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“You’re welcome” – speech acts of thanking and their reactions in Japanese and English

Jun Ohashi. 2013. *Thanking and Politeness in Japanese. Balancing Acts in Interaction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan.

This monograph focuses on the speech act of thanking and its realization strategies in Japanese and British English. Based on the analysis of three different types of data Ohashi provides a comprehensive insight into culture specific communication norms and strategies and concludes with a discussion of their implications for second language teaching and politeness research.

The book is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 gives a brief introduction into the concepts of thanking and politeness by reviewing prior cross-cultural analyses as well as by discussing the notion of “face” in this context. In contrast to prior studies, Ohashi views the speech act of thanking not as a single one-way utterance realized by the speaker but as a collaborative process in which the speech act participants are engaged in order to balance their interaction.

Chapter 2 reviews the data elicitation methods used in his research: As the discourse completion task (DCT) – a written questionnaire, which requires subjects to write what they would say in a concrete situation – is convenient to obtain large amounts of data on linguistic routines and reveals the speaker’s expectations, it is used as a tool for gaining primary information on norms in thanking situations. It does not, however, reflect natural language use. Therefore, Ohashi also uses role plays as a method. Role-plays, too, demonstrate the expectations of the interlocutors in a given situation but also allow spontaneous interaction and thus illustrate the complete interaction process. In order to validate the findings obtained by these two methods Ohashi additionally analyzes naturally occurring telephone conversations.

Chapter 3 presents the results of the DCTs and role-plays. 20 native speakers of Japanese and English respectively and 10 L2 learners of Japanese were asked to complete the discourses in three different situations, such as the one in (1).

- (1) Your friend told you that Cup Noodles are now on sale at a supermarket close to your flat. You went there and bought a box (20) of them. You popped into the friend’s flat and gave him/her a pot of Cup Noodles. The following day you meet him/her in the street.
Friend: “Thanks for the noodles.”
You:

(p. 40)

On the basis of the elicited data Ohashi concludes, that the Japanese respondents tend to react to the thanking by acknowledging their own benefit, by thanking back with semantic formula like *kochirakoso* (“likewise”/ “the pleasure’s all mine”) and *arigatoo* (thanks) or even apologizing formulae such as *gomennasai* (excuse me). Benefactive verbs such as *morau* (get) were frequently used means, too. Native speakers of English, on the other hand, tend to accept the thanking offered using phrases like *it’s o.k.* and to express their gladness, that they could help. The author concludes that Japanese speakers mark themselves as beneficiaries, while English speakers mark themselves as benefactors. In the role-plays done with 10 pairs of Japanese speakers, only one situation (thanking for two weeks of accommodation at the host’s home) that had been experienced by the author himself was analyzed for thanking expressions. The results of the role-play reveal that the guest used various linguistic expressions of direct thanks whereas the host used relievers (*kinishinaide* “don’t worry”) and reciprocators (*kochirakoso* “likewise”/ “the pleasure’s all mine”) in order to deny the acknowledgment of any dept. The speech acts of guest and host were accompanied by bowing, an essential body movement in thanking episodes in Japanese. All in all both interlocutors used approximately the same amount of linguistic features – benefactive verbs included – in order to redress the debt-credit imbalance. Chapter 4 is dedicated to Japanese naturally occurring telephone conversations that were recorded by three households during the summer gift-giving season. These data, too, reveal that an act of thanking is often followed by a denial in order to disburden the beneficiary. This kind of collaborative work on the debt-credit equilibrium was very salient in conversations between socially distant participants whereas it was not/ could not be observed between family members. Chapter 5 addresses the implications of these studies on Japanese language teaching and on the current debate on face and politeness. Japanese language teaching materials do not reflect the findings of Ohashi’s studies showing that thanking – denial + thanking back is a coherent conversational sequence in Japanese. Furthermore, they fail to highlight the pragmatic significance of benefactive verbs. The results of Ohashi’s research, however, prove that a wider look at the speech acts of thanking is necessary and support the view of a mutually developed process. The five chapters are supplemented by four appendixes that contain the responses to the DCT, the transcriptions of the role-plays and of the telephone calls.

This monograph is an important contribution to cross-cultural pragmatics research that successfully illustrates the complexity of culture specific realization strategies for the speech act of thanking. The fact that it provides the reader with substantial empirical data is one of its major advantages. Unfortunately, Ohashi failed to check whether the situations used for

the DTC were typical situations for thanking behavior in both cultures. So, one might argue, that his findings are influenced by the fact, that the situations chosen are but minor occasions for thanks in British English culture. Furthermore, the implications on second language teaching remain on a rather superficial level. Except for these shortcomings, however, his monograph is a valuable reading for people interested in cross-cultural pragmatics as well as for Japanese language teachers. It is to be hoped that the linguistic data provided by the studies will actually be used in teaching cross-cultural pragmatics.

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Research interests: semantics, text- and discourse linguistics, lexicography

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