

"Please accept my appreciation": A corpus-pragmatic investigation of thanking behaviour in British and American emails

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Previous work on expressions of thanks in English (Eisenstein and Bodman 1993, Aston 1995, Aijmer 1996, Schauer and Adolphs 2006, Wong 2010, Jautz 2013, Mosegaard Hansen 2016) has identified several functions beyond showing gratitude, such as mitigating the negative face threat of a rejection or dismissal (*thanks, but we won't need you*), or part of indirect requests, in the form of prospective thanks (*I'll thank you to..., thanks in advance for...*). Expressing thanks can be routine phatic work, as noted for example by Eisenstein and Bodman (1993:66)'s description of *thank you* used in American English as "social amenity rather than a genuine expression of gratitude", and Leech (2014:197) who observes in British English that "a large proportion of thankings, as of apologies, are cases where the utterance is highly routinized".

The increasing number of studies on pragmatic variation (e.g. Flöck 2011, Goddard 2012, Haugh and Schneider 2012, Murphy & De Felice in press) indicate significant differences in pragmatic behaviour across "native" English varieties. The small amount of work that has compared thanking in British English (BrE) and American English (AmE) has found differences in how expressions of gratitude are used. BrE, for instance, has been claimed to use *thanks* and *thank you* for additional non-gratitude functions that are not exploited in AmE: to mark points in an exchange (Hymes 1971) and to emphasize disapproval (Algeo 2006). Given that BrE seemingly has more functions for *thank(s)*, one might predict that *thank** would be more common in British English. However, AmE speakers use *thank** far more than BrE speakers in corpora of spoken English (Biber et al. 1999) and web-based English (Davies 2013).

The present study offers a systematic examination of thanking expressions in British and American corporate email corpora (the Enron and COBEC corpora: Styler 2011, De Felice & Moreton 2015), echoing previous research on *please* in the same corpora (De Felice & Murphy 2015, Murphy & De Felice in press). In these corpora, we search for a range of relatively direct thanking expressions, including: *thank**, *grateful*, *gratitude*, *appreciat**, *cheers*, *ta*, *thx*. The emails are then coded for rate of thanking expressions, while individual thanking utterances are blind double-coded on several dimensions, including:

- form of expression (*thanks, thank you, I appreciate*, etc.)
- intensification (e.g. *thanks very much*)
- presence / absence of direct address (*thank you, Ruth*)
- recipient (2nd person *you*; 3rd person, e.g. *thanks to the Alpha team*)

- position (in opening, body, or closing of email)
- part of speech (verb, interjection)
- retrospective (gratitude) versus prospective (indirect request) usage
- object of gratitude (e.g. material, time, action)
- inclusion of object in thanking clause (e.g. *thank you for the reminder*)
- presence of more than one thanking utterance in same email

Preliminary analysis of 8729 emails confirm the “Americans thank more” claim for the business email genre: 49% of American emails include thanks versus 31% of British ones. However, the data also show that BrE displays a broader range of thanking expressions compared to AmE. For example, phrases using *appreciate* constitute 21% of BrE instances, but only 10% of AmE ones.

It has been proposed (Biber et al. 1999, Murphy 2016) that the disparity between British and American thanking rates may be attributed to a greater positive-face orientation (‘solidarity politeness’) in the US. In line with this, Tottie (2002) claims that Americans are more likely than the British to thank others for their time. Our data shows that, in this context, *thank you/thanks for your time* is a rare occurrence in both corpora; however, AmE writers are much more likely than BrE ones to thank their interlocutor for their help or assistance, both prospectively and retrospectively. BrE displays a wider range of actions and events for which gratitude is expressed, often pointing to material and retrospective actions (e.g. sending and reviewing documents, attending meetings, producing information).

These differences in the object of gratitude and related prospective / retrospective usage could be at least in part accounted for by the use of (and stereotypes about) *please*, the other canonical “magic word” of politeness in these two varieties. Anecdotally, speakers of one variety are alert to differences in use of these words in the other variety, cf.

- (1) I often complain that Americans rarely say “Please” but boy do they take “Thank you” seriously (British expatriate in the US; <http://pondparleys.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/americans-brits-always-offending-each.html>)
- (2) Yet while ‘**thank you**’ is still important to civilized discourse, I find that ‘**please**’ has almost the opposite effect in American English. (<http://dialectblog.com/2012/05/13/impolite-please/>)

Recent work on corporate emails (Murphy and De Felice in press) has confirmed these impressionistic accounts, reporting a lower use of *please* in AmE together with a greater variety in the phrasing of AmE requests compared to BrE. We suggest that *thanks/thank you* occurs more in AmE because it acts as a polite request marker in lieu of *please*. This may also help account for why the form of thanking is more invariant in AmE.

Further differences emerge from the written nature of the data. For example, while in spoken BrE, Aijmer (1996:59) notes that thanking is “almost mandatory” in closing business telephone conversations, in the BrE corpus *thanks/thank you* is far more likely to open than close an email. The

opposite is true in the AmE data, where, for instance, around 75% of instances of *thanks/thank you* are found in the closing of the email.

The analysis allows us to address the question of whether stereotypes of a greater positive-face orientation in AmE are warranted across interactional genres. It also highlights the interconnected role of politeness markers seemingly associated with different speech acts, which is more clearly identified by corpus investigation.

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