

# Responding to thanks

## From *you're welcome* to *you bet*

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A variety of forms serve as responses to thanks in Present-day English, albeit infrequently. Such responses minimize the debt incurred by the thanker and serve purposes of negative politeness. The history of responses to thanks has received only brief attention (Jacobsson 2002; Jucker 2020; Taavitsainen and Jucker 2020). Most of the contemporary responses to thanks (e.g., *no problem* and *you bet*) are of quite recent origin. Those that “express pleasure” (*the pleasure was mine*) appear in the late-nineteenth century, while those that express “verbal acknowledgment” (*all right, okay*) appear in the twentieth century. The increase of minimizing responses is consonant with a trend toward negative politeness, while the loss of the deferential forms found in Early Modern English (*your humble servant*) reflects the rise of camaraderie politeness. Responses to thanks have also undergone “attenuation” (Jucker 2019), evidenced by the appearance of short forms (*welcome*), the rise of verbal acknowledgment types, and the increasing use of such responses as conversational closers.

**Keywords:** Early Modern English, Late Modern English, politeness, Present-day English, responses to thanks, thanks

### 1. Introduction

It is always difficult to receive thanks without some resistance. The American reply, “you are welcome,” or the German reply, “please,” expresses the refusal to accept thanks without hesitation. “Don’t mention it” is the simplest expression of this resistance to accept thanks, which, however, we do accept at the same time.

(Paul Tillich. 1963. *The Eternal Now*)

Present-day English (PDE) provides a wide variety of possible ways to respond to thanks, including among others, the following examples from the *Corpus of*

*Contemporary American English* (COCA) (Davies 2008–), which each constitute the second part of an adjacency pair.

- (1) a. Thank you, thank you. Thank you so much. KIM-WAGNER-COWORKER: **You're welcome.** (2019 COCA: SPOK)
- b. Arturo, thank you for being with us. DAFOE: **My pleasure.** (2019 COCA: SPOK)
- c. Thanks, Evan. MILLWARD: **No problem.** Thank you. (2019 COCA: SPOK)
- d. Taylor, thank you very much. NORAH-O'DONNELL: **No worries.** (2019 COCA: SPOK)
- e. Thank you, sir. JASSER: **Any time,** Greta. (2015 COCA: SPOK)
- f. All right, Lonnie, thank you very much. LONNIE-QUINN: **You bet.** (2019 COCA: SPOK)
- g. John Coffee, thank you very, very much. COFFEE: **Sure.** (2019 COCA: SPOK)
- h. CONAN: All right, Connie, thanks very much. CONNIE. **Okay.**  
CONAN: Let's end with [...]. (2011 COCA: SPOK)
- i. PAMELA-BAEZ: Thank you. MICHAEL-AVENATTI: **Absolutely.** (2018 COCA: SPOK)

Outside the sociolinguistics literature (see Section 2.3), responses to thanks have been discussed briefly elsewhere (Edmonson and House 1981:166–167; Aijmer 1996:39–40; Leech and Svartvik 2012:345; Leech 2014:200–201). These sources note that such responses are infrequent in British English (in the London–Lund corpus; see Aijmer 1996), possibly because they occur only when the interlocutors are socially distant or the thanks expressed are effusive rather than routine (Leech 2014:200). But they are more standardized and common in American English, especially *my pleasure* and *you're welcome*. They are often negative in structure: for example, *don't mention it* and *no problem*. Responses to thanks share many forms with responses to apologies, including *no problem*, *don't mention it*, *think nothing of it*, *it was nothing*, *it's all right* and *ok*, and function in much the same way (Edmondson and House 1981:167; Leech 2014:130–131). Most importantly, responses to thanks typically function as minimizers, “minimizing the debt that the thanker has expressed toward the thanked” (Leech 2014:200).

Following a background (Section 2), this paper presents a diachronic, corpus-based study with two goals:

- a. To explore the rise of these responses, focusing on when they first appear in English corpora (Section 3); and,
- b. To uncover the way that politeness strategies have changed over time as well as how motivated expressions have developed into conventional formulae (Section 4).

2. Background

2.1 Dictionary evidence

Some (but not all) of the forms are identified in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2000–) as responses to thanks (see Table 1). In addition, the *Urban Dictionary* lists as “top definitions” the response-to-thanks meaning of *you’ve got it, you bet, no problem* and *my pleasure*.

Table 1. OED entries for responses to *thanks*

| Response                   | Head word and definition                             | First citation        |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>don't mention it</i>    | <i>mention</i> , v., def. P1d                        | 1777                  |
| <i>you're welcome</i>      | <i>welcome</i> , n.1, adj. and int., def. B3d        | 1907                  |
| <i>it's nothing</i>        | <i>nothing</i> , pron., and adv., and int., def. A3a | 1915                  |
| <i>forget it</i>           | <i>forget</i> , v., def. 1a                          | 1931 (“Yankee slang”) |
| <i>think nothing of it</i> | <i>think</i> , v.2, def. III 14c                     | 1950                  |
| <i>(it's) my pleasure</i>  | <i>pleasure</i> , n., def. P10                       | 1950                  |
| <i>anytime</i>             | <i>anytime</i> , adv., adj. and int., def. C         | 1961 (“U.S.”)         |
| <i>no problem</i>          | <i>problem</i> , n., def. Phrases                    | 1999                  |

2.2 Responses to thanks in a politeness framework

Thanking is inherently polite. It is a means by which the speaker (S – the thanker) acknowledges a favor or good turn done by the hearer (H – the thankee) and gives approval of H (for example, by expressing appreciation or gratitude). This can be categorized as positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 101ff.), or, in Leech’s terminology, pos-politeness and “O-oriented”; that is to say, it gives value to the other (the recipient of the thanks) (Leech 2014: 11, 91–92, 119, 196). But thanking is also a potentially face-threatening act (FTA) against S’s own positive face (because it is humbling) (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 67). Jautz (2013: 19–34, 154–208, 251–276), in a detailed study of thanking in a politeness framework, finds that thanking is used for purposes of positive politeness and mostly does threaten S’s face.<sup>1</sup>

However, thanking also introduces difficulties for H. In expressing thanks, S is admitting to being in H’s debt and gives a high value to H. As a consequence,

1. Jautz (2013) also finds that thanking is what Leech calls “convivial” since the illocutionary and social goals coincide. On thanking, see also Aijmer (1996) and Leech (2014: 196–201).

H's response must conform to what Leech calls the Modesty Maxim ("give a low value to S's qualities") (Leech 2014: 92, 94). In response, H attempts to minimize S's debt and not accept the value placed on them by S. As Edmondson and House (1981: 166) note, "the recipient [of thanks] is potentially 'embarrassed' in that according to the H-supportive maxim he [sic] should underplay or suppress his own benefits. [...] The Minimize is a conversational illocution which avoids these difficulties".

H's response to thanks serves to restore the equilibrium between S and H. Responses to thanks provide a "reduction of the thanker's indebtedness and thus the reduction of the imbalance between the thanker and the thankee" (Bieswanger 2015: 528). As thanking can threaten the negative face of the thanker (their "embarrassment" at being indebted), the thankee's response mitigates this FTA by "disclaiming any indebtedness" of the thanker (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 210). This action thus falls under the rubric of negative politeness in their framework. For Leech (2014: 92), responses to thanks conform to Maxim 6, "give a low value to [the other's] obligation" (i.e., the thankee assigns a low value to the thanker's indebtedness). This is thus a case of neg-politeness, whose function is to reduce or lessen possible causes of offence. In neg-politeness "we diminish or soften the expression of (negative) value in the transaction" (Leech 2014: 12).

The many responses to thanks can be categorized by their semantic/pragmatic potential. The typology in Table 1 is an adaption of the scheme first proposed by Aijmer (1996: 40) and later modified by Schneider (2005: 121–122) and Bieswanger (2015: 537).<sup>2</sup> Where to place certain forms is debatable, as is the delineation of categories.<sup>3</sup>

All of the strategies in fact minimize, or at least reduce, S's debt: "the motivation of all [responses to thanks] is essentially the same, i.e., to minimize the thanker's indebtedness and, thus, to restore the imbalance between participants" (Schneider 2005: 106).<sup>4</sup> In addition to explicit minimizers, both expressing pleasure and appreciation also serve to minimize; they eliminate the need for gratitude because both parties benefit. In the case of appreciation it is as if the

2. Rüegg (2014) proposes a three-way categorization of responses to thanks: those that focus on the receiver of the favor (*you're welcome*), those that focus on the giver of the favor (*my pleasure*), and those that focus on the favor itself (*no problem*). This three-way distinction is similar to Schneider's (2005: 107) categorization of responses into those that focus on the thankee (pleasure), on the thanker (appreciation) and on the thankable (minimize).

3. "In general, it is not clear how the strategy types are arrived at, how many such categories should be distinguished, and how individual realizations relate to the postulated strategies" (Schneider 2005: 107).

4. Schneider (2005) calls responses to thanks "thanks minimizers", while Bieswanger (2015), thinking that the term "minimizer" is misleading, calls them "imbalance reducers after thanks".

**Table 2.** Typology of responses to thanks

| Category                              | Possible formal realizations                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Minimize the favor                    | <i>no problem/worries/bother, don't mention it, not at all, that's alright, that's okay, (it is/was) no trouble, {no need to, don't} thank me, think nothing of it, it was nothing</i> |
| Express pleasure                      | <i>(it was) my pleasure, the pleasure is/was mine</i>                                                                                                                                  |
| Express appreciation of the addressee | <i>you're welcome, sure, absolutely, anytime, anything for you, you bet, you got it</i>                                                                                                |
| Repeat or return thanks               | <i>thanks</i>                                                                                                                                                                          |
| Verbally acknowledge                  | <i>yeah, mh-hm, right, okay, alright, of course</i>                                                                                                                                    |
| Non-verbally acknowledge              | <i>&lt;head nod&gt;</i>                                                                                                                                                                |

responder is saying, “I didn’t mind doing you a favour because I like you as a person” (Schneider 2005:106). In the case of pleasure, it is as if the responder is saying, “You don’t have to thank me (or else I would have to thank you, too), because in doing you a favour I also received a benefit” (Schneider 2005:106). Returning thanks balances the debt, and acknowledging thanks indicates that the verbal act of thanking is sufficient recompense. Responses to thanks bring the sequence of speech acts to an end: “In all cases, a response to an act of thanking terminates the sequence it occurs in, irrespective of the length and complexity of this sequence” (Schneider 2005:103).

2.3 Sociolinguistic studies

Responses to thanks have been examined in a series of sociolinguistic studies (Schneider 2005; Mulo Farenkia 2012; Rüegg 2014; Bieswanger 2015; Dinkin 2018; Staley [Rüegg] 2018). The results are difficult to compare because of differences in the techniques of data collection (written questionnaires, oral overt or covert elicitation, collection of naturally occurring examples), the regions (i.e., Canada, Ireland, Britain and the United States) and contexts (restaurants, asking directions) in which the data collection occurred, the nature of the favors and the thanking expressions used, and the ages of the participants and their relations.

Schneider (2005) studied young British, Irish and American speakers using discourse completion tasks. Overall the order of responses was WELCOME > OKAY > ANYTIME > NO PROBLEM, with other variants all occurring less than 5 percent

of the time. Minimizing the favor and expressing appreciation were dominant. American speakers preferred *WELCOME* and British speakers *OKAY* over 50 percent of the time. American speakers used more standard forms and responded to thanks more frequently than British speakers did.

Mulo Farenkia (2012) studied (mostly) young Canadian speakers using a discourse completion task. *No problem* constituted 47.97 percent, *you're welcome* 22.76 percent, and *pleasure* 13.82 percent of the forms used.

Rüegg (2014) and Staley [Rüegg] (2018) collected responses to thanks in three classes of restaurants in Los Angeles (UP, MID and LOW). She found that only 21–25 percent of thanks from the clients received responses from the servers, with LOW showing the lowest rate. Expressing appreciation (*you're welcome*) was the most common form in all price ranges, again with less frequency in LOW. Servers in all categories expressed pleasure, but *my pleasure* was reserved for UP and MID, while LOW used “more creative and less standardized” forms (e.g., *awesome*, *great* and *absolutely*) (Rüegg 2014: 29). Many forms found in other studies were not found here (e.g., *don't mention it*, *no problem*, *no trouble*, *that's alright* and *not at all*).

Bieswanger (2015) elicited data in New York City and Vancouver by asking directions of 30–50 year old white people in business attire. Verbal acknowledgment of thanks was the most common category in both locations, followed by expressing appreciation. After that, New York City residents preferred non-verbal acknowledgment whereas Vancouverites preferred minimizing the favor.

Dinkin (2018) also elicited data from speakers of different ages by asking directions in Toronto. Three thanking expressions of differing formality were used (*thanks*, *thank you* and *thank you very much*). It was found that younger speakers used *no problem* as the preferred form in response to all three, while older speakers used it only in the informal case and thus viewed it as a less polite response. Because younger speakers did still differentiate by answering *you're welcome* to formal and *no worries* to informal thanking formulae, Dinkin argues that there is a change in progress toward *no problem* as the general response formula. *No problem* has attracted the attention of prescriptivists and language commentators, who see it as a rude form associated with younger speakers and recommend its elimination, especially in service contexts (see, for example, Noë [2015] and Holland [2019]).

### 3. Diachronic corpus study

Thanking in the history of English has received some attention (Jacobsson 2002; El-Mahallawi 2018; Jucker 2020: 127–134; Taavitsainen and Jucker 2020: 116–120), but the history of responses to thanks has been virtually neglected, except for

brief mention by Jacobsson (2002:69–70, 75–76), Jucker (2020:128, 130) and Taavitsainen and Jucker (2020:117, 118).

3.1 Historical corpora and methodology

Table 2 provides a list of the historical corpora used in this study. Corpora were chosen which contained authentic or constructed dialogue. My methodology was as follows: CED was searched for all examples of *thank(e)*, which were then manually edited.<sup>5</sup> In CEAL and CLMET3.0, all instances of possible responses were collected individually and then manually edited. CEN was searched selectively for early examples. For COHA and Movies, the search was for each possible response preceded by nine characters by “thank\*” (to capture both *thank you* and *thanks*). This had somewhat lower recall than individual searches of responses, but generally good precision.<sup>6</sup>

Table 3. Historical corpora used

| Name                                                      | Variety          | Registers                                                                                 | Period      | Size            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------|-----------------|
| <i>Corpus of English Dialogues</i> (CED)                  | British English  | Authentic (trials, depositions) and constructed dialogue (drama, fiction, didactic works) | 1560–1760   | c. 1.2 million  |
| <i>Corpus of American Literature</i> (CEAL)               | American English | Mostly fiction, with some other genres (political and religious texts)                    | 1690–1920   | c. 13.5 million |
| <i>Corpus of Late Modern English Texts</i> 3.0 (CLMET3.0) | British English  | Fiction, non-fiction, drama, letters, treatises, etc.                                     | 1710–1920   | c. 34 million   |
| <i>Corpus of Historical American English</i> (COHA)       | American English | Fiction, non-fiction books, magazines, newspapers, TV/movies                              | 1820s–2010s | c. 475 million  |

5. For Early Modern English, because of the small size of CED, EEBO (1400s–1700s) was searched, as was the English Drama collection for the period 1500–1800. Only one relevant example was found (see Footnote 8).

6. Similar searches in COHA for less common and less explicit expressions of thanks (see Aijmer [1996:35–39]), (*be*) *grateful*, *appreciative*, *indebted*, *gratitude* and *appreciation*, yielded only two early instances.

Table 3. (continued)

| Name                                  | Variety                                 | Registers     | Period        | Size           |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|----------------|
| <i>Corpus of English Novels</i> (CEN) | British English, North American English | Fiction       | 1881–1922     | c. 26 million  |
| <i>The Movies Corpus</i> (Movies)     | US/CA, UK/IR, AUS/NZ                    | Movie scripts | 1930s–present | c. 250 million |

There were certain limitations. Since thankers often repeat *thank you*; I could not search for the “repeating thanks” category. Non-verbal acknowledgments and backchannels such as *mh-hm* were impossible to search for in COHA, and a collocate search with *not at all* was also not possible because of the high frequency of the individual words.

### 3.2 Responses to thanks in Early Modern English

A study of thanking in Early Modern English (EModE) in the *Corpus of English Dialogues* by Jacobsson (2002: 69–70) found five examples of responses to thanks. I found that only fifteen examples out of 227 THANK forms (*thank you/ye/thee, thanke you/ye/thee, thanks*) in CED were followed by responses, giving a response rate of less than 7 percent. Responses to thanks would appear to be so uncommon because the thanks are either embedded in longer discourses (see Jucker [2020: 128, 133]) or more rarely serve to bring the dialogue to a close (a function recognized for Present-day English; see, for example, Leech [2014: 200]; cf. Taavitsainen and Jucker [2020: 119]). In Example (2), *I thank you* serves as a way to bring the dialogue to an end, not as a sincere expression of thanks.

- (2) *Thee good wife R.* [...] Fare you well, I will talke no longer with you.  
*M.B.* She is wilfull in deede. I will leaue you also.  
*Sam.* I **thank you** for your good companie.  
 FINIS (1593 Gifford, *Concerning Witches*; CED)

As Jacobsson observes, responses to thanks may be minimizing (*it is not worth thanks*) as in Example (3a), may express appreciation (*You are heartily welcome, sir*) as in Example (3b) or may denote deference (*I am your most humble Servant*) as in Example (3c). In addition, I find cases, such as Example (3d), where thanks are repeated.



- (3) a. *The neigh.* God be wy sir, and you also mistresse. I thank you for your good chere.  
*The mist.* **It is not worth thanks**, good euen neighbour, you are well come. (1586 Bellet, *Familiar Dialogues*; CED)
- b. *Hu.* I thank you M. Pipkin, I haue got many a good dish or broth by your means.  
*Pip.* According to the auncient [...] Curtesie **you are welcome**. (1602 Heywood, *A Pleasant Conceited Comedie*; CI)
- c. *Ind.* First give me leave to thank you, for my Tickets.  
*Bev. Jun.* **O! your Servant, Madam** – But pray tell me [...] whether *Crispo* or *Griselda* is the more agreeable Entertainment. (1723 Steele, *The Conscious Lovers*; CED)<sup>7</sup>
- d. *Mr. Page.* I am glad to see your Worships well: I thanke you for my Venison Master Shallow.  
*Shal.* Master Page, I am glad to see you: ... how doth Mistresse Page and I **thank you always with my heart**, la: with my heart. (1623 Shakespeare, *The Merry Wiues of Windsor*; CED)<sup>8</sup>

Jacobsson calls out the deference forms for special notice and associates them with negative politeness (2002: 71, 77).<sup>9</sup>

### 3.3 Thanking and responses to thanks in the eighteenth century

Thanks in the eighteenth century are expressed in elaborate terms, often embedded in longer turns, are primarily used to express gratitude infused with

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7. As Taavitsainen and Jucker (2020: 118) note, this response begins with an exclamation, followed by a self-effacing phrase and a vocative.

8. OpenSourceShakespeare (see: <https://www.opensourceshakespeare.org>) yielded 106 examples of “I thank you” in the complete works of Shakespeare. Only Example (3d) (see Jacobsson’s [2002: 75–76] discussion of this example) and the following contain a response to thanks:

(i) Benedik: Fair Beatrice I thank you for your pains.

Beatrice: **I took no more pains for those thanks than you take pains to thank me**: if it had been painful, I would not have come. (1598–1599 *Much Ado about Nothing* II.iii)

Here, Beatrice has come against her will to bid Benedik attend dinner. She rejects Benedik’s *thank you* and suggests, by taking Benedik’s fixed formula (*take no pains*) literally, that she is not in need of thanks and that his thanks are insincere.

9. Similarly, El-Mahallawi (2018) finds that thanks in EModE are accompanied by deferential terms of respect (e.g., *your ladyship* and *your grace*), which recognize social rank and authority, and intensifying adverbs denoting self-deprecation and humility (e.g., *humbly*), suggesting that thanking was “perceived at that time as an act of *deference* which should emphasize the addressee’s social standing” (El-Mahallawi 2018: 910, original emphasis).



3.4 Responses to thanks in Late Modern English

The Late Modern English (LModE) corpora provide very few examples of responses, all first attested in the nineteenth century. As shown in Table 3, the majority fall in the “minimize” category. *You’re welcome* is found in EModE, but not recorded in the these corpora until the mid-nineteenth century.

Table 4. First attestations of responses to thanks in Late Modern English

| TYPE                    | 1830s             | 1860s                                     | 1870s             | 1880s                    | 1890s               | 1910s                                               |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Minimize                | <i>don’t</i>      |                                           | <i>not at all</i> | <i>no need to</i>        | <i>it is/was no</i> |                                                     |
|                         | <i>thank me</i>   |                                           | (1870)            | <i>thank me</i>          | <i>trouble</i>      |                                                     |
|                         | (1835)            |                                           | <i>it is/was</i>  | (1889)                   | (1892)              |                                                     |
|                         | <i>don’t</i>      |                                           | <i>nothing</i>    |                          | <i>that’s all</i>   |                                                     |
|                         | <i>mention it</i> |                                           | (1872)            |                          | <i>right</i> (1895) |                                                     |
|                         | (1838)            |                                           |                   |                          | <i>no trouble</i>   |                                                     |
|                         |                   |                                           |                   |                          | (1896)              |                                                     |
| Express<br>pleasure     |                   |                                           |                   |                          |                     | <i>the pleasure</i><br><i>is/was mine</i><br>(1915) |
| Express<br>appreciation |                   | <i>you’re</i><br><i>welcome</i><br>(1862) |                   | <i>welcome</i><br>(1886) |                     |                                                     |

Instances of LModE responses to thanks are given in Example (7):

- (7) a. I want before you die to thank you brother Page, for your uniform kindness during the nine years we have been laboring together; [...] “O, brother H., **don’t thank me.**
- (1835 Hallock, *Memoir of Harlan Page*; COHA)<sup>10</sup>
- b. once more a thousand thanks to you; good day.” “A very good day to you, my lord; **don’t mention it**; glad at any time to ser-ser-serve you,” said Mr. Douce,
- (1838 Bulwer-Lytton, *Alice*; CLMET3.0)
- c. “You are very kind to me, Paolo,” said Phil, raising his dark eyes with a sudden impulse of gratitude. “**It’s nothing**, Phil” said Paul, modestly.
- (1872 Alger, *Phil, the Fiddler*; COHA)
- d. No, I mean I thank you very much. [Davy] **You’re welcome**, miss –
- (1862 Murdoch, *Davy Crocket* COHA)

10. The English Drama collection provides an earlier example:

(i) *Sir W. [to Freeport]* ... Which way shall I thank you for your goodness to me and my Amelia?

*Free. Don’t thank me at all;* (1767 Colman, *The English Merchant, A Comedy*)

- e. [Agnes] (long pause; she looks around cautiously, as if making up her mind, then suddenly kisses him on top of his head). Thank you. [Bertie Vanalstyne] **Welcome**. Agnes. (1886 Howard, *The Henrietta*; COHA)
- f. On my return, I told him that I had decided to do so, and thanked him at the same time for his generosity. **“That’s all right,”** said he. (1895 Doyle, *The Stark Munro Letters*; CEN)
- g. Sir, began Liliās, how can we thank – **Not at all**, lady, replied Sir James smiling; (1870 Yonge, *The Caged Lion*; CLMET3.0)
- h. “How can I thank you?” **“There is no need to thank me.** (1889 Alger, *Luke Walton*; COHA)
- i. “Well, Westmacott, I am sure I am very much obliged to you,” said the Admiral [...] “Oh, **it is not trouble**. I have nothing to do.” (1892 Doyle, *Beyond the City*; CEN)
- j. “Shall I go and call her?” Gid asked. She gave him a look of surprise and answered: “No, I thank you.” **“No trouble**, I assure you,” Gid persisted. (1896 Read, *An Arkansas Planter*; COHA)
- k. BILLY HOLLIDAY Thank you very much. MRS. TEMPLE **The pleasure is mine**, I assure you. (1915 *Hit-the-Trail-Holiday*; COHA)

Speakers could use *don’t thank me* in a literal sense when the recipient of the thanks should be other than the hearer (Example [8]) (possibly with contrastive stress on *me*), but the expression then becomes a conventional response to thanks (Example [7a]):

- (8) “I should like to thank you,” she said shyly, “about the Hurds. [...]”  
 “Oh, **don’t thank me!**” he said cheerily. “Thank Aldous.” (1894 Ward, *Marcella*; CLMET3.0)

In the initial use of *it was nothing* (Example [7c]), the thankee explicitly refuses thanks. *You’re welcome* (Example [7d]) has served as a greeting of pleasure at the sight or arrival of a person since Old English (OED, s.v. *welcome*, n.1, adj., and int., def. B1a and C1; see Grzega [2008]) and since Middle English as an invitation for someone to have or do something, “you’re welcome to do X” (def. B3a). *No trouble* (Examples [7i–j]) first occurs in the context of an offer which the hearer refuses (*no thank you*), with the speaker reassuring the hearer that it would not cause inconvenience (*no trouble*). *The pleasure is mine* (Example [7k]), appearing at the very end of the period, represents a new category of responding to thanks – that is, “expressing pleasure”.

The small numbers of response-to-thanks tokens found in CLMET3.0 and CEAL, as well as the unbalanced nature of CEN, do not allow one to confidently attribute the forms or frequencies to national varieties. All of the variants are found in the much larger American English COHA.

3.5 Responses to thanks in Present-day English

A large variety of forms arise in the twentieth century:

Table 5. First attestations of responses to thanks in Present-day English

| TYPE                    | 1920s                                | 1930s                                                                                              | 1940s                                                                                             | 1950s                                | 1970s                                 | 1980s                                                      | 1990s                                                                           | 2000s                                    |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| Minimize                | <i>forget</i><br><i>it</i><br>(1921) | <i>think</i><br><i>nothing</i><br><i>of it</i><br>(1932)<br><i>that's</i><br><i>okay</i><br>(1938) | <i>don't</i><br><i>worry</i><br><i>about it</i><br>(1949)                                         | <i>no</i><br><i>bother</i><br>(1951) | <i>no</i><br><i>problem</i><br>(1974) | <i>no prob</i><br>(1986)                                   | <i>no</i><br><i>worries</i><br>(1999)<br><i>no</i><br><i>problemo</i><br>(1997) | <i>not a</i><br><i>problem</i><br>(2003) |
| Express<br>pleasure     |                                      |                                                                                                    | <i>it was</i><br><i>my</i><br><i>pleasure</i><br>(1944)<br><i>my</i><br><i>pleasure</i><br>(1947) |                                      |                                       |                                                            |                                                                                 |                                          |
| Express<br>appreciation |                                      | <i>anything</i><br><i>for you</i><br>(1939)                                                        | <i>sure</i><br>(1940)<br><i>you bet</i><br>(1947)<br><i>anytime</i><br>(1940)                     |                                      |                                       | <i>absolutely</i><br>(1983)<br><i>you got it</i><br>(1982) |                                                                                 |                                          |
| Verbally<br>acknowledge |                                      | <i>all right</i><br>(1932)<br><i>okay</i><br>(1934)<br><i>yeah</i><br>(1935)                       |                                                                                                   |                                      |                                       |                                                            | <i>of course</i><br>(1992)                                                      |                                          |

Instances of PDE responses to thanks are given in Example (9).<sup>11</sup>

- (9) a. “Thanks for the lift.” “Aw, **forget it.**” (1921 Cooper, *The Cross-Cut*; COHA)

11. The Movies corpus of film scripts provides some challenges since the context is only what is provided in the KWIC concordance. Different speakers are sometimes separated with a dash, but not always. Especially with *okay* and *all right* it is not clear whether the form is a response to thanks or a topic changer/mark of closure.

- b. Oh, thank you, sir. Thank you. **Think nothing of it**, my good man.  
(1932 *One Way Passage*; Movies)
- c. Now, run along and drive your Aunt Minnie around for her shopping. Of course, Father. Thanks a lot. **All right**.  
(1932 *Hot Saturday*; COHA [TV/MOV])
- d. Thanks, you saved my life. – **Okay**.  
(1934 *It Happened One Night*; COHA [TV/MOV])
- e. Thanks a lot, Mr. Thorpe. – **Yeah**. – We'll see you on the front page.  
(1935 *Gold Diggers of 1935*; COHA [TV/MOV])
- f. May I say thank you? Well, sure, if you'll omit the "mister" and make it plain "Roger." Thank you, Roger. – **That's okay**.  
(1938 *Little Miss Broadway*; COHA [TV/MOV])
- g. I'm very glad. Thanks for bringing him. **Anything for you**, Miss Judith.  
(1939 *Dark Victory*; Movies)
- h. SHE ASKED ME TO THANK YOU FOR ALL YOUR TROUBLE. **SURE, THAT'S OK**.  
(1940 *Third Finger*; COHA [TV/MOV])
- i. HAMILTON All right, Georgie. Thanks ever so much. **GEORGIE Any time**.  
(1940 Saroyan, *Love's Old Sweet Song*; COHA)
- j. Thank you for dropping me off, Colonel Darly. **It was my pleasure**, Miss Smith.  
(1944 *Meet Me in St. Louis*; COHA [TV/MOV])
- k. Yeah. Thanks. I'll see you. **My pleasure**, Kay. (1947 *I Walk Alone*; Movies)
- l. Thanks. Thank you, sir. **You bet**. (1947 *Welcome Stranger*; Movies)
- m. HELEN BROWN Thanks. TELEPHONE MAN **Don't worry about it** [...].  
(1949 Kanin, *The Rat Race*; COHA)
- n. Don't bother, thanks ... I can manage. **No bother at all!**  
(1951 *Laughter in Paradise*; Movies)
- o. Thanks, Ernie. – **No problem**.  
(1974 *The Swinging Cheerleaders*; COHA [TV/MOV])
- p. First door on your right. – Thanks a lot. – **You got it**. Don't stay too long. Please don't.  
(1982 *The Entity*; Movies)
- q. Hi. Thanks for coming. **No prob**, heh. (1986 *Witchboard*; Movies)
- r. Thanks for the Fred Gwynne. – **Absolutely**.  
(1983 *Twilight Zone: The Movie*; Movies)
- s. ANTONIA Thank you. DON PEDRO **Of course** (Pause).  
(1992 Linney, *Ambrosio*; COHA)
- t. I'm going there anyway. Thanks, mate. **No worries**. No. I really appreciate it. Yeah. Alright.  
(1999 *Paperback Hero*; Movies)
- u. Oh. Well, thanks for meeting me here, Q. **No problemo**, man.  
(1997 *Tower of Terror*; Movies)
- v. Thanks for coming, lieutenant. **Not a problem**.  
(2003 *Requiem for Mutants: The Score of 'X2'*; Movies)

Most of the new forms in PDE fall into the “minimize” and “express pleasure” categories. Some of the forms have different dialect distributions and frequencies (see Schneider [2005]; Bieswanger [2015]). For example, both *forget it* and *anytime* are identified in the OED as characteristic of American English. The response-to-thanks function of *you bet* (Example [9l]) is the majority usage in the spoken subsection of COCA, and is rarely found in British English (see Hirota and Brinton forthcoming). *No bother* (Example [9n]) occurs only in the UK/IE part of Movies corpus and is absent from COCA.

A new category of responses to thanks appears in PDE, namely that of “verbal acknowledgment” (*okay*, *all right/alright*, *yeah* and *of course*). Note that because *that’s okay* (Example [9f]) and *that’s all right* (Example [7f]) refer explicitly back to the act of kindness, with *okay* and *all right* functioning as adjectives meaning “adequate, acceptable” (OED, s.v. *all right*, adv., adj., int., and n., def. B1; OK, adj., int.1, n.2, and adv., def. A1)), I categorize them as minimizers; however, because *okay* (Example [9d]) and *all right* (Example [9c]) as interjections express “assent” (OED, s.v. *all right*, def. C2a; OK, def. B1), they are categorized as verbal acknowledgments. There are many examples of *yeah* in the TV/MOV subsection of COHA, where it may be reinforced by a second form, as in Example (10).

- (10) WEIDNER # Thanks for seeing us ... # PEDROSA **Yeah. You’re welcome.**  
(2004 *Collateral*; COHA [TV/MOV])

The tendency is for the shortened forms to appear later than longer forms:

*the pleasure is mine* (7k) / *it was my pleasure* (9j) > *my pleasure* (9k)  
*don’t worry about it* (9m) > *no worries* (9t)  
*you’re welcome* (7d) > *welcome* (7e)  
*it’s no trouble* (7i) > *no trouble* (7j)  
*that’s all right* (7f) > *all right* (9c)

The exception is *okay*, which appears before *that’s okay*.

#### 4. Discussion

Over time, there has been change both in the forms used for replying to thanks and in politeness strategies. In form, these expressions have become fossilized, routinized or conventionalized (i.e., pragmaticalized). Some retain their original meaning to a greater extent (e.g., *no trouble*, *think nothing of it* and *no need to thank me*), while others undergo depletion of meaning (e.g., *all right* and *absolutely*). For example, *welcome* loses its original meaning of “acceptable, agreeable, pleasing” to become a minimally contentful response to thanks and *my plea-*

*sure* starts out as a form expressing pleasure at having performed the act for which thanks are being received, but becomes a routinized formula with little content – a mere token of acknowledgment of the thanks proffered.

It is widely acknowledged that PDE is characterized by negative or “non-imposition” politeness (see Jucker [2011, 2012, 2020]; Leech [2014]). This is perhaps most obvious in the rise of *can you/could you* indirect directives since the nineteenth century (Culpeper and Demmen [2011]; see also Wierzbicka [2006]): these lessen the imposition on the hearer by asking about the hearer’s ability/willingness rather than by expressing the speaker’s desires and attempting to coerce the hearer. Other indicators of the change to negative politeness are the use of *need to/should* rather than *must* to express obligation and the use of *I’m sorry* rather than *excuse/pardon/forgive me* for apologies. The proliferation of responses to thanks, especially those belonging to the explicit “minimizing the favor” category, is thus in line with the trend toward negative politeness in PDE.

How do we explain the loss of deferential forms (e.g., *your humble servant*) serving as responses to thanks in Early Modern English? These are characteristic of what Jucker (2020) calls “deference politeness”, which arose in the Middle English period; deferential responders are associated with negative politeness. Jacobsson (2002:70) suggests the use of these forms may be “connected with a stricter social hierarchy” of the Early Modern period, and since deferential responders become more common towards the end of the period, he sees a shift from positive politeness to negative politeness (Jacobsson 2002:72, 74, 78). Why they do not continue to be used is associated with the second major change in politeness observed in PDE – namely, the decline and virtual loss of honorific terms of address. “Camaraderie politeness” (Lakoff 1973; Leech 2014) refers to strategies which increase solidarity and eliminate distance between individuals, such as the increasing use of first names. Leech (2014) attributes this to individualism, democratization, informalization and colloquialization. The loss of deferential responders is thus consistent with the ascendancy of camaraderie politeness.

Tracing the “long diachrony” of apologies, Jucker (2019) argues that apologies (and presumably also responses to apologies) have become more common, often uttered for minor infractions, which the apologizer playfully calls attention to with new expressions such as *oops*, *whoops* and *my bad*. Thus, the “illocutionary potential [of apologies] has been maximally weakened, i.e., attenuated, and they are fully pragmatized, i.e. the semantic transparency has largely been lost and their interpretation increasingly relies on the specific context in which they occur” (Jucker 2019:16). Jucker suggests that other speech acts such as promises (which have become insincere and devoid of commitment) and greetings (such as *How are you?*, no longer a serious request for information) may undergo similar atten-



uation. A study of thanking – and responses to thanks – seems to show similar signs of attenuation.

First, it is agreed that the short forms, *thanks* and *thank you*, did not exist in earlier stages of the language (Jacobsson 2002: 67; El-Mahallawi 2018: 906–907; Jucker 2020: 133). Thus, over time we see a change from fully performative *I give you thanks* and *I thank you* to implicitly performative forms, *thanks* and *thank you*.<sup>12</sup> As Aijmer (1996: 72, 76–77) observes, the short forms are “institutionalized” and rarely express “real gratitude”; they are used “routinely” in response to polite greetings (*How are you? Fine, thanks.*), in response to minor services (e.g., the handing of food or drink) or as closings. Similarly, among responses to thanks, we also witness an attenuation of forms. The rise of the “verbal acknowledgment” category of responses in the twentieth century carries less weight than minimizers or tokens of pleasure or appreciation. There are cases in which true minimizers (*that’s okay* and *that’s all right*) devolve into signs of acknowledgement (*okay* and *all right*). Second, it is common to combine thanking expressions representing different strategies (e.g., appreciation of addressee + thanking: *that’s nice of you thank you*) (Aijmer 1996: 48–51), which may point to a weakening of the functionality of *thank(s)*. Combinations of responses also occur, as in Example (11).

(11) “Thanks.” And I was like, “Yeah, you’re welcome. No problem.”

(2011 *The Glee Project*; COHA)

Third, among thanking expressions we see a change from sincere expressions of gratitude in earlier stages of the language to the acknowledgment of rather trivial acts of kindness (not incurring great debt) and their use as “discourse markers” (Aijmer 1996: 52–66) in closing sequences (including accepting proposals to bring the sequence to an end).<sup>13</sup> In the latter, the thanking expression has “very little meaning” (Aijmer 1996: 52); the gratitude sense is at best residual. In Aijmer’s corpus of PDE, this usage is the most common one (Aijmer 1996: 68). Jacobsson (2002: 72–4, 78; see also Taavitsainen and Jucker 2020: 119) finds a handful of examples that may be analyzed as discourse markers in EModE, but concludes that *thank you/thanks* has not yet acquired this use (Jacobsson 2002: 78) (cf. Jucker 2020: 132). It is likely that responses to thanks may serve to reinforce the

12. El-Mahallawi (2018: 906) dates the rise of shortened *thank you* from the end of LModE: 27.5 percent of the speech acts of thanking in the CLMET3.0 have explicit *I thank you* as opposed to 2 percent in the *British National Corpus* (2018: 906, 918n.). Jacobsson (2002: 67) finds only five examples of shortened *thanks/thank you* in his EModE data. The OED (s.v. *thank*, n., def. P1) dates formulaic *thanks* to EModE.

13. On the use of *thank you* to close discourse, see Jautz’s (2013: Chapter 5) study of radio interviews and Aijmer’s (1996: 58–65) discussion of telephone conversations.

discourse-closing function of thanking expressions. Aijmer (1996: 59–61) finds that “echo responses” of *thank you* are common in closings; typical thanks responders such as *it’s OK*, *great pleasure* and *all right* may also occur in this slot. According to Goffman (1976: 70, cited by Aijmer 1996: 79), other responses to thanks, including *you’re welcome*, *that’s all right*, *think nothing of it* and *it’s okay*, follow *thanks* in closing position. Finally, the ironic use of *thank you* observed in PDE (Aijmer 1996: 51) may be a further sign of attenuation. While examples of this ironic usage may be found in Early Modern English (Jacobsson 2002: 72; Taavitsainen and Jucker 2020: 119–120), it is clearly rare in earlier periods. It is possibly reinforced by *thank you for nothing*, which the OED (s.v. *thank*, v., def. 3f) dates to the early eighteenth century. We may be seeing a similarly ironic development affecting *you’re welcome* (see Hess [2015]), in which an unprompted use of the form becomes an acknowledgment of one’s own generosity.

## 5. Conclusion and directions for future research

Responses to thanks have undergone many changes in the history of English. Overall, responses are not frequent in the corpora examined here. The “express pleasure” category appears for the first time in the late-nineteenth century, while the “verbal acknowledgment” category appears for the first time in the twentieth century. The proliferation of forms and increased frequency of minimizing responses to thanks in PDE are consonant with the trend toward negative politeness, and the loss of deferential forms is consonant with the decline in honorific forms and the rise of camaraderie politeness.

One direction for future research would be to study the correlation of responses to thanks expressions over time with the widening functions of thanking that are recognized for PDE (but assumed not to occur with any frequency before the modern period), including thanks for both material things (letters, e-mails, gifts, hospitality, services, visits, phone calls, etc.) and immaterial things (compliments, congratulations, well-wishes, offers, promises, suggestions, invitations, fulfillments of requests, information, etc.) (see Aijmer [1996: 66–74]). As Jucker (2002: 129) points out, eighteenth-century handbooks provide very little information on the reasons for thanking during the period, though the acknowledgment of favors seems common. Certain types of responses are likely to be more appropriate for thanks for different types of actions. More detailed study of the relation between the source of thanking (what the thanker is expressing gratitude for) and the response given is clearly warranted; for example, some but not all types of minimizing responses (i.e., *no problem/worries/trouble*), would be a pragmatically odd way to answer thanks for material gifts. Many responses

to thanks (e.g., *okay*, *of course* and *all right*) have a wide range of discourse-pragmatic functions, and a study of how and when these are co-opted as responses to thanks would be revealing. An additional direction of research would be a study of the frequency and types of responses in a large corpus of PDE (COCA), with a view to how these findings correlate with the sequence of forms which arise diachronically and with contemporary sociolinguistic research that documents ongoing change among the thanks-responders, such as the rise of *no problem* (e.g., Dinkin 2018).

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## Corpora, primary sources and text collections

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CEN = De Smet, Hendrik. 2006. *Corpus of English Novels*. See: <https://perswww.kuleuven.be/~u0044428/cen.htm>

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