It’s No Problem to Be Polite: 
Apparent-Time Change in Responses to Thanks

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Variation in responses to thanks (e.g., you’re welcome, no problem, don’t mention it) is the subject of much popular commentary, but little variationist research.

Prescriptivists object strenuously to a perceived change toward no problem (e.g., Seid 2011, Flanagan 2013, Blasingame 2014, Noé 2015, etc.). But empirical research on this variable has ignored the question of change in progress:

- Schneider (2005): questionnaire study with Irish, American, & English respondents; large differences between communities (e.g., England favors okay, US welcome)
- Mulo Farenkia (2012): questionnaire study of Cape Breton, N.S., university students; no problem by far most common variant
- Rüegg (2014): observational study of restaurant servers; you’re welcome favored at upscale restaurant and no problem untested, but very little data
- Bieswanger (2015): rapid anonymous study in NYC & Vancouver; you’re welcome favored in NYC, no problem infrequent in both

None of these studies examine age as a factor, or consider possibility of change.

This study: is no problem actually an innovation, as popular perception suggests?

Data: rapid anonymous study carried out by University of Toronto undergraduates, as assignment for LIN351: Sociolinguistic Patterns, while reading Labov (1972). Students are assigned to ask for directions from passers-by and business employees, and say thanks, thank you, or thank you very much to elicit response.

1537 total elicitations conducted over 3 academic terms in which class was taught—almost twice as many elicitations as all 4 studies cited above combined.

Dependent variable in this analysis; category of response:
- you’re welcome, including you’re very welcome, you’re most welcome, etc.
- no problem, including no prob, not a problem, no problo, etc.
- no worries, including don’t worry about it
- acknowledgements that don’t serve to “minimize the indebtedness” of the thanker (Bieswanger 2015), including yep, sure, uh-huh, okay
- miscellaneous other responses: don’t mention it, my pleasure, it’s okay, etc.
- no spoken response at all (nonverbal response may or may not be present)

Independent variables:
- prompt: thanks, thank you, or thank you very much
- apparent age (estimated to nearest 5 years, usually)
- apparent native-speaker status
- semester of data collection

Overall results:
- you’re welcome: 514 (33%)
- no problem: 325 (25%)
- no response: 281 (18%)
- acknowledgement: 156 (10%)
- no worries: 123 (8%)
- other: 78 (5%)

Overall results by age:

Logistic regressions, calculated using RBrul (Johnson 2009):

Factors significantly affecting use of any response (vs. non-response):

Non-response and mere acknowledgement are less polite than true thanks responses; both favored by less polite thanking expressions (cf. Okamoto & Robinson: 1997). Non-response and mere acknowledgement are both disfavored by younger speakers—perhaps a solidarity effect: students elicit more politeness from people their own age?
Factors significantly affecting **acknowledgement** (vs. all other spoken responses):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>log-odds</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>male</td>
<td>+0.228</td>
<td>568</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>female</td>
<td>-0.228</td>
<td>688</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Factors significantly affecting **no problem** (vs. you’re welcome, no worries, & other), including significant interactions with age:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>log-odds</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11/2013</td>
<td>+0.68</td>
<td>+0.026</td>
<td>731</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6/2015</td>
<td>+0.080</td>
<td>-0.000</td>
<td>148</td>
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<tr>
<td>3/2015</td>
<td>+0.788</td>
<td>-0.026</td>
<td>421</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intercept</td>
<td>+0.818</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **No problem** is favored by younger speakers, as expected
- Slope of age correlation much steeper in spring 2015 than 2013 for some reason

Younger speakers use **no problem** equally for all thanks expressions; older speakers strongly **disfavor** it for thank you and thank you very much:

- **No problem** is **favored by younger speakers**, as expected
- Slope of age correlation **much steeper in spring 2015** than 2013 for some reason
- **Younger speakers use no problem equally for all thanks expressions**; older speakers strongly **disfavor** it for thank you and thank you very much:

This means the **status of no problem** has changed:
- for older speakers **no problem** is a **less polite response**, suitable for less polite thanks; for younger speakers it has **become suitable for more polite contexts**.

This might explain the **intensity of the prescriptive reaction against no problem**—perceiving young people as using a **less polite variant** when a polite one is called for.

**No worries** is also **increasing in apparent time** (log-odds = –0.023 per year of age).

**No worries/no problem** both in category of **minimizing the favor** (Schneider 2005); perhaps that **strategy** of thanks response is target of change in progress?

Even so, **no worries/no problem** have different **degrees of politeness** for young speakers; so politeness is determined at the level of individual variant, not general strategy.

Regression models allow comparison with Bieswanger (2015) in NYC and Vancouver: both show much higher rate of “acknowledgement” responses than Toronto, but Toronto’s ratio of **you’re welcome:no problem** resembles Vancouver.

Future plans for this data: look for effects of **areas in Toronto** where data was collected.

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**References:**


