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Thank you very much for that

Expressing gratitude is apparently not just good for those receiving it, but also for those giving it, if an entire industry of gratefulness journals is anything to go by. English has numerous ways of saying thank you. Why so many?

Gratitude can be offered in English by simply saying *thanks*. Then there is the informal *ta*, dating from the 1700s. There is also *cheers*, which transitioned “from the pub to the sober world” as a marker of thanks, according to a 1976 Times article. And, of course, there are others: *much obliged*, *I appreciate it*, *(you’re a) legend*, *I’m eternally grateful*, *I owe you one*, *what would I do without you* and many variations on *thanks* (*thanks a million / a bunch / very much*).

Older versions of English show that such variation is by no means new. In 2018, Jonathan Culpeper and his colleagues scoured dialogue in Shakespeare’s plays in search of all the different expressions that Middle English speakers used to show gratitude. While *thanks* sometimes sufficed, at other times the language was infused with lavish magnanimity: *I take my leave with many thousand thanks* or *I thank your pretty sweet wit for it* (examples from Henry IV).

Yet the variation was not arbitrary. The researchers found a direct relationship between the importance of the gift or magnitude of the act received and the (linguistic) effort invested in expressing gratitude. Shakespearean dialogue shows that perhaps creativity is not just symbolic but also entertaining.

Moreover, the reciprocal act of recompensing the value of the gift by a linguistic form mirroring it appeared mitigated by the status of the thanker. When the thanker had higher status than the receiver of gratitude, the speaker invested less effort in offering their thanks. So, power is at play.

What about in Aotearoa New Zealand? Analyses of NZ English recordings and writing from the 1990s suggest little variation in expressions of gratitude beyond *thanks* and *thank you*. The only real variant seems to be the addition of the term *mate*: *thanks mate*.

In contrast, British English speakers from a similar era expressed gratitude more often than Kiwis and displayed more differences in the patterns used (*thanks*, *thanks very much*, *thanks so much*). They also favoured the more formal *thank you very much*. Our preference for informality could be explained by egalitarian aspirations. We value equality.

However, it would be interesting to collect recent data from NZ English to check if patterns have changed. One innovation is the use of the Māori phrase *kia ora*, but its prevalence (in its use meaning ‘thanks’) remains unknown. Another is the slang form *chur*.

Moreover, not all uses of *thanks* expressed gratitude. Analysing Twitter posts, we found that two seemingly synonymous hashtags, *#thanksforthat* and *#thankyouforthat*, had very different uses. While the longer *#thankyouforthat* hashtag expressed genuine gratitude, the shorter, *#thanksforthat*, was typically used sarcastically to express the opposite.

Here is one example: “Just before our *courthouse wedding* the judge told us, “You’re the first person I’ve married that I haven’t also sent to jail.” *#thanksforthat*”. Again, patterns of use are not arbitrary.

The desire for creativity and innovation manifests itself even in the most basic human communication: offering gratitude – a discourse function we learn early and use so often thereafter. And that’s definitely something to be thankful for: *#kiaora4that!*



Accents may reflect our past but don't explain us



Donna Miles

Iranian-Kiwi columnist and writer based in Christchurch

I speak English with an accent. You do too. We all have accents. My husband speaks with an accent which is recognisably native. Listening to him, people would know, immediately, that he is from New Zealand.

When I speak, people become puzzled. Unlike a strong Italian or French accent, my accent is not easy to place. This is because my accent is a mishmash of different accents.

I learnt most of my English in Scotland so you can hear a hint of a Scottish accent in the way I sometimes roll my Rs. Interestingly, the younger generation is changing the Scottish accent and sadly the rolling R is in danger of dying out.

There is also a trace of an English accent in my general intonation because I spent most of my young adult life in London. But those with keen ears and some knowledge of Farsi would recognise that my accent, in its lilt, rhythm and sounds, is predominantly Iranian because I was brought up by Iranian parents in Tehran.

My daily social interactions are shaped by my non-native accent. But my accent alone would not tell you much about my multicultural background, my world views and my general character.

An accent is simply a way of speaking shaped by a mixture of ethnicity, geography, first language, social class and education.

Judging people by their accent is the linguistic equivalent of judging people by their appearance. We all do it, even though we know such judgments are socially constructed and generally fraught.

Media and popular culture play a pivotal role in elevating some accents while creating disdain for others. This is true of regional accents as well as international ones.

If you are a native of an English-speaking country, generally you would not be judged less capable or less intelligent if you spoke a foreign language (say, Mandarin or Indian) with an accent.

Compare this privilege with all the jokes about an Indian or a Chinese accent. There is definitely a hierarchy of status attached to accents. People whose accents fall at the bottom of

the hierarchy suffer an extra layer of discrimination that people with accents deemed “desirable” or “dominant” do not have to navigate.

Mocking people’s accents is harmful because people can internalise the stigma about their accents to the point that it would make them hate the way they speak.

These days, most linguists agree that no language, dialect or accent is superior to another – and that nobody should arrogantly claim that they have no accent. Even those who speak English with a received pronunciation, commonly known as “BBC English”, have an accent.

Most English speakers in the world are second-language speakers. There are three times as many non-native speakers of English as there are native. So speaking English with a non-native accent is more of a normative form. Yet we are made to believe that the perfect accent is one that is completely inaudible.

Many second-language speakers of English have excellent writing skills and much better knowledge of grammar than many of the native speakers.

New Zealand-based Italian magazine editor and translator Giovanni Tiso speaks with a non-native accent but is known for his excellent command of English and impressively extensive vocabulary.

Although, in general, an accent is a poor measure of language proficiency, a strong accent can sometimes be accompanied by limited vocabulary and grammatical mistakes.

My Iranian mother’s English is good enough for her daily needs. But, outside her routine social interactions (at the doctor or at the local mechanic, etc.), she struggles with comprehension and making herself fully understood.

The language barrier is one of the main challenges facing immigrants and refugees. Difficulty in speaking and comprehension can make immigrants feel isolated and anti-social. For many the experience can lead to depression.

A friend from Los Angeles recently told me a story about his mum, an Iranian Turk, who also lives in Los Angeles. His mother, usually of a quiet character, was rapidly transformed on a holiday trip to Azerbaijan’s capital city, Baku. She suddenly came to life, confidently chatting to everyone and relishing the fact that she was in a place where her accent and language skills were no longer an obstacle to her interactions with others.

Comprehensible communication is obviously important and should be a goal for all language learners. But we all need to remind ourselves that there isn’t a single true, authentic way to speak – and an accent alone can never tell us the full story of who a person is.

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