

## 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*): 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, Noë 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* unattested, 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; code results for various factors and then submit via spreadsheet or online form.

**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.

Term	Students	Elicitations
Fall 2013	34	734
Spring 2015	30	603
Summer 2015	10	200

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 problemo*, 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)

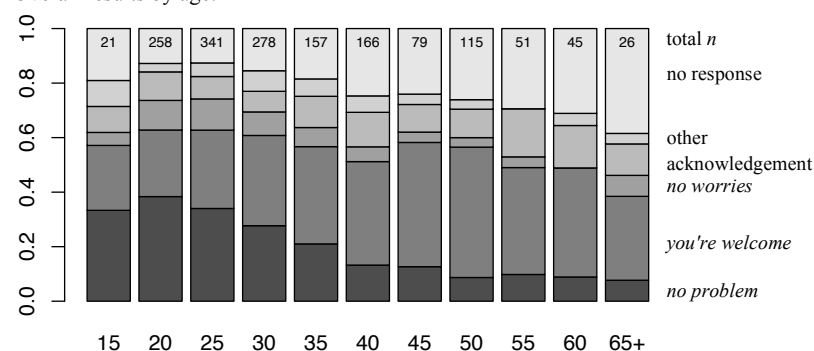
Independent variables:

- **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
- **apparent gender**
- **apparent ethnicity**
- **passer-by/employee** status

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):

Age	log-odds
per year	-0.033

Ethnicity	log-odds	n
black	+0.438	177
south Asian	+0.385	128
white	+0.287	786
east Asian	-0.217	364
Latino	-0.226	39
other	-0.586	43

Native speaker?	log-odds	n
yes	+0.237	1170
no	-0.237	367

Prompt	log-odds	n
<i>thank you very much</i>	+0.334	302
<i>thank you</i>	-0.083	796
<i>thanks</i>	-0.251	439

intercept: +2.501

**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**):

Age	log-odds
per year	+0.023

Gender	log-odds	n
male	+0.228	568
female	-0.228	688

Prompt	log-odds	n
<i>thanks</i>	+0.356	352
<i>thank you</i>	+0.041	643
<i>t.y. very much</i>	-0.397	261

intercept: -3.065

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

Age	log-odds
per year	-0.05

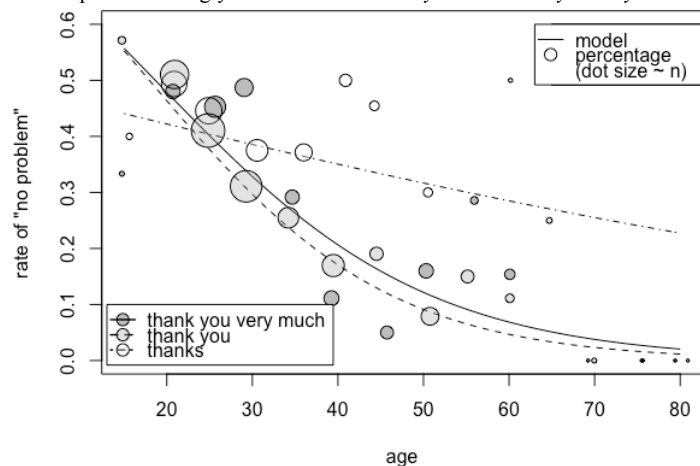
Speaker status	log-odds	n
passer-by	+0.148	672
employee	-0.148	428

Date	main	× age	n
11/2013	-0.868	+0.026	531
6/2015	+0.080	-0.000	148
3/2015	+0.788	-0.026	421
intercept	+0.818		

Prompt	main	× age	n
<i>thanks</i>	-0.829	+0.035	298
<i>t.y. very much</i>	+0.358	-0.013	239
<i>thank you</i>	+0.471	-0.022	563

- *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*:



But younger speakers **do** distinguish between thanking expressions for **other responses**: more polite thanking expressions favor *you're welcome* ( $\Delta$ log-odds = +0.64), and disfavor *no worries* ( $\Delta$ log-odds = -0.95).

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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