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**Politeness calls – re-exploring the use of English
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Politeness calls – re-exploring the use of English thanking formulae in radio phone-ins from New Zealand and Britain

Sabine Jautz. 2013. *Thanking Formulae in English. Explorations across varieties and genres*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.

1. Thanking formulae in English from a new angle: aims and methods in exploring them “across varieties and genres”

This monograph presents itself as an aspiring corpus-based approach to forms and functions of thanking formulae (henceforth TF) as occurring within two variational linguistic frames, i.e. British and New Zealand English.

In six meticulously divided chapters containing 44 descriptive tables and four figures, the author gives intriguing interpretive insights into how, where and why TF are applied in spoken discourse, using data from two acknowledged corpora, i.e. *The British National Corpus* (BNC, URL 1) and *The Wellington Corpus of Spoken New Zealand English* (WSC, URL 2). Adopting a form-to-function approach, she draws her pragmatic deductions from the analysis of occurring forms, options of syntactic positioning and the semantically bleached and routine nature often displayed by TF, before stepping on to the functional level of analysis (Chapter 4).

One further chapter is dedicated to what the author refers to as the genre of radio texts (Chapter 5). Excerpting all relevant phone-in dialogues, she arrives at a specified subcorpus covering almost 20% (i.e. about 180,000 words) of the complete data. By means of 43 select examples, Jautz primarily shows that, particularly in radio phone-ins, TF take on the main function of discourse organization, frequently being used by the host with the goal of concluding the conversation (p. 231).

After this brief introductory summary of Jautz’s dissertation, the following sections shall further outline and discuss the qualitative and quantitative relevance of her corpus data, also going into variational differences revealed (Section 2), the author’s approach to interlocking TF and the politeness models by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), Leech (1983) and Watts (2003: Section 3), and her carving out the functions assumed by TF in radio texts (Section 4). Concluding remarks are given in Section 5.¹

¹ Whilst discussing various functions and forms of verbally expressing gratitude in this review, my own personal thanks is due to Rüdiger Hahn (*Pragmatics Reviews*) and Piotr Jagodziński (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań) for content- and style-related feedback.

2. Thanking formulae in the BNC and the WSC: A discussion of the corpus data, its elaboration and significance²

Jautz's corpus-browse for eight different (phrasings of) TF reveals 887 matching expressions of gratitude,³ which she first analyses with regard to their syntactic realizations, their collocation with benefactors and their positions in the conversational threads displayed in general, before she turns to their evaluation on a functional level. Jautz assesses the data by context-dependently interpreting the role of TF in organizing the ongoing discourse, in fulfilling a phatic function, and in responding to material goods and services on the one hand or to immaterial goods and psychological support on the other hand.⁴

While expressive observations are made in the course of the author's extensive analysis of the data, which is gathered in a number of descriptive tables facilitating for the reader to keep track of the numerous figures and quantitative findings,⁵ some inferences drawn from the data lack argumentative depth and tend to be redundant as well as overgeneralizing at times. Jautz, e.g., argues that the function of discourse organization conducted by TF appears to be of "paramount importance in British English, while New Zealanders care more for interpersonal relations" (p. 207).⁶ Such remarks, which occur at several places in the book, give the impression of Jautz arguing along rather stereotypical lines.⁷

Jautz's assessment of the data must also be re-evaluated with regard to the corpus's size and composure, which have clearly led to discrepancies in her line of argumentation. For example, the BNC reveals many more instances of TF in response to the receiving of material goods than the WSC does, which, however, is simply due to the fact that British

² Jautz's introduction into corpora and corpus linguistics covering 5 pages (51-56) seems too basic for a linguistically experienced readership, whom she claims to address.

³ She chose the items on the basis of earlier works by Aijmer 1996, Eisenstein and Bodman 1986, Okamoto and Robinson 1997, as well as Schauer and Adolphs 2006 (also cf. her Table 3.2).

⁴ Only the sequence of functions Jautz looks into is not entirely stringent, since, as a reader, I would have expected her to discuss the contents of chapters 4.3.3 and 4.3.4 prior to those in 4.3.1 and 4.3.2. After all, the former two represent what Jautz regards as their conventionally prototypical use (cf. 132).

⁵ Her investigation of TF being used "jokingly or ironically" (Chapters 4.3.5 and 4.3.7.5) is unsatisfyingly short and superficial.

⁶ In 2.5 Jautz provides a very perfunctory and dispensable overview of the phonetics, morphology, vocabulary and orthography of New Zealand English, after introducing the chapter with a poorly chosen quote from *Asterix in Britain* (*Asterix comic book series*, 8 (1971), which anachronistically situates the variety of British English into Caesar's time.

⁷ Also see, e.g., her chapter heading for 4.4, i.e. "The politeness of thanking formulae in BrE and NZE".

radio phone-ins award prizes for featured quizzes, which is apparently not done in New Zealand (133-134; also cf. 5.3.3).

While these conceptual and cultural differences in radio phone-in formats may raise the question of the actual applicability of the two corpora chosen for this study, they nevertheless make clear that TF take on partly divergent functions in both variational frames.

3. Thanking formulae as “prime examples of linguistic politeness” (p. 72)? Revisiting the data against the background of politeness theories

It has to be criticized that Jautz’s use of *politeness* and *polite*, despite her dealing with the linguistic aspects of politeness theory, is rather ambiguous, as she applies them interchangeably referring to both the linguistic or pragmatic concept, as well as the non-linguistic but conventional everyday concept of etiquette (e.g., “Calling someone a witch is not considered nice and polite” (p. 263)).

Challenging three prominent politeness models, i.e. by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), Leech (1983, 2007) and Watts (2003), Jautz’s main goal is to tackle the question, “whether the predictions which can be made in three different frameworks of politeness regarding thanking routines can be empirically verified” (p. 33). She lists five predictions to be checked and retains this sequence throughout her work: On the basis of Brown and Levinson, Jautz firstly investigates whether TF threaten the speaker’s negative face by acknowledging a debt of gratitude and, secondly, whether TF are mostly used as positive politeness strategies. Based on Leech’s model (1983), Jautz then asks whether TF typically are realizations of the maxim of approbation, and whether they have indeed a convivial function with regard to their coincidence of illocutionary and social goals. Finally, the model by Watts (2003) is the springboard for the author to investigate whether TF more often than not show politic rather than polite verbal behaviour.⁸

Jautz correctly emphasizes the fact that the three “chosen frameworks”⁹ taken into account “are not complementary” (p. 191f.). They are thus not supposed to paint a “complete picture of all politeness-related aspects” (p. 192), but do draw attention to the fact that politeness must not be seen as an absolute concept, but only as a pragmatic phenomenon always to be

⁸ The models by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Leech (1983, 2007) take up much more space in Jautz’s study than Watts’ (cf. her Table 3.5). In 4.4.4 she does, however, partly explain this by the fact that Watts’ (2003) model is the least applicable to the TF-material, as the observer simply lacks contextual background information enabling them to adequately evaluate specific factors of politeness (p. 191).

⁹ One may discuss, whether the term *framework* should be considered inappropriate with reference to Watts (2003) in particular, who principally takes a discursive – and thus *per definitionem* anti-theoretical – approach to (im-)politeness research.

looked at in relation to and dependence from the subjective perception of the situational context it occurs in (cf. Leech 2007: 174).

In Chapter 4.5, Jautz digresses into a discussion of the correlation between the interlocutors' status and the degree of politeness being thus applied (cf. 4.5). Only preliminary findings are presented here, which is mostly due to the fact that the corpora provide rather sketchy background information about the speakers (cf. 77), not allowing for any deep insights into the usage of TF dependent from speaker status. She thus only scratches the surface of potential interpretation, distinguishing between the status categories superior, inferior and equal, which – if these observations are to be deepened in further studies – have to be differentiated much more explicitly.

In Chapter 5.4 Jautz draws again on all three politeness concepts and the five major check points (see above) set up for the use of TF in radio texts,¹⁰ aiming for any differences compared to the analysis of the complete corpus material in 4.4. As one of the major revelations she finds that positive politeness strategies are implemented by 91.11% of all TF in the radio data, which is even a higher percentage than for the complete corpus (p. 255-256). This, according to Jautz, "is not surprising [...as t]hey represent the default case when expressing gratitude". She hypothesizes "that it is very much according to both hosts' and callers' wishes in the given situations to establish or stress common ground" (p. 260).

4. "[G]enre does make a difference" (p. 283): thanking formulae in radio texts¹¹

Jautz grounds her choice of genre, i.e. radio phone-ins, in Chapter 5 on the perception that these are samples of "institutional talk", employing specific functions of TF – an assumption based on studies by Aijmer 1996, Clark and French 1981, and Schneider 2007, who also discerned that TF are frequently used as (pre-)closing signals in telephone conversations. What also sustains her choice of 'genre' is Jautz's observation that the nature of participant roles in radio talk context is necessarily shaped by the fact that that there is an asymmetrical relation of status and power between host and caller. This standard precondition "result[s] in unequal possibilities in conversational management" (p. 44).

Jautz's approach is again parallel to her analytic steps in Chapter 4, conducting an insightful form-to-function mapping along the same posts, not only sustaining the immediate

¹⁰ Jautz again displays a redundant style of presentation when bringing up again the basic principles and assumptions of the models (face-threats etc.) included (one and the same quote from Watts (2005: 50) is even given verbatim twice, i.e. on pages 29 and 272. She furthermore re-quotes example (4.66) as (5.41) and also then arrives at the same conclusion as in Chapter 4, which makes the reader wonder about the additional value of this discussion.

¹¹ It appears that Jautz is using the latter term interchangeably for *radio phone-ins* and *radio talk*.

connection between form and function of TF, but also confirming what earlier studies (e.g., Aijmer 1996; Eisenstein and Bodmann 1986; Leech 2007; Norrick 1978; Okamoto and Robinson 1997) have suggested: Adding a benefactor or intensifiers to a TF – which is particularly often done in the WSC data – contributes to an utterance being understood as more polite (p. 222). Due to the relatively small number of words gathered in her radio talk subcorpus, however,¹² most other findings are not statistically significant (p. 219) or further deliberated.¹³ This is, with the exception of the expressive quantitative result, that, formally, “the ratio of the [TF] found in the two varieties of English is much more imbalanced in the radio texts than for all texts taken together” (p. 221).

5. Jautz’s approach to thanking formulae in English: an appreciative conclusion

The title of this book does not live up to the reader’s expectations, as, for one thing, there are no more than two varieties investigated standing behind the phrasing “explorations across varieties and genres”. For another thing, there may certainly be various genres in the two corpora she investigates, but since she does not include any genre-related approach and misses to exhaustively define her own use and understanding of this highly debatable term before applying it to radio texts (except for a citation of Swales 1990), the title should rather have contained a specific reference to radio phone-ins or to politeness theory, the importance of which the author thus undermines herself for her work. After all, one major revelation rooted in the intertwining of politeness theories on the one hand and the contrastive analysis of BNC and WSC corpus data on the other is that politeness theory in general has so far been highly limited due to it being primarily based on British English data. According to Jautz,

[i]t can be generally concluded that British expressions of gratitude conform more to the predictions and expectations based on the relevant literature than the ones from New Zealand. (p. 206)

Thus, despite some argumentative weaknesses¹⁴ and obvious truths stated,¹⁵ Jautz’s study nevertheless is an inspiring read, well-structured and parallel in the arrangement and

¹² The subcorpus’s size is mentioned multiple times (cf. pp. 211, 212, 221, 242, 280, 290, 291).

¹³ For instance, Jautz mentions that all instances of *cheers* in the BNC occur in radio texts, but does not explain what this suggests.

¹⁴ Repetitive wordings and sequential recital of figures somewhat darken what Jautz actually wishes to highlight: The modification *significant(ly)* with regard to the data, for instance, is used excessively (e.g., pp. 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161 etc.) and thus tends to render her evaluations void at times.

¹⁵ E.g., Jautz, based on her variational investigation, comes to the conclusion that “‘English’ is not ‘English’” (p. 287).

presentation of elaborated criteria set up by the author herself. Amongst further noteworthy assets of the book are the detailed quantitative itemization and the many insightful and context-related discussions of the data, pointing out quite a number of formal and functional characteristics of TF that have been overlooked so far.¹⁶ Moreover, this study contributes to linguistic research on TF in spoken English – with radio phone-ins certainly representing an abundance of linguistic research potential.¹⁷ Finally, Jautz's dissertation takes new and ambitious perspectives on the young and promising field of Variational Pragmatics and is able to show that thanking and TF do in fact significantly differ in the two varieties under investigation.

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¹⁶ Jautz had two earlier papers published on the exact same topic her present monograph deals with (i.e. in 2008 and 2009), which she does not refer to, though (but cf. this bibliography).

¹⁷ Jautz refers to a number of highly valuable works dealing with phone-ins, but misses to cite e.g. Norma E. Verwey's monograph on *Radio call-ins and covert politics: a verbal unit and role analysis approach*. (Aldershot [et al.]: Avebury, 1990), dealing with Canadian and British phone-in material.

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