# The act of thanking: A pragmatic study of speech act to speech action transition

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**Abeer Al-Ghazo**

*Department of English Language and Literature, Ajloun National University, Jordan.*
*Email: fares.abeer@yahoo.com*

## ABSTRACT

The force behind illocutionary speech acts is a complex concept that plays a crucial role in communication. By studying this concept, learners can gain a deeper appreciation for the power of language and the importance of effective communication in their daily lives. This study investigated the common thanking strategies used by Jordanian EFL learners in different situations. Using an 8-item Discourse Completion Test (DCT), 35 EFL learners (male and female), who studied at the Department of English Language and Literature at Ajloun National University, participated in this study. The learners were asked to write down what they identified as thanking expressions, similar to what they would say in their real-life situations. When the DCTs were finished, the kind of thanking expressions were categorized based on Cheng's taxonomy of gratitude expressions which included eight strategies: thanking, appreciation, expressing positive feelings, repayment, recognition of imposition, apology, alerting and other expressions that did not belong to the mentioned strategies. The frequency and percentage for each strategy were quantified. The results confirmed that most EFL learners used simple thanking expressions either in formal or informal situations. It was also found that aside from Chen's taxonomy-based thanking schemes, the participants also used combined strategies such as Thanking + complimenting/ Thanking +giving appreciation+ expressing delight/ Thanking by stating the reason/ Expressing surprise+ thanking / Thanking+ offering promise, and Thanking + Repayment. Future studies need to be conducted to investigate the difficulties faced by EFL Learners in using speech act of thanking.

**Contribution/Originality:** This study contributes towards exploring the pragmatic force of thanking expressions performed by EFL speakers. It sheds light on the importance of expressing gratitude as a way to show appreciation among EFL Jordanian students.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The speech act concept was first introduced by Austin (1962) in his book 'How to Do Things with Words', which explained the power to perform actions through language. It is a crucial concept in communication that can greatly impact our lives. Understanding the force behind speech acts can help us communicate more effectively and avoid misunderstanding. An understanding of speech acts is essential for effective communication. By recognizing the type of speech act being used, we can better interpret the speaker's intention and respond accordingly. Speech act can have a profound impact on our lives, from legal proceedings to everyday interactions.

By understanding the force behind speech acts, the power of language is appreciated. Halupka-Rešetar (2014) explains that the speech acts theory explores how the speaker can use language to fulfill intended aims and how hearers can understand the exact meaning of the conversation. Many language experts (Austin, 1962; Jung, 1994; Levinson, 1983; Schiffer, 1972; Tsui, 1994; Yule, 1996) have investigated and analyzed the force of speech acts which include five main types: assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declaration. Assertive is a statement that can be true or false, such as 'the sky is blue'. Directives are requests or commands, such as 'please pass the salt'. A commissive is a promise or commitment, such as 'I will meet you at 2 pm'. An expressive is an expression of feelings or attitudes, such as 'I am sorry for your loss'. Declarations are statements that bring about a new state of affairs, such as 'I now pronounce you husband and wife' (Searle cited in Levinson (1983)).

By understanding the different types of speech acts, people can better interpret the speaker's intention and respond appropriately. It can also help people communicate more effectively by using the appropriate type of speech act in a given situation. Through learning the language expressions such as expressing compliments, gratitude, agreements, disagreements, requests… etc., the learners can better interpret the speaker's intention and respond appropriately. Gratitude is another speech act that has a powerful force to transform our lives and the lives of those around us. When people thank someone, they are acknowledging their kindness, generosity, or help, and they are also recognizing the value they have brought into their lives (Gass & New, 2006). Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) have identified gratitude as an illocutionary act. They indicated that an expression of gratitude is: *"An illocutionary act performed by a speaker which is based on a past act performed by the hearer. This past act benefits the speaker and the speaker believes it to have benefited him or her. The speaker feels grateful or appreciative, and makes a statement which counts as an expression of gratitude"* (p. 167).

Expressing gratitude is not only a way to show appreciation, but it also has numerous benefits for our mental health, relationships, and overall well-being. In this paper, the power of gratitude was explored and shown how to cultivate it in our daily lives. Expressing gratitude can be a powerful tool for encouraging positive behavior. Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, and Schkade (2005) believed that showing thankful expressions can assist the general public to handle stressful circumstances healthier, and to reinforce social contacts (as cited in Yusefi, Gowhary, Azizifar, and Esmaeili (2015)). Jung (1994) showed that gratitude expressions have the "effect of enhancing rapport between the interlocutors". He also indicated that "these kinds of gratitude expressions may serve different functions depending on the context such as "conversational openings, stopping, leave-takings and offering positive reinforcement" (p. 20).

Thanking someone may seem like a simple task, but there is an art to doing it properly. It is not just about saying 'thank you,' but also about expressing genuine appreciation for what the person has done. This can be achieved through thoughtful words and actions that show the recipient how much their efforts are valued. Thanking someone is more than just a polite gesture. It is an opportunity to express genuine appreciation and strengthen relationships. One tip for expressing gratitude in a meaningful way is to be specific which means that instead of simply saying 'thanks for everything,' try to identify specific things that the person has done that you appreciate. For example, "I really appreciate that ". Another tip is to be timely, don't wait too long to express your thanks, as it may lose its impact, and don't underestimate the power of a handwritten note or small gift.

Thanking speech act responses from students can be an effective way to encourage their positive behavior. By acknowledging and validating their responses, teachers can help create an environment of mutual respect and appreciation. This can lead to improve student engagement and better academic outcomes. Many researchers and language experts have investigated and analyzed the positive impact of practicing gratitude on our lives. Expressing gratitude has been shown to have numerous benefits for individuals, including improved relationships with others. When people or learners express their gratitude to someone, it helps them feel appreciated and valued, which can lead to stronger connections and a sense of belonging. In addition, expressing gratitude has been linked

to increased positivity and better mental health. By focusing on the things, they are thankful for, they can shift their mindset towards a more positive outlook(Faqe, Jbrael, & Muhammad, 2019; Yusefi et al., 2015).

Siregar (2011), (cited in Dalilan (2012)) stated that thanking expressions serve many purposes: *"(a) to express the feeling of generosity at an act accepted by a speaker, (b) as a courtesy to maintain a relationship, (c) to praise, (d) to end a conversation, (e) to reject a gift or a present given by someone in a polite way"* (p:51) . Gratitude strengthens the relationships with others by increasing feelings of connection and empathy. When someone expresses gratitude towards others, he is more likely to receive gratitude in return, creating a positive cycle of appreciation and support. Brown and Levinson (1987) stated that positive politeness is used to meet the needs of speakers for approval. They also confirmed that "expressing thanks and its responses belong to the category of offending speaker's negative faces".  They consider the responses to thanks as minimizing the debt. (p.67). Eisenstein & Bodman,1993,( cited in Dalilan (2012)), also asserted that " thanking you " is not always a gratitude expression but can also serve as a compliment. Nofsinger, 1999, cited in Meiramova and Kulzhanova (2015) added that thanking expressions have their own cultural identity .

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Farnia and Suleiman (2009) examined thanking expression strategies of the Iranian EFL learners when expressing gratitude and compared them with those used by native speakers of Farsi and American speakers. Using a 14-item Discourse Completion Test (DCT), data were collected from two groups of Iranian EFL learners, i.e. at intermediate and advanced levels of language proficiency. The results revealed that the American respondents resorted to fewer strategies for expressing gratitude in comparison with the Iranian respondents. Moreover, there were no statistically significant differences in the type or use of strategies used by Iranian intermediate and advanced EFL learners.

Yoosefvand and Rasekh (2014) studied a cross-cultural investigation of the speech act of gratitude used by Persian and English speakers using a discourse completion test that introduced eleven natural situations The kind of thanking expressions were categorized based on Cheng (2005) taxonomy of gratitude expressions which included eight strategies. The findings showed that there were significant differences in the use of different kinds of thanking, positive feeling, repayment, and recognition of imposition strategies between the participants.

Morsi (2010) investigated different social and discourse functions of expressing thanks in Egyptian Arabic.  To achieve the purpose of the study, the researcher observed naturally occurring thanking and responses to thanking in Egyptians' everyday interactions. The kind of thanking expressions were analyzed into four categories: Appreciation of benefit, opening a conversation, closing a conversation and leave taking. The results of this study showed that the participants employed several strategies in responding to thanking expressions. They used "reiteration, redundancy and a plenitude of epigenetic expressions to show sincerity and gratefulness to the hearer" ( p. 5).

Faqe et al. (2019) investigated the most common thanking expression strategies by Kurdish EFL learners. To achieve the purpose of the study, the researchers used DCT as an instrument and ask the EFL learners to write down the words and phrases they used to thank others. The kind of thanking expressions were analyzed based on Cheng's (2005) taxonomy of gratitude expressions. The findings showed that the most frequently-used thanking expressions by Kurdish EFL learners were 'thanking, state of favor, and appreciation'.

Salayo (2021) examined the most common thanking expression strategies used by pre-service teachers and showed how the identified gratitude strategies built their identity. a 15-item Discourse Completion Test (DCT) is used to collect the needed data from 22 pre-service teachers in the Province of Cavite, Philippine.  An informal interview was conducted to validate the gathered data. The researcher analyzed the data through the use of Cheng's (2005) taxonomy of gratitude expressions. The results revealed that the most frequent conversational routines for thanking were found to be 'simple thanking'.

While much research has been performed to examine different types of speech act expressions such as expressing requests, permission, invitations, complaints, apologies, agreements, disagreements, and compliments, little attention has been paid to the expressions of gratitude. Therefore, this study focused on the speech act of thanking and expressing gratitude which strengthens our relationships with others by increasing feelings of connection and empathy. When people express gratitude towards others, they are more likely to receive gratitude in return, creating a positive cycle of appreciation and support. Consequently, the study aims to identify the most common strategies adopted by Jordanian EFL learners for issuing the speech act of thanking in certain situations and it tries to answer the main question: To what extent are Jordanian students able to respond to the speech acts of thanking?  It is hoped that this study will be of value to those who are interested in studying the pragmatic force of utterance performed by speakers.

Specifically, the present study was limited by the following: (i) The study focuses only on the speech act of thanking. (ii) For the main purpose of this study, the data was collected through Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs) of 35 EFL students in their fourth years at the Department of English Language and Literature, Ajloun National University, during the academic year 2022-2023.

### 2.1. Statement of the Problem

Expressing gratitude is an important speech act that can strengthen our social bonds and enhance our relationships.  Despite its importance, expressing gratitude can be difficult. There are many pragmatic difficulties and reasons why people struggle to thank others effectively and making it challenging to produce and express the speech act of thanking. Context plays a crucial role in the way people express gratitude. Different situations require different forms of thanking, and failing to adapt to the context can lead to confusion or miscommunication. For example, thanking someone in a formal setting may require a more elaborate expression of gratitude than thanking someone in an informal setting. Similarly, thanking someone in a different culture may require an understanding of their customs and traditions. Many studies showed that even advanced learners have difficulties adequately expressing gratitude (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993; Hinkel, 1994). Other studies have also showed that saying thank you is a problem for native speakers and second language learners who need to know when and how to thank in the target culture (Bodman & Eisenstein, 1988; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993). Hence, cultural differences can make it hard to know how to express gratitude appropriately. Linguistic barriers can also create challenges, as different languages may have different conventions for thanking. In addition, some people may find it hard to express their emotions or may feel awkward when thanking others. Therefore, by understanding these challenges and adopting strategies for overcoming them, we can improve the ability to thank others effectively and build stronger and more meaningful relationships.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were 35 EFL male and female students who studied at Ajloun National University and their native language was Arabic. All of them majored in English language and literature. Their age ranged from 19 to 23 years old. They were purposefully chosen to participate in collecting the needed data. They all had taken the course Conversation (1) in the second semester of 2022-2023.

### 3.2. Instrument

To identify the most common strategies adopted by EFL learners for issuing the speech act of thanking in certain situations, the data were collected through Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs). A DCT is a type of language questionnaire in which the participants are invited to give verbal thanking expressions and responses toward the situations given. They are asked to elicit what they think they would say in a given situation. This

questionnaire consisted of a total of eight situations that were designed based on different occasions that speakers might face in their daily lives. The cases involved different contexts to elicit the possible thanking responses that the learners might use. EFL learners were asked to use different thanking expressions about each of the following:

- To a friend who brought you a birthday present.
- To a friend who helped you carry a heavy bag.
- To a friend who offered to lend you some money you suddenly need.
- To a friend at the university who told you that he/she has organized a farewell party for you before you graduated.
- To a friend who took some letters to the post office for you.
- To a teacher who chose you for a very special award with a prize of $500.
- To a friend who said that you gave an interesting report at the meeting.
- To a friend who gave you a ride home.

### 3.3. Data Analysis

As soon as the DCTs were finished, the response types were categorized based on thanking strategies taxonomy proposed by Cheng (2005). The frequency of occurrence and percentage for each type were quantified.

1. Thanking

Participants say "thank you" in the following different ways:

a. Thanking by using "thank you" (Thanks a lot! Thank you very much!)

b. Thanking by using "thank you" and mentioning the favor (Thank you for your help!)

2. Appreciation

a. Thanking and using the word appreciate. (Thank you! I appreciate)

b. Thanking and promising. (Thank you! I will do my best)

3. Positive feelings

a. Thanking and stating the reason. (Thank you for your help!)

b. Thanking and farewell. (Thank you! Bye-bye)

4. Apology

a. Using apologizing words. (I am sorry!)

b. Apologizing and mentioning the favor. (I am sorry! I am sorry for being late)

c. Thanking and compensating. (Thank you! I will do your part next time)

d. Thanking and offering promise. (Thank you! I will do my turn next time)

5. Recognition of imposition

a. Acknowledging the imposition. (I know that you were not allowed to give me extra time!)

b. Stating the need for the favor (e.g., I try not to ask for extra time, but this time I need it!)

6. Repayment

c. Offering and promising. (Next time I will treat you)

d. Feeling indebted (I owe you next time)

7. Other Expressions

a. Small talk.

b. Leave-taking (Goodbye)

c. Joking (next time is your turn, don't forget)

8. Alerters

a. Titles and names (Mr, Dr, Azad, Sir)

b. Attention getter (really, well, Hey).

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Results Related to the Study Question

*To what extent are Jordanian students able to respond to the speech acts of thanking?*

The results of this question showed that there were 8 kinds of thanking expressions and 35 participants, giving the maximum frequency of 280 as shown in Table 1. After the data were collected by giving a discourse completion test (DCT), they were analyzed by coding the participants' responses and determining the kinds of thanking strategies used by Jordanian EFL learners according to the taxonomy proposed by Cheng (2005). The meaning of thanking expressions was analyzed and presented with all kinds of thanking expressions. Taxonomy-based gratitude/Thanking strategies of the respondents were given the highest percentage (88.57) as compared to the other combination strategies of (11.43).

**Table 1.** Frequency of all thanking responses types used by Jordanian EFL learners.

| Activity | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Taxonomy-based gratitude/Thanking strategies of the respondents | 248 | 88.57 |
| Taxonomy-based combination strategies | 32 | 11.43 |
| Total | 280 | 100 |

### 4.1.1. All kinds of Gratitude Strategies of the Respondents

There were eight kinds of thanking expressions used by Jordanian EFL students in different situations. These expressions can be categorized as thanking, appreciating, expressing positive feelings, apologizing, alerter, recognition of imposition, repayment, and other Expressions.

### 4.1.2. Taxonomy-Based Thanking Strategies of the Respondents

Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of gratitude strategies of the respondents according to Cheng's taxonomy, which shows that aside from Cheng's taxonomy-based thanking schemes showing the frequency/ percentage of (248/88.57%), the participants also used combined strategies with a frequency/percentage of (32/11.43%). Based on these responses, it was noticed that 170 responses meant thanking (60.7%), and 62 responses represented appreciation (22.1%). This means that these two types of strategies were the most usable thanking strategies utilized by Jordanian EFL learners. Learners used simple thanking, thanking by stating the favor such as thank you, thanks, thanks a lot, thanks a bunch, thank you for help, thank you for your great help, and many thanks. They also used appreciation expressions of thanking such as "I greatly appreciate your help", and "I'm so grateful for helping, I appreciate it.

**Table 2.** Frequency and percentage distribution of thanking strategies of the respondents according to Cheng's taxonomy.

| Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Thanking | 170 | 60.7 |
| Appreciation | 62 | 22.1 |
| Expressing positive feelings | 5 | 1.8 |
| Apology | 1 | 0.4 |
| Expressing repayment | 2 | 0.7 |
| Recognition of imposition | 2 | 0.7 |
| Alerter by using titles and names, and attention getter | 3 | 1.1 |
| Other (Expressions that do not belong to the mentioned strategies) | 3 | 1.1 |
| Subtotal | 248 | 88.57 |
| Taxonomy-based combination strategies | 32 | 11.43 |
| Total | 280 | 100 |

The data also revealed that the least usable thanking strategies utilized by Jordanian EFL learners was apology (0.4%), expressing repayment (0.7%), Recognition of imposition presents percentage (0.7%), Alerter by using titles and names, and attention getter (1.1%). Other expressions that did not belong to the mentioned strategies had 1.1%

and expressing positive feelings, (1.8%). These gratitude strategies appeared to be less preferred responses of the EFL learners as they received low frequency and percentage. Here are some examples of these kinds of thanking responses: "I am so grateful for your help"," I am sorry for doing that", and "I owe you one". To sum up, the findings showed that the most frequent strategies were simple thanking and appreciation. These results to some extent are similar to Salayo (2021) who found that the most usable thanking strategies used by teachers were 'simple thanking. Faqe et al. (2019) also showed that the most frequently-used thanking expressions by Kurdish EFL learners were 'thanking, state of favor, and appreciation'.

Table 3 presents the frequency and percentage distribution of thanking strategies (combination) of the respondents.

**Table 3.** Frequency and percentage distribution of thanking strategies (Combination) of the respondents.

| Category | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| Thanking + complimenting | 7 | 2.5 |
| Thanking +giving appreciation+ expressing delight | 5 | 1.78 |
| Thanking with intensifier | 7 | 2.5 |
| Thanking with intensifier + stating the reason | 4 | 1.42 |
| Thanking+ stating the reason | 3 | 1.07 |
| Expressing surprise+ thanking with intensifier | 2 | 0.71 |
| Thanking+ offering promise | 3 | 1.07 |
| Thanking + Repayment | 1 | 0.35 |
| Subtotal | 32 | 11.4 |
| Taxonomy-Based gratitude strategies | 248 | 88.6 |
| Total | 280 | 100 |

### 4.1.3. Taxonomy-based Combination Strategies

From the responses in the Table 3, it is shown that there were different combinations of thanking strategies. Two categories namely the use of thanking + complimenting and thanking with an intensifier received the highest percentage 2.5 % each, followed by thanking +giving appreciation+ expressing delight (1.78). Thanking with intensifier by stating the reason received the percentage (1.42). It was followed by Thanking+ stating the reason and Thanking+ offering a promise which received the percentage (1.07). While Expressing surprise+ thanking with an intensifier and thanking + repayment received the lowest percentages (.35 and .71).

These findings suggest that learners or anyone in the natural life can use other expressions besides saying thank you according to the situation and the context to deliver the message. Some of these expressions were stated in different situations like the following: Thank you so much/ Thank you for your help/Thank you, and you're my best friend/ Oh, really? Thank you very much/ Thank you for your present, it makes me happy/ Thank you. I will not forget your kindness/ thanks a lot for doing that for me/ thank you, I appreciate that/ thank you, it's great / thank you , I will give it back to you soon. Salayo (2021) indicated that although most learners used simple thanking expressions in giving a response, it was not enough without further expressions to express what they felt. The results showed that the combination strategies (apology + explanation / defensive mechanism/ alibi/ excuses/ repayment/ 'doubt / question+ thanking + repayment/ 'thanking + rewarding / blessing/ 'thanking + apology / regret / refusal / rejection'; 'thanking + praise upgrade' and 'thanking + words of encouragement / praise / return) received the frequency of 32 (11.4%).

To sum up, there were different ways of thanking found such as thanking itself, appreciating, expressing positive feelings, apologizing, alerter, recognition of imposition, and repayment. So, it can be said that different contexts play a crucial role in the way people express gratitude. Different situations require different forms of thanking, and failing to adapt to the context can lead to confusion or miscommunication. For example, thanking someone in a formal setting may require a more elaborate expression of gratitude than thanking someone in an informal setting.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Thanking is a speech act that involves expressing appreciation or gratitude towards someone for something he/she has done. It is a way of acknowledging someone's efforts and showing that we value his/ her contribution. The analysis of the data revealed that most EFL learners used different types of thanking expressions either in formal or informal situations. These expressions can be categorized as thanking, appreciating, expressing positive feelings, apologizing, alerter, recognition of imposition, repayment, and other Expressions. Moreover, it was noticed that learners used other expressions besides saying 'thank you' according to the situation and the context to deliver the message that suits different contexts and cultures such as Thanking + complimenting/ Thanking +giving appreciation+ expressing delight/ Thanking with intensifier + stating the reason/ Expressing surprise+ thanking / Thanking+ offering promise and Thanking + Repayment.

Thanking can take many forms, from a simple 'thank you' to a more elaborate expression of gratitude. It is an important speech act because it helps to build and maintain positive relationships. Expressing gratitude is an important speech act that can strengthen our social bonds, enhance our relationships and create a positive cycle of kindness and support. Finally, it is suggested that in order to establish the role and impact of thanking expressions to show appreciation, future studies are encouraged to focus on the difficulties and challenges faced by EFL Learners in using speech correctly according to the context and adopt strategies for overcoming them which are useful for the studies of foreign language teaching and learning.

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