

# **Thanking Strategies of Gratitude Expressions in English Produced by Americans and Chinese Indonesians in Surabaya: Now and Then**

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There has been a strong assumption and a number of research indicating that Americans are more generous and direct than Asians in producing gratitude expression (Apte, 1994, cited in Cheng, 2005, and Kuntjara, 2003). However, as English has penetrated almost all layers of society, it is very possible for this phenomenon to change. This research focuses on the thanking strategies of gratitude expression in English produced by five native speakers of English (Americans) and five nonnative speakers of English (Chinese-Indonesians) in Surabaya. The data was collected from role plays adapted from Eisestein and Bodman (1983), Cheng (2005), and the researchers' in order to cover more various settings. The researchers used Haverkate's theory (1984, cited in Aijmer, 1996, p.37) on the eight strategies of gratitude expression to analyze the data. The finding reveals that both Americans and Chinese Indonesians mostly used the explicit strategy in expressing gratitude. Interestingly, the Americans used the explicit strategies less frequently than the Chinese Indonesians. This research signifies that ethnicity is not the only factor affecting gratitude expression as other potential factors namely language exposure and attitudes toward both cultures also play important roles.

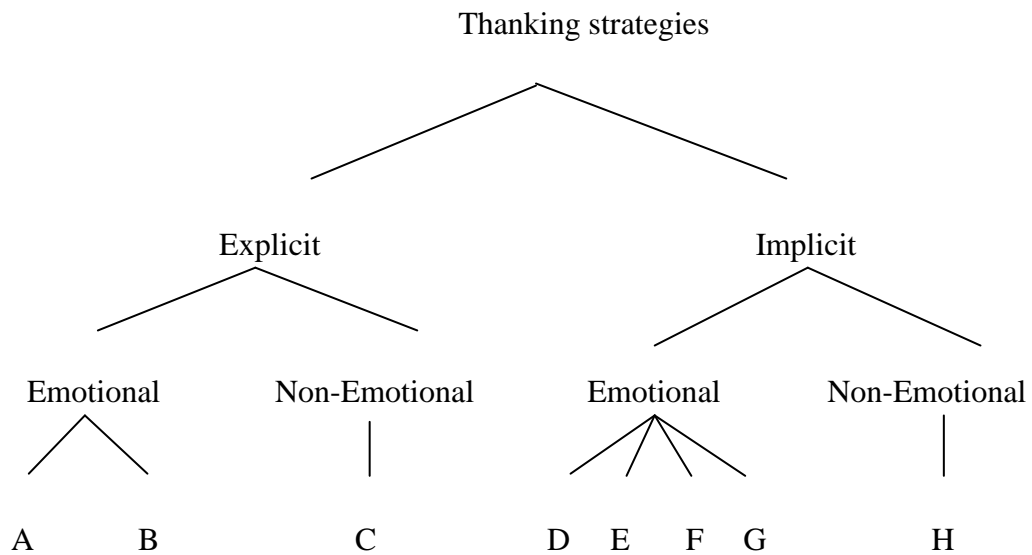
Keywords: Gratitude expressions, thanking strategies, ethnicity

## Introduction

Expressing gratitude is a feeling or response based on a past act performed by the hearers (Quirk, 1993 and Searle, 1969). In general, "thank you" is the most common phrase to express gratitude. However, not all gratitude is expressed with saying "thank you" or "thank you so much." Haverkate (1984, cited in Aijmer, 1996) divided gratitude expressions into two major categories, namely explicit and implicit strategies, in which each of them consists of

more detailed thanking strategies. A more systematic classification of thanking strategies is illustrated as follows:

Figure 1.1 *Thanking Strategies*



Notes:

- (A) *Thanking somebody explicitly*
- (B) *Expressing gratitude*
- (C) *Acknowledging a debt of gratitude*
- (D) *Expressing appreciation of the addressee*
- (E) *Expressing appreciation of the act*
- (F) *Stressing one's gratitude*
- (G) *Expressing emotion*
- (H) *Commenting on one's own role by suppressing one's own importance (self-denigration)*

The following section will elaborate the abovementioned strategies:

### 1) **Explicit**

*Explicit* means a thanking strategy that is fully and clearly expressed or leaving nothing implied. People express their gratitude openly, clearly and exactly. *Explicit* consists of two sub-categories, *emotional and non emotional*.

## **A. Emotional**

There are two strategies included in *explicit – emotional*.

- The first strategy is *thanking somebody explicitly*. It is one of the most direct strategies as it is expressed through certain words directly in informal setting in incomplete sentence. This gratitude expression is a simple thanking commonly used by people. Some phrases to illustrate this following strategy are “*thank you*” and “*thanks*”.
- The second strategy is *expressing gratitude*. It is also another direct strategy, but it is more formal than the first strategy. This strategy is considered more polite because it is used in a complete sentence. Thanking strategy is expressed through certain words or ideas to represent thankfulness. This expression consists of thanking and stating favor. Some phrase to illustrate this following strategy is “*I’m grateful for your invitation*”.

## **B. Non - Emotional**

There is only one strategy in this sub-category.

- The strategy in non-emotional explicit sub-category is *acknowledging a debt of gratitude*. Here, the recipient realizes the existence of a debt and feels that he or she has to thank someone. It is sometimes found in writing and some situations such as thanking one’s teacher or family in the preface of academic works. Some phrase to illustrate this following strategy is “*I owe a debt of gratitude to...*”

## **2) Implicit**

*Implicit* is something that is implied and not expressed directly. In *implicit*, there are two sub-categories, *emotional* and *non emotional*. Those two sub-categories are also divided into several strategies.

## **A. Emotional**

In this category, there are four strategies of thanking.

- First of all, the strategy included here is *expressing appreciation of the addressee*. It does not express gratitude directly; however, it refers to the felicity conditions or rules for thanking. The person who has received a favor feels grateful and expresses his appreciation of the benefactor. The examples of this strategy are "*that's kind of you*" and "*that's nice (of you)*".
- The next strategy is *expressing appreciation of the act*. It is also an indirect strategy and refers to the rules for thanking. The person who has received a favor feels grateful and expresses his appreciation of the act itself. Here are some of the examples of this strategy, "*that's lovely*", "*it's appreciated*", and "*good job*".
- The third strategy is *stressing one's gratitude*. It involves the performative verb (I/hereby/thank you for...) and it can be reinforced by stressing the speaker's wish or obligation to express his gratitude. The phrases often used in this strategy are "*thank you very much*" or "*I must thank you*".
- The last strategy is *expressing emotion*. It is literally an expression of surprise and is associated with a high degree of emotion. This strategy is usually related to facial expression. The illustration of this strategy is "*oh... (thank you), wow... (thank you)*". However, in this study, the researchers excluded this strategy because this study only deals with the linguistic data.

## **B. Non - Emotional**

There is only one strategy in this sub-category.

- The last strategy is *self-denigration* which means commenting on one's own role by suppressing one's own importance (*self – denigration*). In addition, it is only found in writing and always with other strategy. Some phrases to illustrate this following strategy is “*I’m so careless, I am an ingrate*”.

### Gratitude Expressions: Asian vs American

There are several factors affecting the selection of gratitude expression, such as ethnicity, formality, gender, topic of discussion and many more. However, Fishman (1989) stated that “ethnicity plays an important role that influenced linguistic variation.” Additionally, there has been a strong assumption and a number of research revealing that Americans are more generous and direct than Asians in producing gratitude expression (Apte, 1994, cited in Cheng, 2005, and Kuntjara, 2003). Hinkel (1994, cited in Cheng, 2005) who investigated cultural differences in the attitude toward the speech act of thanking among nonnative speakers of English language groups, e.g. Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, and so on, found out that some of nonnative speakers failed when delivering gratitude in English. Unfortunately, this may result in worsened relationships between the speakers and the listeners. Based on Eisenstein and Bodman’s study of gratitude expression (1986), the non native speakers had syntactic and lexical errors, as well as making mistakes in intensifiers, tense, word order, misused idiom, and choice of words. They further found out that even the advanced non-native speakers of English had difficulty in expressing their gratitude in the target language. They assumed that the socio-cultural aspect created more serious misunderstanding which made them unable to express their gratitude adequately. In other words, some of the situations are culturally unfamiliar for nonnative culture.

However, as English has penetrated almost all layers of society, it is very possible for this phenomenon to change. Thus, the researchers chose to compare the gratitude expression in English produced by the native speakers of English (American) and the nonnative speakers of English (Chinese – Indonesian) who speak fluent English as to reduce language barriers. The researchers decided to chose American as the respondents because showing gratitude plays an important role in America as it is used frequently and openly in a wide range of interpersonal relationship (Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986, p.167).

The respondents for this study were five female native speakers of English and five female nonnative speakers of English. The native speakers of English are American people who have lived in Indonesia for one to five years whereas the nonnative speakers are Chinese – Indonesian people who speak English fluently. All of the respondents are 20-30 years old.

The key instrument of this research was a list of questions in 24 role plays. The role plays are gratitude given to strangers, bosses/supervisors, friends, and family members/best friends. It was adopted from various sources to cover the various setting, degree of formality, intimacy and importance. Fourteen questions were adopted from Eisenstein and Bodman (1986), two questions from Cheng (2005), and eight questions were created by the researchers. The role play was already piloted to three people (one American and two Chinese Indonesians) to reduce any misunderstanding. All of the questions are written in English. Aside from the role play, the respondents filled in their personal data in a form. The role play was conducted in an individual interview in which the questions were asked one by one and they respondents were given two minutes to answer each question.

## Analysis

The following table is the findings of the research. The numbers are presented in percentage.

NS (AMERICAN)								NNS (CHINESE – INDONESIAN)							
STRATEGIES OF GRATITUDE EXPRESSION															
Explicit			Implicit				O	Explicit			Implicit				O
E		NE	E		NE	E		NE	E		NE				
a	B	c	d	e	F	h		A	B	c	d	E	F	h	
25.5	19.8	2.5	2.5	15.3	16.3	1	15.8	34.5	13.2	2.1	7.4	12.7	14.3	0	15.4
TOTAL								TOTAL							
45.3		2.5	34.1		1	15.8	47.7		2.1	34.4		0	15.4		
47.8			35.1				15.8	49.8			34.4				15.4

Notes:

*a: Thanking somebody explicitly*

*b: Expressing gratitude*

*c: Acknowledging a debt of gratitude*

*d: Expressing appreciation of the addressee*

*e: Expressing appreciation of the act*

*f: Stressing one's gratitude*

*h: Self denigration*

*o: Other strategies (Promise, rejection, apologizing)*

*E: Emotional*

*NE: Non Emotional*

The table above displays the findings of the present study. One of the major findings reveals that there is no significant differences in terms of the most frequently used strategies in expressing gratitude between the Americans and the Chinese-Indonesians. Surprisingly, the finding further indicated the Chinese-Indonesians used more explicit strategies (49.8%) than the Americans (47.8%). This result contradicts Apte's (1994, cited in Cheng, 2005) and Kuntjara's studies (2003) which revealed that the gratitude expressions are more much extensive in American than in Asian communities. Interestingly, Chinese Indonesians in this

research expressed their gratitude explicitly when they get gift, compliments, help, and big or small favor.

Another comparison is about the variety of strategy in each response. Most Chinese Indonesians used less various strategies than the Americans in responding to the role plays. It is reported that the American people were more likely to use more than one strategy in responding to a situation. In question no 24 (a new friend gives you a ticket to Bali as a gift because you have invited him to your party), for example, respondent D (American) responded to the question by employing four strategies in one utterance, namely *other strategy – rejection* (“*wow, I can’t accept it*”), *expression appreciation of the act* (“*I appreciate it*”), *thanking somebody explicitly* (“*Thank you*”), *other strategy – promising* (*I’ll make sure put it a good news*), whereas respondent F (Chinese – Indonesian) replied by using only one strategy, namely *expressing appreciation of the act* (“*Oh... a ticket to Bali, what a great gift*”). Another interesting finding also occurred when respondent F (Chinese – Indonesian) did not give any responses in question no.6 with a friend (your friend tells you that you have something on your face). It is further reported that she did not say anything at all because she thought it was not necessary to say thank you.

From this finding, the researchers are aware that ethnicity might no longer become the strongest factor affecting gratitude expressions; instead, there might be some other factors which have played more important roles.

The first possible factor is the language exposure. Most of the American respondents are housewives, who meet non-English speaking people around their houses. They have also lived in Indonesia for more than a year in which every day they have to interact with their drivers, housemaids, or securities. Therefore, it forces them to speak and learn survival *bahasa Indonesia*. On the other hand, most of the Chinese Indonesian respondents are English



teachers, hotel receptionists, and staff in an international company. Their work environments have made them write in or speak English to their students, clients, and colleagues. In addition, they also mentioned that they often watched Western movies, read English books, or listen to English songs. English has become a major part of their lives and it is very likely that they have acquired English as their second language. Thus, there is a high possibility that this language exposure has made them adopt the culture as well.

Another reason for this change of gratitude expressions is the attitude. From the personal data, it was revealed that Indonesia was like their second home and they wanted to adapt to Indonesian culture and mingle with the Indonesian people. In an informal conversation, one of the American respondents said that she had an interesting experience with the Indonesian about gratitude expression. When she got a small favor from her Indonesian friend, and she said “thank you”. The Indonesian replied her with laughter. She really got confused in that situation and she thought that she had made a mistake by saying “thank you” to that Indonesian. Thus, it is possible that the American respondents assumed that saying “thank you” was not practiced adequately in Indonesia. Similarly, the Chinese Indonesian respondents wanted to adapt to the Western culture which they learned for over ten years. They further said that Western culture had become a part of their life. They will automatically say thank you whenever they receive gifts, compliments, and a big or small favor from the addressees.

### Conclusion

As more people use English in their lives, English has penetrated many parts of people’s lives. This might result in cultural exchange and transfer. The present study investigated the gratitude expressions in English produced by a sample of Americans and

Chinese-Indonesians: now and then. Based on the present findings, Chinese Indonesian respondents used more explicit thanking strategies in English than the American did. Two possible reasons the gratitude expressions have experienced a change are language exposure and attitudes toward the language and culture itself. These findings suggest that the ethnic boundary might no longer become a prominent factor in the choice of gratitude expressions.

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