

The speech act of gratitude in contemporary Polish: A pragmalinguistic study

EWA KOMOROWSKA

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Abstract

The aims of this paper are the following: defining gratitude as a speech act and placing it in the group of other speech acts as well as presenting the specificity of its functioning in terms of pragmalinguistic methodology. The analyzed material includes contexts of the speech act of gratitude, with examples coming from contemporary Polish.

Keywords

pragmalinguistics, speech acts, speech act *gratitude*, semantics, lexis

Podziękowanie jako akt mowy we współczesnym języku polskim: Aspekt pragmalingwistyczny

Abstrakt

Celem artykułu jest próba zdefiniowania aktu mowy podziękowanie i usytuowania go w grupie innych aktów mowy oraz przedstawienia specyfiki jego funkcjonowania w ujęciu metodologii pragmalingwistycznej. Podstawę materiałową stanowią konteksty występowania aktu

mowy podziękowanie, które zaczerpnięte zostały ze współczesnego języka polskiego.

Słowa kluczowe

pragmalingwistyka, akty mowy, akt mowy podziękowanie, semantyka, leksyka

“Showing gratitude is one of the simplest yet most powerful things humans can do for each other”.

Randy Pausch

1. Introduction

The subject of this study is the speech act of gratitude. The aim of the study is to define this speech act in reference to other speech acts as well as to present the specificity of its functioning in pragmalinguistic terms. Pragmalinguistics offers a research method that focuses on various types of communicative activities, known as speech acts. The analyzed material includes contexts of the speech act gratitude taken from the contemporary Polish language. The considerations presented here – due to space limitations – will only be an attempt to signal selected pragmatic aspects of the functioning of the speech act of gratitude in contemporary linguistic communication.

In Polish linguistics, speech acts have been studied by numerous scholars, including Krystyna Pisarkowa (1975, 1976), Maria Honowska (1984), Anna Wierzbicka (1973, 1987), Kazimierz Ożóg (1984, 1990, 1992, 2001), Aleksy Awdiejew (1987, 2004), Renata Grzegorczykowa (1995), Ewa Komorowska (1997, 1999, 2002, 2003, 2006, 2008, 2020a, 2020b), Ryszard Lipczuk (1999), Jolanta Antas (2000), Małgorzata Marcjanik (2002, 1993), Beata Drabik (2004), Aleksander Kiklewicz (2006, 2009), Izabella Prokop (2010), Michał Post (2013), Artur Czapiga (2017)

and others. Some linguists propose a cognitive approach to speech acts, e.g. Roman Kalisz (1994, 2006), also in collaboration with Wojciech Kubiński (Kalisz and Kubiński 1993), and Olga Sokołowska (2001).¹

2. Linguistic politeness

Gratitude is a speech act that belongs to the polite speech acts. The word *grzeczność* ‘courtesy’ in Polish comes from the prepositional phrase *k rzeczy* ‘to things’, meaning ‘appropriate, suitable, fitting’. According to Dubisz (2003), politeness includes, among others, words, gestures, forms of behavior which are an expression of kindness, a sign of good manners; polite, flattering words; compliments. Marcjanik (1992: 27) characterizes linguistic politeness as a set of polite strategies. She also defines two basic indicators of politeness, namely, showing respect to the partner (especially the elderly and women, superiors etc.), including downplaying the role of the Sender, and showing interest in the matters of the partner and his/her family, mainly the spouse (especially in matters of health, professional activities, current family events and facts from professional life). The model of linguistic politeness in Polish linguistics was proposed by Ożóg (2001: 75–78). By the model of linguistic politeness, Ożóg understands “a system of socially approved and commonly accepted rules and norms in a given community or a group” (Ożóg 2001: 75, translation mine). “These rules define a certain sanctioned manner of behavior, including verbal communication between people. Nowadays, it is a manner of behaviour described as appropriate, cultured-approved, polite, kind [...] and it stands in clear opposition to inappropriate, unsuitable, impolite” (Ożóg 2001: 75–76, translation mine).

Ożóg distinguishes two main principles that the socially accepted model of politeness is based on and further implemented

¹ See also the volume edited by Kubiński and Stanulewicz (eds.) (2001), as well as the introduction to it (Kubiński and Stanulewicz 2001).

by the use of polite phrases. The first principle assumes the autonomy, dignity and importance of every human being as a person. "Every person deserves respect and this fundamental principle maintained in contacts with other people. One should respect them and demand respect for yourself" (Ozóg 2001: 77, translation mine).

The second principle is the principle of kindness, which Ozóg expresses in the words: "Treat your interlocutor, even a stranger, kindly" (Ozóg 2001: 77). Other rules of politeness are presented by Ozóg as follows:

- showing modesty while enhancing the appreciation for the partner; diminishing one's own merits, raising the merits of another person;
- expressing a request politely, showing gratitude for the favour/service;
- declarations of help, expressing readiness to do a favour;
- showing remorse in the case of committing a breach of etiquette or misconduct;
- empathizing with the interlocutor, sharing joy and sorrow with him/her;
- being tactful towards others – avoiding topics that are unpleasant for them or bringing unpleasant news/information in a delicate way;
- showing special respect to certain members of the group – in our culture – women, the elderly, parents etc. (Ozóg 2001: 77–78).

Geoffrey N. Leech (1983), in his *Interpersonal Theory*, distinguished two basic rules of linguistic politeness. The first rule is the rule of courtesy. It says that the meaning of the utterance should be acceptable to the interlocutor and conveyed so that the statement does not cause any unpleasant emotional state. The second rule involves the approval of the interlocutor. This rule assumes that the participants of the conversation should express mutual kindness and acceptance for their utterances and interpersonal contacts as well as satisfaction with the

conversation. These rules, assigned by Leech to different categories, are the following ones:

- the rule of modesty (the utterance should avoid emphasizing one's "strengths" and successes, which, in a way, could evoke a feeling of inferiority in the recipient);
- the rule of compliance (whenever possible, approval and consent should be expressed with the opinions of the interlocutor);
- the rule of cooperation (one should express the will to continue the conversation and look for the most appropriate ways to organize one's contribution to the conversation);
- the rule of irony (jokes and mockery should be expressed in a clear and legible way, allowing for proper interpretation);
- content attractiveness rule (the Sender and Recipient should express interest in the topics of the conversation and propose topics that are interesting not only to themselves but also to the interlocutor);
- Pollyanna's rule (avoiding topics unpleasant for the interlocutor and those that may bring unpleasant associations).

According to Leech, adherence to all these rules is an indicator of linguistic politeness.

3. The speech act of gratitude in the classification of speech acts

The speech act of gratitude is found in various classifications of speech acts. The first classification was proposed by John Langshaw Austin (1993). Austin defined speech acts according to their corresponding performative verbs, that is, verbs in the 1st person singular or plural of the present indicative mood, which, in his opinion, constituted the basis of explicit performative utterances. As a result, Austin distinguished five basic types of speech acts:

- *verdictives* including acts of giving a verdict, estimation or appraisal, e.g. acquitting, reckoning, assessing, diagnosing;

- *exercitives* including acts of exerting powers, rights or influence, e.g. appointing, voting, ordering, warning;
- *commissives* including acts that commit the speaker to doing something, e.g. promising, undertaking, consenting, opposing, betting;
- *behabitives* including acts that clarify reasons or arguments, e.g. affirming, denying, stating, describing, asking, answering;
- *expositives* including acts having to do with attitudes and social behaviour, e.g. apologizing, congratulating, commending, thanking.

In the above classification, gratitude belongs to the class of behabitives, i.e. socially conventionalized linguistic behaviours, showing attitudes (next to congratulations, greetings, expressing sympathy etc.). The exponent of the speech act of gratitude is the verb *dziękuję* ‘thanks’ in the performative function, i.e. in the 1st person singular or plural of the present indicative mood.

Another classification of speech acts was proposed by John Rogers Searle (1969). According to it, classes differ in the type of illocutionary force, that is, the intention behind the communication.

Similarly, Ryszard Lipczuk writes that the departure from the pragmatic criteria when describing speech acts is certainly more correct than the interpretation of performative verbs, because “it is difficult to talk about a one-to-one correspondence between verbs and illocutive types, and they are the central part of acts of speech” (Lipczuk 1999: 169–176, translation mine). The same approach, i.e. starting from the pragmatic criteria in the classification of speech acts, is also presented by Dieter Wunderlich (1976) and Inger Rosengren (1979). I also support this point of view because, in my opinion, the contextual analysis of speech acts shows that a performative verb does not always express an illocution contained in a performative verb, e.g. *Gratuluję Ci takiego zachowania* ‘I congratulate you on this behavior’ (irony), *Obieczę, że będziesz tego żałować* ‘I promise you will regret it’ (threat), *Proszę w końcu się uspokoić* ‘Please calm down at last’ (command).

Searle (1969) distinguishes the following speech acts:

- *assertives* including acts that commit the speaker to something being the case, e.g. swearing, doubting, boasting
- *directives* including acts that try to make the addressee perform an action, e.g. asking, ordering, requesting;
- *commisives* including acts that commit the speaker to doing something in the future, e.g. promising, betting, vowing;
- *expressives* including acts that express how the speaker feels about the situation, e.g. thanking, apologizing, congratulating;
- *declaratives* including acts that immediately change the state of affairs, e.g. firing, appointing.

In this classification, Searle placed *gratitude* in the group of *expressives*. The purpose of these acts is primarily to express one's own attitudes and emotional states.

As indicated above, gratitude is classified as a behabitive by Austin and as an expressive by Searle. On the other hand, Edda Weigand includes gratitude in declaratives, whereas Habermas (1971) and Wunderlich (Wunderlich 1978) classify it as satisfaction. Regardless of terminological differences, researchers include *gratitude* in the group of speech acts whose illocutionary goal is to express certain emotional attitudes.

4. An attempt to define the speech act of gratitude

Gratitude is initiated by Sender who expresses their feelings/emotions in response to the positive action done previously by the Recipient. Thus, I propose the following definition of the speech act of gratitude:

The speech act of gratitude is a polite reactive act. It is a response to a positive situation which has occurred, to which the Recipient contributed and for which the Sender expresses his/her gratitude.

For each type of illocution there is a certain set of necessary conditions that Searle names *preparatory conditions*. They must

be met in order for the illocution to take effect. In the case of an act of gratitude, as a preparatory condition, we can accept the positive situation that has arisen. The situation is caused by the Recipient and in connection with which the Sender may submit a gratitude message. Gratitude is a speech act expressing an attitude, a positive emotional state towards the Recipient. It can be an act that is a reaction to the gift, kind behaviour, acting in the interest of the Sender, for their benefit or the benefit of his/her relatives. The illocutionary purpose of gratitude is to express a positive attitude towards the person who performed an activity beneficial for the Sender. The psychological orientation of the speech act in question is the intention to express the state of satisfaction and/or joy of the Sender in connection with the help etc. received from the Recipient.

5. Basic structure of the speech act of gratitude

“Sender (participant(s) in communication) expresses thanks to Recipient (participant(s) in communication) for X (action helpful to Sender)”

The linguistic structure of the speech act of gratitude may vary. The Sender chooses a speaking strategy that suits him/her. Thus, the order of the components may vary and not all of them may be used. Examples:

- Sender (*Dziękuję/ dziękujemy*) + Recipient (*ci/ wam*) + X (*za pomoc*)
‘Sender (I/we thank) + Recipient (you) + X (for your help)’
- X (*Za zorganizowanie nam wspaniałego przyjęcia urodzinowego*) + Sender (*serdecznie dziękuję/dziękujemy*)
X (For organizing a wonderful birthday party for us) + Sender (I/we thank you very much)’
- Sender (*Dzieki*) + X (*za wsparcie finansowe naszej inicjatywy*)
‘Sender (Thanks) + X (for the financial support of our initiative)’
etc.

6. The speech act of gratitude in explicit and implicit speech acts

In linguistic communication, the speech act of gratitude can be expressed through explicit or implicit speech acts.

6.1. Explicit speech acts of gratitude

The basic lexical exponent of the speech act *gratitude* – as I have already remarked – is the performative verb *dziękować* ‘thank you’, in the 1st person singular or plural: *dziękuję* / *dziękujemy*. Gratitude is one of the few speech acts in which the performative exponent can be used in isolation or in conjunction with an intensifying adverb and still fully implement the illocutionary meaning, e.g.:

- *Dziękuję!*
‘Thank you!’
- *Dziękuję bardzo/ogromnie/strasznie.*
‘Thank you very much/so much.’

The form *dziękuję* ‘I thank’ may also appear in conjunction with fixed expressions, such as:

- *Dziękuję/ dziękujemy Ci z całego serca.*
‘Thank you with all my/our heart/s’.

Along with this type of open, direct thanks, there may be synonyms expressing gratitude, e.g.

- *Jestem/jesteśmy ci/wam bardzo wdzięczni.*
‘I am / we are very grateful to you.’
- *Nasza wdzięczność nie ma końca.*
‘Our gratitude is eternal.’

Acts of this type require full pragmatic interpretation, as the decisive role in reading illocution is played by presupposition, that is, the knowledge Sender and Recipient have (Komorowska 2008). Usually, the act of thanking is combined with expressions that clarify the situation.

Simple clarifications:

- *Dziękuję Ci za pomoc/wsparcie/życzliwość/dobre słowo.*
‘Thank you for your help/support/kindness/kind words.’

Complex clarifications:

- *Dziękuję Ci za to, że świetnie przygotowanie mojej córki do egzaminu z języka polskiego.*
‘Thank you for preparing my daughter to the Polish exam.’
- *Dziękuję Ci za umożliwienie nam spędzenia wspaniałego tygodnia w twoim apartamencie w Maladze.*
‘Thank you for enabling us to spend a wonderful week in your apartment in Málaga.’
- *Dziękuję Ci za wszystko, co dla mnie zrobileś.*
‘Thank you for everything you’ve done for me.’
- *Dziękuję Ci, że stanąłeś w mojej obronie.*
‘Thank you for standing by my side.’

Another explicit way of expressing the act of *gratitude* is phrases with the verb *dziękować/podziękować* ‘thank’ or with the noun *podziękowania* ‘thanks’, such as *chciałbym/chcielibyśmy wam/ci podziękować* ‘I/we would like to thank you’, *pragnę/pragniemy wam/ci podziękować* ‘I/we wish to thank you’, *przymij/przymijcie moje/nasze podziękowania/wyrazy wdzięczności* ‘Accept my/our thanks’. Examples:

- *Chciałbym Ci podziękować za zapisanie mnie na basen.*
‘I would like to thank you for signing me up for the swimming pool.’

- *Pragnę Wam podziękować za psychiczne wsparcie w tych trudnych dla mnie dniach.*
'I wish to thank you for your support during these difficult days for me.'
- *Przyjmij moje podziękowania za pomoc w przyjęciu mojej mamy na zajęcia seniorów.*
'Please accept my thanks for helping with my mother's admission to the activities for seniors.'

In linguistic communication, there are also other types of thanks, with some understatement, e.g. *Dziękuję. Ty wiesz za co* 'Thank you. You know what for'. This type of thanking is a kind of language game between Sender and Recipient, which, as a rule, can be afforded by people who are emotionally close and kind to each other. Due to presupposition, the number of people who can read such thanks in a proper way is limited.

6.2. Implicit speech acts of gratitude

The implicit speech act of gratitude is not expressed on the surface by using the performative verb *dziękować* 'thank'. The basis for determining the illocutionary power of such an act is the inference process, which, taking into account presupposition, allows for the interpretation of a given extra-linguistic situation. Some examples:

- *Nie zapomnę Ci tego do końca życia.*
'I will not forget it for the rest of my life.'
- *Mam w stosunku do Ciebie tyle ciepła i miłości.*
'I have so much warmth and love for you.'
- *Jestem twoim dłużnikiem.*
'I am indebted to you'.

7. Post-positional complemental component in the speech act of gratitude

In my works on speech acts, I introduce the term *post-positional complemental component* (Komorowska 2003: 237–246, 2008: 51–53, 2015: 897–904, 2020: 87–101). It is a phrase that is placed after a speech act. In other words, the *post-positional complemental component* brings additional elements to the content of a given speech act. On the one hand, it shows the emotions and feelings of the Sender, and on the other hand, it defines the conditions under which the situation occurs. Those can fall into different categories:

(1) positive valuation of the Recipient

- *Dziękuję Ci bardzo za pomoc wypielegnowaniu pięknej zielonej trawy. **Bez Twoich cennych rad na pewno by się to nie udało.***
‘Thank you very much for helping me to cultivate the beautiful green grass. **Without your valuable advice, it would not be possible.**’
- *Ogromnie wasm dziękujemy za przypilnowanie naszego domku i zaopiekowanie się kotami. **Bez waszej pomocy nie moglibyśmy pojechać na wycieczkę.***
‘Thank you very much for taking care of our house and taking care of the cats. **Without your help, we wouldn't have been able to go on the trip.**’

(2) justification

- *Pragnę Ci podziękować za sfinansowanie wyjazdu mojej córki do Francji. **Dobrze wiesz, że nie mogliśmy tego sami zrobić, bo nas po prostu nie stać na to.***
‘I would like to thank you for financing my daughter’s trip to France. **You know very well that we couldn’t do it ourselves because we simply can’t afford it.**’

(3) explanation

- Bardzo Ci dziękuję za wsparcie! **Te pieniążki chcę przeznaczyć na doskonalenie moich filmów.**
‘Thank you very much for your support! **I want to spend this money on perfecting my films.**’
- Bardzo dziękuję za wiadomość, że zostałam przyjęta na iberyjską. **Zawsze chciałam uczyć się języka hiszpańskiego.**
‘Thank you very much for the message that I have been admitted to Iberian Studies. **I've always wanted to learn Spanish.**’
- Ogromne dzięki za pomoc w przygotowaniu uroczystej kolacji. **Ten wieczór jest dla mnie bardzo ważny.**
‘Many thanks for your help with the dinner preparation. **This evening is very important to me.**’

(4) satisfaction / emotion

- Dziękujemy za zaproszenie na ślub twojej córki. **Bardzo się cieszymy, że możemy uczestniczyć w tak radosnej uroczystości.**
‘Thank you for inviting to your daughter's wedding. **We are very happy that we can take part in such a joyful celebration.**’
- Pani Profesor, dziękuję za wiedzę, która mi Pani przekazywała. **Jestem bardzo wdzięczna losowi, że mogłam Panią spotkać na swoje drodze.**
‘Professor, thank you for the knowledge you passed on to me. **I am very grateful that the fate brought us together.**’
- Ogromnie dziękuję kochani za wszystkie gratulacje i ciepłe słowa! **Jestem wzruszona.**
‘Many thanks, dear friends, for all congratulations and warm words! **I am touched.**’

8. Concluding remarks

The above analysis, carried out from a pragmalinguistic perspective, is only an introduction to the issue of the act of gratitude in the classification of speech acts. I have defined this

speech act and presented its basic structure as well as its functioning as explicit and implicit acts. In addition, I have highlighted the importance of the *post-positional complemental component* in the contextual perception of the speech act.

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Ewa Komorowska
ORCID iD: 0000-0002-8089-4440
Instytut Językoznawstwa
Uniwersytet Szczeciński
al. Piastów 40 B
70-065 Szczecin
Poland
ewa.komorowska@usz.edu.pl