



Thanking Expressions in Spoken Nigerian English: A Conversational Analysis

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Abstract. This paper investigates Conversational Routines of Thanking in Spoken Nigerian English. Everyday utterances are made through the use of language whether spoken or written. Thanking is prevalent basically in conversations. The selected speech acts for this study is thanking. Subjects for this study were drawn from three federal Universities from the South-South Region in Nigeria. They included: University of Uyo, University of Calabar and University of Port Harcourt. Data for this study were collected from three different speech interactions, namely: face-to-face conversations (FTFC), telephone conversations (TC) and vote of thanks (VOT). Data were collected through the use of a mini-tape recorder. Here, a Corpus of conversations were selected using purposive sampling method and surreptitiously collected from strategic points. This enabled the researcher to collect the Corpus in its original form. They were collected at different points where the students meet: lecture halls, hostels, canteens, relaxation centres among others. The framework for the analysis of this study is provided by the Speech Act theory. Frequency of the distribution between the male and female subjects, were calculated using the mean statistical method. This study found out that beyond the main functions of thanking, it also performs an array of other functions. Data have also revealed that the multilingual situation in Nigeria has affected the choices of language use, resulting in features such as code-mixing, slangs, Nigerian English-based pidgin, among others. This study has specifically shown that apart from classifying thanking as expressive speech act, it can further be classified as declarative, commissive and requestive speech acts. Therefore, this study concludes that with regard to thanking, the co-existence of English with other indigenous languages have given rise to linguistic patterns and forms, identifying Nigerian English as a distinct variety of the world Englishes.

Keywords: Conversational routines, Thanking, Spoken Nigerian English, Nigerian Identity, Speech Acts.

1. Introduction

Every speech community has its specific rules for interpreting messages communicated verbally or non-verbally. A speech community could be seen as a group of peoples who use a particular language or dialect in their everyday communication and interaction. Consequently, a particular speech act may have different values in different speech communities. Wardhaugh (2006) observed that “conversation involves much more than using language to make propositions” (p. 280). The author upheld that there exists an establishment of relationship with others when there are some forms of co-operation amongst members of the speech community for greater relationships through communication (Utin, 2016). In years past and in recent times, several studies have been carried out in the area of conversational routines. Aijmer (1996), Eggins & Slade (1997), Liu (2004), Murahata, G. (2018), Udoka, Enang & Utin (2018), Eskildsen (2021), Enang & Utin (2023), Coulmas, F. (2024), and others. These writers were concerned with varieties of English Language such as the national varieties of English like British English, American English, New Zealand English, Indian English, Singaporean English, Nigerian English among others.

However, in a situation where two or more languages come in contact, there is a tendency for cultural and linguistic interference. This is the case with Nigerian English with reference to conversational routines such as thanking. In this routine, there are transfer of some socio-cultural habits and traits expressed by Nigerian speakers of English. Issues like prostrating, kneeling down, bowing, hugging, smiling, praying for the person and many more are employed as way of showing gratitude or expressing thanks in Nigerian English. In addition, there are also the issues of introducing the Nigerian-English-based pidgin, use of slang, code-mixing/switching by Nigerian speakers of English to express thanks. Essien (1995) observed that code-mixing is “a result of languages in contact which exert influence on each other” (p.240). Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2007) in Utin (2017) observes that:

In Nigeria, code-mixing is now a common phenomenon both in Urban and Rural settings. It is more common in Urban areas due to the complexity, heterogeneity and density of the areas. Indeed, we are at the threshold of a language shift where the ability to speak an indigenous language continuously, for a minute, is a difficult test to pass for the Nigerian elites (p.38).

For instance, there are expressions such as “*Ehn! Thank you!*”, “*Walaihi! I’m grateful*” “Thanks very much”, for thanking expressions. Conversation amongst humans is as important as life itself. This is because without communication (Utin, 2016), life will be boring and the world itself would be a lonely place. Worthy of note is the fact that through conversation, we establish relationships with friends, spouses, colleagues and many more. It has been observed that the speech habits of any community cannot be fully ascertained without examining the linguistic routines of that language (Hymes, 1962). The source also observed that the analysis of routine includes, “Identification of idiomatic units, not only greeting formulas and the like, but also the conversational significance for an individual, group or whole culture” (Hymes, 1962, p.38). It has also been observed that in our everyday interaction, a great deal of communicative activity is experienced, consisting of enacting routines that make use of prefabricated linguistic units in a well-known and generally acceptable manner. The routinised repertoire of language thus plays an important function in language use and social organisation (Coulmas, 2024).

Moreover, in a socio-cultural context like Nigeria and with the diverse linguistic backgrounds, language use experiences a lot of influences. Some of these influences hinder the free flow of conversation. Sometimes, certain maxims are violated or flouted and also elements of politeness and appropriateness are grossly eliminated. Jaszczolt (2002) observed that “if the maxims are breached or ostentatiously flouted, the hearer infers that the speakers must have meant something else, that is, the speaker must have had some special reason for not observing the maxims” (p. 212). In breaching or flouting the maxims of conversation, the speaker causes the hearer to either understand or misinterpret what was intended. Consider these sets of conversations:

- A) You look good.
- B) Ehn! Thank you.

In the response by ‘B’ in (1), ‘B’ has flouted the maxim of relevance, by introducing the hesitation

pause ‘Ehn!’ The response by ‘B’ either shows that B is surprised or did not even realise that he/she looked good. It could also be understood as a surprise in the sense that A has never appreciated B.

- 2. A) Did you receive the gift that I sent?
- B) Oh! Yes, thank you so much, I appreciated the content
- A) Don’t mention (cuts in)
- B) So sorry that I forgot to say thank you. In fact, you are an angel.

In conversation 2, B acknowledges the fact that she received the gift with thanks. Not only that, B went on to offer her apologies for not expressing the gratitude earlier. In addition, B compliments A by saying “In fact, you are an angel”. In this conversation, by thanking, apologising and complimenting at the same time, B has violated the maxim of quantity by giving more information that was required. This agrees with Sperber and Wilson’s (1986) argument that giving more information than is necessary in the interpretation of a particular utterance may give the hearer room to make interpretations that were not intended. However, it should be noted that, through interaction, speakers generally use language in complex ways, and this often involves expressing several functions of language simultaneously. Such functions could include thanking; complimenting, requesting, commanding, regretting, apologising and so on. With reference to Jaszczolt’s (2002) observation, one of the special reasons for flouting or violating the maxims of conversational routines such as thanking, could be that the speaker never really intended to thank. Grice (1975) distinguished between the speaker secretly breaking them, e.g. by lying, which he termed violating the maxims, and overtly breaking them for some linguistic effect, which he called flouting. Also, from a linguist’s point of view, cases of flouting are more interesting than violations of maxims. For instance, irony can be seen as an example of flouting the maxim of quality, eg. telling an ugly friend: “You are the most beautiful friend I have ever had”; or when one says: “thank you indeed for the embarrassment”.

Furthermore, thanking expressions reside primarily within the speech act category of “expressives” (Ndimele, 1997, p. 123) and ‘behabitives’ (Austin, 1965 cited by Jaszczolt, 2002). The authors defined behabitives as that “which include the notion of reaction to other people’s behaviour and fortunes and of attitudes and expressions of attitudes to someone else’s conduct or imminent conduct” (p.160). The speech act of thanking is a post event act but may sometimes be used in anticipation of what is expected.

Thanking expresses the speaker's appreciation or gratitude to the hearer for an action that has been completed (Utin,2017). In the Nigerian context, "thank you" could also be used to acknowledge small favours such as helping someone to cross the road, when a customer receives his cash over the counter from the bank clerk. "Thank you" can equally be used when one rejects an offer. For instance:

3. A) Where are you heading?
 B) The market
 A) Can I give you a ride?
 B) No, thank you.

In conversation 3, B used "thank you" to dismiss the driver whose services she did not need. Here, the "thank you" served as a dismissive. Tsui (1989), see thanking at this level as "rejection finaliser". Thank you could also be used to show phatic communion as in:

4. A) How are you?
 B) Fine, thank you.

Here, *the thank* you has no other function than making the hearer feel good.

Beyond these, Aijmer (1996, p.53) has outlined the functional domain of thanking to include:

...acknowledging a major favour, acknowledging a favour such as being handed something, assuring a person of one's future gratitude, dismissing a person or person's services, accepting a proposal that the conversation should end, closing the conversation.

In the Nigerian context, thanking basically expresses gratitude for a favour done or yet to be done. For this reason, this research examined the speech act of thanking as a conversational routine in the Spoken English of Educated Nigerians.

2. Research Methodology

Data for this study were collected using a purposive sampling method through surreptitiously recording of sixty (90) conversations which include face to face, telephone conversations and additional ten (10) vote of thanks. The institutions selected for this study were, University of Uyo, University of Calabar and University of Port Harcourt. They were collected from academic blocks (lecture halls), hostels, relaxation centres on the campuses selected. The selection of the three federal universities gave the researcher a wide range to choose from as subjects were from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The conversations recorded

were listened to and the required speech act of thanking were isolated and analysed using frequency distribution between the males and the females and the mean distribution was calculated.

3. Theoretical Framework

Speech act is associated with a British Language Philosopher, known as J.L. Austin (1911-1960). Speech Act is an act performed by a speaker the moment he/she makes an utterance. As one of the working theories in pragmatics, Speech Act takes into consideration functions of utterance such as thanking, apologising, requesting, complimenting, commanding, promising, among others. Jaszczolt (2002) observes that:

The unit of linguistic communication is a speech act, not a sentence or utterance. This is an act that depends on the intentions of the speaker and the hearer... (p.294).

It, therefore, follows that, speech acts either assert a fact or do 'something', bring about some change to the world. As a result, Austin's terms for these two categories are performative utterances and constative utterances. While performatives refer to the act of doing, constatives refer to statements and assertions. Further categorisation of the performative result in explicit or implicit or primary, as Austin (1961, p.244, 1962, p. 69) called them. Explicit performatives contain verbs such as promise, warn, thank, reject, congratulate and apologise.

Moreover, implicit meaning refers to those meanings which are not clearly stated in word, but could be understood if the hearer discovers the three factors such as the situation, the shared previous knowledge or common cultural background between the interlocutors (i.e. the speaker and the hearer), and the linguistic context in which a particular expression occurs.

This sort of meaning is understood from the surrounding linguistic environment in which the utterance is made in social interactions at all levels of conversation and communication (Utin, 2016). As a result, the theoretical framework for the analysis of conversational routines is mainly provided by the Speech Acts theory.

4. Conversational Routines of Thanking

In a study comparing native and non-native speakers in Eisenstein and Bodman (1986), it was found out that even advanced learners of English had problems with thanking due to the idiomatic nature of the phrases, and socio-pragmatic constraints on their use (Bodman and Eisenstein 1988). In addition, in comparing

English with other languages, there are differences as regard who one says thank you to, when one says thank you, the settings in which thanking is expected, as well as the use of polite and appropriate expressions. Aijmer (1996) and Moji and Taofik (2011), for instance, asserts that “thank you/thanks is analysed on the speech-act level, as a politeness marker and as an element of organising the discourse” (p.33). It should be noted that in order to understand why some speech acts can be expressed in many ways, we must go beyond the illocutionary point of the specified speech act and consider its politeness or affective value. Thanking can serve as a booster to the one who engages in the act of kindness. Thanking or gratitude expressions come in different forms. It also enhances good communication (Utin 2016) among the interlocutors.

Eisenstein and Bodman (1986) observes that ‘thank you’ can be used ironically and can have the illocutionary function of accepting or rejecting an offer and signalling the conclusion of the conversation (p.168). From Goffman (1971), ‘thanks’ are small supportive rituals associated with politeness and good behaviour in the society.

In our society, thanking is associated with good behaviour, politeness, sound morals and the like, while failure to express gratitude could be seen as a negligence of responsibility, ill-mannered and rude. Consequently, one who fails to express gratitude as at when due has neglected a responsibility. Norrick (1978) argued that “gratitude expressions have a number of social functions depending on what the speaker wants to achieve by means of thanking” (p. 294).

Table 1: Thanking Expressions in Nigerian English

S/N	Functions	Type of Expressions	Frequency	Male	Female
1	Acknowledgment of Favour	Thanks for calling.	10	6	4
		Thanks a lot.	5	3	2
		Thanks a million.	54	23	31
		I want to say a BIG thank you	5	4	1
		We thank you for your concern	4	3	1
		May God bless you for your kindness.	4	3	1
		I thank you sincerely.	2	1	1
		I appreciate your (this) call, thank you.	9	3	6
		Thanks,...	75	32	43
		It's okay, thank you.	3	2	1
2	Expressing gratitude	Thanks so much and God bless you.	5	2	3
		I'm grateful.	10	3	7
		Indeed, we are grateful.	2	2	0
		My gratitude goes to...	1	1	0
		I'm very (most) grateful, please call again.	3	1	2
		We are earnestly grateful	3	1	2
3	Appreciating the object/person	I'm so so grateful, thanks			
		Thanks so much, I appreciate it.	5	2	3
		I appreciate all that you have done.	4	2	2
		I appreciate your kind gesture	4	2	2
4	Phatic function	I love it, thank you.	10	2	8
		I'm fine, thank you.	12	6	6
		It's okay, thanks.	4	1	3
		I'm good, thank you.	7	5	2
		Good to hear that, thanks.	3	1	2
5	Accepting the offer of Compliment	Good to hear from you, thanks.	5	2	3
		Thank you	17	7	10
		Thanks for your compliment	9	4	5
		Thank you very much	10	4	6
		Thank you, thank you and thank you	5	2	3
		Thanks a million	20	10	10
		Thanks very much.	5	3	2
6	Expressing annoyance	Thank you one, thank you all.	2	2	0
		Thanks for the insult	2	0	2
7	For rejection/refusal of offer	Thanks for wasting my time	3	1	2
		No, thanks	7	3	4
		Don't bother, thanks. I'm okay.	4	2	2
8	Anticipating favour (anticipatory)	I don't want it, thank you.	7	2	5
		I'm hopeful, o' thanks.	3	2	1
		Thank you (thanks) in anticipation.	2	1	1

		I hope I'll get it tomorrow, thanks.	3	1	2
9	Appreciating an Earlier received Favour	Thank you for yesterday.	5	2	3
		Thank you for that day.	3	0	3
10	Thanking as dismissive/expressing Satisfaction	It's okay, thank you.	5	2	3
		It's all right, thanks	10	3	7
11	Expressing delight	We are (highly) delighted, thank you (so much).	5	2	3
		I appreciate your kind gesture.	1	1	0
		I'm delighted, thanks.	4	3	1
12	Complimenting	You are wonderful, thank you.	5	1	4
		You do well sweetheart, thanks.	2	0	2
13	Acknowledging receipt of something/information	I got your text, thanks	9	3	6
		We received your compliments, thanks	3	1	2
		I received the goods, thanks so much.	5	3	2
14	Nigeria English-based pidgin	<i>You do well o, thanks</i>	2	2	0
		<i>Walachi, I'm grateful</i>	5	3	2
		<i>You do too much for me, thanks.</i>	4	1	3
15	Code-mixing/switching	<i>Ado ok, thanks</i>	6	2	4
		<i>I'm grateful, Nagode</i>	7	3	4
		<i>Imela...</i>	3	0	3
16	Reduplication	I'm very very grateful, thanks	6	2	4
		I'm really really grateful (delighted), thanks	3	0	3
		I'm so so thankful	5	2	3
17	Nigerian English	My heart is red	5	1	4
18	Use of Negation	I'm not ungrateful...	6	2	4
	Total		262	106	156

Table 2: Functions of Thanking Expressions in Nigerian English and their Respective Codes

S/N	Functions	Codes
1	Acknowledgment of favour	AF
2	Expressing gratitude	EG
3	Appreciating the object/person	AOP
4	Phatic function	PF
5	Accepting the offer of compliment	AOC
6	Expressing annoyance	EA
7	For rejection/refusal of offer	FR/RO
8	Anticipating favour	AF
9	Appreciating an earlier received favour	AERF
10	Thanking as dismissive/expressing satisfaction	TD/ES
11	Expressing delight	ED
12	Compliment responses	C
13	Acknowledging receipt of something/information	ARS/I
14	Nigerian English-based Pidgin	NEBP
15	Code mixing/switching	CMS
16	Reduplication	R
17	Nigerian English	NE
18	Using negation	UN

Table 3: Features Identifying the Functions of Thanking in Nigerian English and their Mean

S/N	Functions	Mean
1	Acknowledgment of favour	16
2	Expressing gratitude	3.33
3	Appreciating the object/person	5.75
4	Phatic function	6.2
5	Accepting the offer of Compliments	9.7
6	Anticipating favour	2.66
7	Appreciating an earlier received favour	5
8	Acknowledging receipt of something/information	5.66

5. Analysis of Features Identifying Functions of Thanking in Nigerian English

From the results presented in Table 3, it shows that acknowledgment of favour (AF) had the highest mean points of 16. This was closely followed by accepting the offer of compliments (AOC) with a mean point of 9.7. The next in this series was using thanking for phatic function (PF) with a mean point of 6.2, while appreciating the object/the person (AOP), had a mean point of 5.75. In addition, acknowledging receipt of something/information (ARS/I) had a mean

point of 5.66 while appreciating an earlier received favour (AERF) had a mean point of 4. Expressing gratitude (EG) and anticipating favour (AF), had mean points of 3.33 and 2.66 respectively. In summary, the results show that in Nigerian English, thanking is quite often expressed when acknowledging a favour and seldom expressed when anticipating a favour. This is sequel to the fact that acknowledging a favour had the highest mean point of 16 while anticipating a favour had a mean point of 2.66. All these put together results in a variety which has the Nigerian identity (Utin, 2023) making it distinct (Utin, 2017) from all the other varieties.

Table 4: Other Features Identifying Thanking in Nigerian English

S/N	Features	Mean
1	Expressing annoyance	2.5
2	For rejection/refusal offer	6
3	Thanking as dismissive/expressing satisfaction	7.5
4	Expressing delight	3.33
5	Compliment responses	3.5
6	Nigerian English– based Pidgin	3.66
7	Code-mixing/ switching	5.33
8	Reduplication	4.66
9	Nigerian English	5
10	Using negation	6

6. Analysis of Other Features Identifying Thanking in Nigerian English

The results presented in Table 4, show that thanking as dismissive/expressing satisfaction (TD/ES) had the highest mean point of 7.5, followed by signalling rejection/refusal of offer (FR/RO) and using negation (UN) with a mean point of 6 each. In addition, using code-mixed/switched (CM/S) expressions had a mean point of 5.33 while Nigerian English expression had a mean point of 5. Reduplication (R) is closely followed by complimenting (C) with mean points of 4.66 and 3.66 respectively. Finally, expressing delight (ED) and expressing annoyance (EA) had mean points of 3.33 and 2.5 respectively. At a glance, the results show that thanking as dismissive and expressing satisfaction (TD/ES) had the highest mean point of 7.5 indicating that Nigerians thank when they are expressing satisfaction or dismissing a conversational partner. Finally, expressing annoyance (EA) had the lowest mean point of 2.5 indicating the fact that despite using thanking for expressing annoyance, they seldom do this.

Table 5: Gender Influence on Thanking in Nigerian English

S/N	Functions/Features	Male	Female
1	Acknowledgment of favour	7.81	8.54
2	Expressing gratitude	1.3	2
3	Appreciating the object/person	2	7.5
4	Phatic function	3	3.2
5	Accepting the offer of compliment	4.57	5.14
6	Expressing annoyance	0.5	2
7	For rejection/refusal of offer	2.33	3.66
8	Anticipating favour	1.33	1.33
9	Appreciating an earlier received favour	1	3
10	Thanking as dismissive/expressing satisfaction	2.5	5
11	Expressing delight	2	1.33
12	Compliment responses	0.5	3
13	Acknowledging receipt of something/information	2.33	3.33
14	Nigerian English–based pidgin	2	1.66
15	Code-mixing/switching	3	3.66
16	Reduplication	2.33	3.33
17	Nigerian English	1	4
18	Using negation	2	4

7. Results of Gender Difference in the Use of Thanking in Nigerian English

Table 5, shows that acknowledgment of favour (AF) had the highest mean points with the female subjects having a higher mean point of 8.54 over the male subjects with a mean point of 7.81. Expressing

gratitude (EG) showed that the male subjects had a mean point of 1.3 while the female subject had a mean point of 2. For appreciating the object/person (AOP), the female subjects had a mean point of 7.5 while the male subjects had a mean point of 2 indicating that the female subjects have 5.5 greater than the male subjects. This result clearly indicates that females use

more of thanking expressions when they are appreciated or their objects are appreciated rather than the males. For phatic function (PF), there was a close gap between the male and the female subjects with mean points of 3 and 3.2, respectively. Also, for accepting the offer of compliments (AOC) the male subjects had a mean point of 4.57 while the female subjects had a mean point of 5.14. Expressing annoyance (EA), as a feature of thanking in Nigerian English shows that the male subjects have a mean point of 0.5 while the female subjects have a mean point of 2.

Furthermore, for rejection/refusal of offer (FR/RO), the male subjects had a mean point of 2.33 and the female subjects had a mean point of 3.66. For anticipating favour (AF), both the male and the female subjects had the same mean points of 1.33 each. For appreciating an earlier received favour (AERF), the result showed that the male subjects had 1, while the female subjects had a mean point of 3. Thanking as dismissive/expressing/ satisfaction (TD/ES), showed that the male subjects had a mean point of 2.5 while the female subjects had a mean point of 5. Also, expressing delight (ED) and compliment responses showed that the male subjects had 2 and 0.5 and the female subjects had mean points of 1.33 and 3 respectively. Acknowledging receipt of something/information (ARS/I), using Nigerian English-based Pidgin (NEBP), showed that the male subjects had mean points of 2.33 and 2 while the female subjects had mean points of 2.33 and 1.66, respectively. Code-mixing/switching (CM/S) and reduplication had 2 and 3.33 for the male subjects while 3.66 and 3.33 were the mean points for the female subjects in this classification. Lastly, Nigerian English (NE) and using negation (UN) had mean points of 1 and 2 for the male subjects while the female subjects had 4 points each respectively. In sum, the results showed that the female subjects had the highest mean point of 8.54 for acknowledgment of favour (AF), indicating that they are quick to acknowledge favours done to them. In addition, the lowest mean point was 0.5 for the male subjects in compliment responses (CR), meaning that the males rarely use thanking to respond to compliments. Finally, both the male and the female subjects had a tie of 1.33 mean points for anticipating favour (AF).

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has shown that thanking expressions do not restrict themselves only to the main functions that they are known for, but they also perform a variety of other functions. They feature in different forms of expressions depending on the

intention of the speaker. This study concludes that thanking performs an array of functions ranging from acknowledging a major or minor favour, accepting or rejecting offers, dismissing offers, anticipating favour, phatic functions, appreciating, acknowledging receipt of something/information, expressing delight, expressing annoyance and so on. As a result, when someone uses a thanking expression, it does not necessarily mean that the person is out-rightly thanking but that thanking may be used for other functions depending on the context, situation, relationship between the interlocutors, choice of language, shared previous background knowledge and many more. It could be said that the above issues determine the varieties and functions of thanking expressions in the different speech interactions. It was also observed that some subjects had to code-mix using indigenous languages, slang and pidgin expressions. It was shown that the female subjects had higher mean points in thanking in the selected speech interactions, indicating that they are quick to use thanking expressions than the males whether for the main or other functions.

This study reveals that there are various expressions peculiar to the speech acts of thanking in Nigerian English. Worthy of note is the fact that, frequent usages of these expressions by Nigerian speakers of English have made them part and parcel of Nigerian English. This study therefore concludes by corroborating other findings earlier cited, that there is a variety of English known as Nigerian English which has an identity culture distinct from all other varieties of Englishes and has peculiarities which are mainly Nigerian. It also shows that the co-existence of English with other indigenous languages have given rise to linguistic patterns and forms which gives it a distinct Nigerian identity.

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