components such as intonation, context, and subsequent sentences to serve the overall communicative intention of the discourse and truly realize this intention. In this way, a dynamic and mutually restrictive relationship is formed between the part and the whole:

On the one hand, the overall function will determine the interpretation of parts. The overall intention of the discourse can profoundly restrict the semantic expression of "thank you", and even push it to the point of fundamental deviation. For example, in the warning discourse of "thank you for your 'kindness', please don't interfere any more", the overall warning intention forcibly twisted the conventional meaning of "thank you", turning it from a "thank you" tool to an ironic negative preposition. At this time, its core function is not to express gratitude, but to strengthen the tone of the warning behind.

On the other hand, some components will in turn boost the realization of the whole: "thank you" will also play a positive role in the overall function of the discourse. By introducing a politeness framework, it can buffer the face threatening behaviors that follow, so that the overall refusal or warning intention can be realized more tactfully and more in line with social etiquette. This kind of "politeness attack" compound structure is constructed by the specific use of "thank you".

The following are the specific manifestations of the indirect speech act of "thank you":

3.1 Reject

In daily communication, "thank you", as a speech act, can not only express gratitude, but also realize other pragmatic functions through indirect ways. Refusal is one of the more common ones. This usage is not uncommon in language communication, especially when the speaker needs to politely express his refusal intention, "thank you" can often play a role in easing the tone. Refusal is essentially a "face threatening behavior" (FTA), and the "positive face" of the other party will be directly threatened. Directly saying "no" will appear rude and easily hurt the face of the other party. "Thank you" is different. As a "non-public politeness strategy" or "negative politeness strategy", it does not directly point out the refusal behavior, but creates emotional distance and buffer by expressing gratitude, and the threat to the face of the other party will be reduced. The following is an example sentence to illustrate: (1) "no, thank you! I don't want to." (RAO Shuo Yi "lady Chatterley's lover") in this sentence, "no" and "I don't want" have directly put forward the intention of rejection, but the insertion of the word "thank you" has played a role in easing the tone. Such expressions not only refuse, but also convey a respectful and polite attitude to the other party.

3.2 Courtesy

Example sentence (2) "how can I thank you?" the old lady was very disappointed. (Lao She's "Xiao Po's birthday") in this sentence, "thank you" does not directly express gratitude, but through rhetorical questions, it reflects the old lady's polite response to the help or kindness of the other party.

The politeness of "thank you" does not mean that the language has become empty, nor is it emotional hypocrisy, but the inevitable result of social interaction becoming more and more complex. This is a flexible and efficient pragmatic strategy, sublimated from the direct emotional expression, which bears multiple functions such as lubricating social relations and adjusting interpersonal distance.

3.3 Mantra

Example sentence (3) "she slept in my bed, which is beyond your permanent ability. Thank God!" (spare me the story of lady Chatterley's lover). In this sentence, "thank God" appears after the description of a

certain situation, which is actually an expression of sigh or sigh. This kind of expression is actually very common in daily communication, especially when it is necessary to express strong emotions or attitudes. Once "thank you" has become a mantra, its core has become "social habits and situational management". "Thank you" has gradually evolved from an emotional expression to a common mantra, which can be said to be the great impact of modernity on the development of language. It is a pragmatic tool developed in order to efficiently and safely complete daily interaction in a highly complex and mobile society of strangers.

3.4 *Expulsion*

Example sentence (4) "Miss, I thank you! Please go back! How can I get there?" (Lao She's "four generations in one room, Part 1- confusion)" the "thank you" here appears as an indirect speech act of expulsion, which just reflects the flexibility and strategy of language in communication. On the surface, the speaker is expressing gratitude, but in fact, he tactfully conveys the hope that the other party will leave.

The word "thank you" here serves as an indirect expulsion instruction. The word "thank you" here has gone beyond the simple lexical meaning and has become a multi-functional language tool. Through the analysis of this phenomenon, we can feel that the meaning of language is highly dependent on the context, and successful communication lies not only in "what to say", but also in "how to say" in the specific social and cultural conventions.

3.5 *Sarcasm*

Example sentence (5) "if President Shen really gave me a face, I would like to thank him and not live up to his kindness." Zhang Xiaorong's words didn't matter, but annoyed his fellow countrymen. (xiangkairan's sequel to the study of foreign history in the East) on the surface, he seems to be expressing his gratitude to President Shen, but in fact, this expression is full of irony. From this sentence, we can understand that this is a move with some purpose or bad intentions.

The use of this implicit and sharp expression is in line with the Chinese preference for indirect communication. This is a "face" game. It is a compromise between "tearing the face" and "swallowing the anger". It not only implements the attack, but also retains the surface etiquette. It is a delicate "face" offensive and defensive war.

3.6 *Reminder*

Example sentence (6) "thank me for going. I love her, but she doesn't recognize me. I'm also in vain." (a dream of Red Mansions by Cao Xueqin) the context in which this sentence appeared was after Sister Feng explained in detail the difficult situation Tanchun would face in the future as a concubine's daughter. She has paved the way so much to highlight how difficult it is to appreciate and maintain Tanchun. The "thank you" here is not to wait for a ceremonial thank you, but rather to express "you should now clearly realize how rare and important my support and love for Tanchun is."

"Thank you" indirectly and politely accomplishes the reminding function of "urging", "prompting for performance" or "correcting deviation" by implementing a superficial act of gratitude, which profoundly

reveals the core wisdom of language communication. It is not only a simple politeness, but also a highly strategic indirect speech act.

3.7 Command

Example sentence (7) "thank you, don't say any more!" said Sun Jiu Chia. (Qian Zhongshu's *Fortress Besieged*) literally, this sentence seems to be thanking while making a request; But once returned to the context at that time, the "illocutionary force" it really conveyed was a rather tough stop order. "Thank you" here does not assume the function of thanking, but acts as a kind of negative ceremony with polite color. When it is used to implement the indirect speech act of "command", its nature has also changed. The "thank you" that originally expressed the fact that has happened has now turned into a "command" that points to future actions.

3.8 Warnings and Threats

Example sentence (8) "thank you for your kindness. Please mind your own business!" (Mao Dun's *Rainbow*)

"Thank you" in the above context has completely stripped off gratitude and become an aggressive pragmatic strategy. The use of guidance is the key. It clearly determines the so-called "good intentions" of the other party as "good intentions" with ulterior motives.

From the perspective of pragmatic function, it implements two kinds of behavior at the same time. The first is warning, which clearly points out that the other party's behavior has crossed the boundary; The second is the threat, implying that if the other party continues to "meddle", it may lead to conflict.

4. Statistics and Analysis of Speech Act Types of "Thank You"

Based on the collected corpus, we have carefully sorted out and counted all speech act types involved in the expression of "thank you". The relevant results are as follows.

From the statistical data, it can be clearly seen that, first of all, "thank you" occupies 47.1% of all the cases as a function of simply expressing gratitude, which shows that its core purpose is to express gratitude. Secondly, from the perspective of the distribution of "thank you" at the beginning, middle and end of a sentence, the number of cases expressing the function of thanks shows a decreasing trend. In addition, the function of expressing rejection accounted for 15.5%, expression of politeness accounted for 12.3%, expression of mantra accounted for 9.7%, expression of irony accounted for 7.3%, expression of expulsion accounted for 4.1%, expression of command accounted for 2%, expression of reminder accounted for 1.2%, while the proportion of expressing warning and threat was the lowest, only 0.9%. In each type, the proportion of "thank you" appearing at the beginning of a sentence is relatively high, followed by the middle and the end of a sentence, which is related to people's expression habits.

The diversified speech act functions of the Chinese phrase "thank you" fully reflect the profound contextual flexibility and sophisticated pragmatic logic of modern Chinese daily discourse, successfully breaking the long-standing academic and public stereotype that polite formulas merely serve simple emotional expression and interpersonal courtesy. The obvious frequency differences among the ten

categorized speech act types in this corpus investigation strongly demonstrate that the pragmatic connotation, illocutionary force, and communicative value of “thank you” are never static or fixed by its literal lexical meaning. Instead, they are dynamically generated, adjusted, and reconstructed under the joint influence of specific communicative contexts, syntactic sentence positions, prosodic features, and bilateral interactive intentions between speakers and listeners. The dominant high-frequency gratitude function, which accounts for nearly half of all corpus instances, firmly consolidates the fundamental pragmatic status of “thank you” as the most conventional and universal polite expression in modern Chinese social interaction. Meanwhile, various low-frequency indirect speech acts, including polite refusal, formal courtesy, habitual mantra, verbal sarcasm, interpersonal expulsion, behavioral reminder, mandatory command, and contextual warning and threat, fully illustrate how fixed formulaic language can actively adapt to increasingly complex and subtle interpersonal communication demands. In diverse scenarios ranging from casual daily conversations and classic literary dialogues to formal social negotiations, Chinese speakers tactfully transform the original grateful meaning of “thank you” into multiple pragmatic strategies to balance interpersonal face relationships, ease potential conversational conflicts, moderate discourse tone, and achieve implicit communicative goals. This research outcome effectively remedies the limitations of traditional speech act studies, which often adopt oversimplified static analysis and neglect the contextual variability of polite language. It powerfully proves that daily polite vocabulary possesses abundant pragmatic potential and multi-dimensional behavioral functions, providing a solid empirical foundation and innovative theoretical perspective for future research on the contextual differentiation and pragmatic operation rules of indirect speech acts in modern Chinese discourse.

5. Conclusion

In view of the limitations of corpus size, the complexity of verbal communication and the high flexibility of language use, it may be difficult for us to classify and summarize the speech act of “thank you” comprehensively and accurately. However, the purpose of our research is to reveal that “thank you”, a very common and important language of thanks, is not only used to express gratitude, but also involved in the expression of a variety of other speech acts, and the realization of these speech acts is affected by their position in the sentence.

Based on the above findings, we hope to help Chinese native speakers better understand the multiple functions and semantic changes of “thank you”, so as to use the expression more smoothly. At the same time, these research results also provide useful reference and guidance for foreign students to learn and master the “thank you” in Chinese, and help them better understand and use this complex speech act.

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