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Author(s): Judith A. Becker and Patricia C. Smenner

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The spontaneous use of *thank you* by preschoolers as a function of sex, socioeconomic status, and listener status

JUDITH A. BECKER AND PATRICIA C. SMENNER

*Department of Psychology
University of South Florida*

ABSTRACT

This study investigated whether preschoolers would spontaneously say *thank you* in a familiar context without their parents' presence. Two hundred and fifty 3 1/2- to 4 1/2-year-olds played a game with their teachers and received a reward from either an unfamiliar peer or adult. Across conditions, 37 percent of the children said *thank you* spontaneously, more than in previous studies. The frequency of the spontaneous use of *thank you* was assessed as a function of sex, socioeconomic status, and listener status. Preschool-aged girls said *thank you* spontaneously more than boys, $\chi^2(1) = 7.95, p < .01$. Also, children from families of low economic status said *thank you* spontaneously more than children from middle income families, $\chi^2(1) = 7.17, p < .01$. This finding does not appear to be due to racial differences. Finally, the preschoolers said *thank you* spontaneously more to the adult than to the peer, $\chi^2(1) = 4.27, p < .05$. These results are discussed in terms of their implications for pragmatic socialization and the acquisition of politeness formulas such as *thank you*. (Routines, politeness formulas, pragmatic socialization, sex differences, socioeconomic differences, language and status)

INTRODUCTION

The study of pragmatics in language acquisition has emerged from the recognition that much of language cannot be understood without knowledge of the context in which a verbal exchange occurs. Context involves the listener's relationship to the speaker, the speaker's goal, and the physical setting in which the exchange occurs. Some of the pragmatic language skills children must develop to become effective communicators include knowing when it is appropriate to request rather than demand of a listener, taking turns speaking, and knowing when to use particular social phrases. As Eisenberg (1982) pointed out, learning to say the "right" thing at the "right" time means knowing when the "right" time is. Knowing when to use a social phrase such as *thank you* involves the

ability to perceive differences in the context of situations and the knowledge of rules governing social interaction. This is because the "meaning" of *thank you* lies in the context in which it is used rather than in its representation of an object or person.

Ritualized communications such as those involving *thank you* are universal in human languages and are important in the regulation of interactions within a society (Ferguson 1976; Goffman 1971; Goody 1978). *Thank you* is the accepted way of showing appreciation in the United States and may convey respect for a listener who has contributed to, assisted in, or alleviated a condition for the speaker. Failure to use phrases such as *thank you* correctly can have socially disruptive consequences for the individual (Apte 1974; Ervin-Tripp 1969; Hymes 1973). While politeness routines have been discussed in terms of adult use (Apte 1974; Ferguson 1976; Goody 1978), research on how and when children learn to use them is sparse.

The results of research on the use of *thank you* by preschoolers are inconsistent. Gleason and Weintraub (1976) showed that middle class children under six years of age tended not to say *thank you* spontaneously when given candy on Halloween. Twenty-one percent of the children said *thank you*, typically while being prompted by parents.

Greif and Gleason (1980) found spontaneous production of *thank you* by preschoolers to be even more rare, with middle class children responding spontaneously in only 7 percent of the appropriate opportunities observed in the laboratory. Following prompting by their parents (which occurred 51 percent of the time), 86 percent of the children said *thank you*. Greif and Gleason noted that *thank you*, as compared to *hi* and *goodbye*, was the least likely to be produced spontaneously and appropriately, and most likely to be prompted by parents.

It may be that the children's infrequent use of *thank you* resulted from factors other than their ignorance of the context involved in its appropriate use. One explanation for the infrequent spontaneous use is that children become accustomed to prompts by their parents. Children may view the prompt as an integral part of the ritual. It is unlikely, with parents prompting them over 50 percent of the time and persisting in prompting until the child says *thank you*, that prompts are having no effect on the children.

Another factor which may have influenced the low frequency of the spontaneous use of *thank you* by the children in these studies is the fact that both were conducted in unusual situations. The study by Gleason and Weintraub (1976) was conducted on Halloween, which occurs only once a year. A three- to four-year-old has had minimal experience with this ritual. The laboratory (used in Greif & Gleason 1980) is also a unique setting for the majority of children of this age. It may be that, in novel social situations, children attend to the unfamiliar aspects of the situation. Familiar and understood aspects of the situation may be neglected in an attempt to actively learn new information. Therefore, these

studies may not be representative of behavior in settings which are familiar and social situations which are more common to the children's experiences.

In fact, Eisenberg (1982) observed preschoolers in their homes. By age three, the children had a number of politeness formulas in their repertoires and used them spontaneously and appropriately quite frequently. Eisenberg concluded that children had formed a "category" of polite expressions and that errors indicated that the children were attempting to analyze the situational components governing the appropriate context in which to use the routines. Children never confused politeness routines involving *please*, *thank you*, *excuse me*, and *sorry* with greetings such as *hello* and *goodbye*. Unfortunately, this study has limitations in that it involved children from only three Mexican-American families who may not be representative of the population in general.

Additional research is necessary to determine whether preschoolers are aware of the contexts in which *thank you* is appropriate and whether this knowledge was masked by the presence of the parents or the unfamiliarity of the situation in previous studies. Furthermore, there may be other factors which affect the use of *thank you*. These include the sex of the child, the socioeconomic status of the child's family, and the relative status of speaker and listener.

Sex differences in the spontaneous use of thank you

There has been an abundance of research on sex differences in children's use of language, but relatively little deals with pragmatics. Most of the literature (e.g., Clarke-Stewart 1973; Maccoby & Jacklin 1974; Nelson 1973) shows that girls are more advanced than boys in many language skills. Greif and Gleason (1980) reported the only sex difference found in the use of social phrases by children of preschool age: A higher percentage of boys (41%) than girls (18%) spontaneously said *hi* to the experimenter. Gleason (1980) suggested that this difference may be because girls are more shy than boys and Western culture puts more emphasis on males providing greetings. However, Greif and Gleason (1980) also found that boys and girls are equally likely to say *thank you* and *goodbye*. Further research is in order on the spontaneous use of *thank you* by boys and girls of preschool age.

The spontaneous use of thank you and socioeconomic status

The relation between preschoolers' use of *thank you* and their socioeconomic status has not been directly addressed. Of the few studies conducted on the use of *thank you*, one involved families of low income (Eisenberg 1982) and two involved middle income families exclusively (Gleason & Weintraub 1976; Greif & Gleason 1980). While both middle and low income parents were found to prompt their children to say *thank you* (Eisenberg 1982; Greif & Gleason 1980; Gleason & Weintraub 1976), there is evidence of socioeconomic differences in the ways parents teach their children pragmatic skills. Greif and Gleason (1980)

suggested that middle income families may be more permissive and concern themselves less with pragmatic routines. Researchers have noted that lower class, black families tend to emphasize different pragmatic skills (Heath 1983), such as making "ritual insults" (Labov 1972; Sullivan 1972), and even encourage pragmatic behaviors, such as profanity, that are often punished by middle class, white parents (Ward 1971). Unfortunately, however, such comparisons are complicated by the confounding of class with race.

It may be that both middle and low income parents stress the acquisition of politeness routines, but not for the same reasons (Chilman 1980; Kohn 1963). Middle income parents may stress politeness routines to allow their children to become socially effective communicators and develop beneficial affiliations; they emphasize social achievement. Low income parents may stress politeness routines in order to insure conformity and to gratify needs as conveniently as possible by avoiding social conflicts (Hess 1970). The extent to which teaching styles and the amount of prompting of politeness routines by middle and low income parents differ, and the effect these differences may have on children's spontaneous use of *thank you*, have not yet been studied.

Listener status and the spontaneous use of thank you

Authority (or status) is a natural concomitant of age. Status also includes relative power by virtue of control of resources, size, or sex. These and other factors that affect children's use of language include social distance or intimacy, what the speaker desires from the listener, and the formality of the setting in which an encounter takes place (Becker 1982; Brown & Levinson 1978; Ervin-Tripp 1969; Goody 1978; Wood & Gardner 1980). It is not clear at what age children begin to recognize and respond appropriately to listener status. Shatz and Gelman (1973), for example, found that four-year-olds were sensitive to their listeners' status and verbal abilities. The children used more polite and indirect speech with adults than with peers or two-year-olds.

The relationship of preschoolers' use of *thank you* to listener status has not been directly studied. There is evidence, though, that children of this age recognize differences in listener status and adjust their use of other politeness routines accordingly. For example, Bates (1976) found preschoolers to be more polite and indirect when requesting of an adult than a peer. Preschoolers also address dominant, higher-status peers with indirect requests, as they do adults (Ervin-Tripp 1969). Similarly, dominant children tend to use more direct requests with less dominant, lower-status peers (Wood & Gardner 1980). These studies demonstrate that preschoolers are affected by status variables, and adjust their use of politeness when addressing their listeners.

Previous research has provided much information about children's understanding and use of pragmatic skills. The present study focused on the spontaneous use of *thank you* by preschoolers and its relationship to sex, socioeconomic status, and listener status. It is necessary to study the spontaneous use of *thank*

you by preschoolers in a setting that is familiar to the children and in the absence of the parents. Thus, the present study took place in day care centers, a setting that meets these criteria. The children received a gift from either an adult or child model and this provided an appropriate context in which to say *thank you*.

METHODS

Subjects

Two hundred and fifty children (121 boys, 129 girls) between the ages of 3 1/2 and 4 1/2 years participated in this study. Subjects were drawn from day care centers in a southeastern metropolitan area. Children came from middle and low income families, as measured by the cost per week to the family of the day care center which the child attended. The 146 children from low income families attended day care centers which charge nothing to the family. The 104 children from middle income families attended day care centers which charge the highest rates in the area (approximately \$40.00 per week), and had parents employed in professional occupations. This information was obtained by a telephone survey and an interview with the director at each center.

Procedure

Teachers were given colored cards and asked to play a color-naming game with the children. The teachers explained that if the children correctly guessed the color on the card, they would receive a reward from a guest helper in the adjoining room. The teachers alternately called on boys and girls.

After guessing, children went individually into the next room where they each received a sticker from either a child model or an adult model. As each child approached, the model said only "Hi, here's your sticker." Both the child (a 4 1/2-year-old girl) and the adult (the second author) were unfamiliar to the children. Half of the children of each sex and socioeconomic group received the sticker from the child model and half from the adult model. Both models were seen first an equal number of times in each socioeconomic level. All responses were audiotape-recorded and the adult model also kept a record of them.

RESULTS

Inter-rater agreement was assessed conservatively. Three additional raters, blind to the purposes and conditions of the study, listened to the audiotapes and noted whether each subject said *thank you* or some derivative (e.g., *thanks*). Because of the high level of agreement among the four raters (96.4%), the experimenter's original coding was used for statistical analysis.

The overall frequency with which children said *thank you* was relatively low. Only 37 percent of the children across conditions responded this way. A number

TABLE 1. *Number of children responding thank you in each condition*

	Children responding <i>thank you</i>			
	Boys		Girls	
	Peer	Adult	Peer	Adult
Low SES	7 (19%)	13 (41%)	12 (34%)	17 (40%)
Mid SES	2 (8%)	1 (4%)	6 (21%)	10 (42%)
	Children not responding			
	Boys		Girls	
	Peer	Adult	Peer	Adult
Low SES	30 (81%)	19 (59%)	23 (66%)	25 (60%)
Mid SED	24 (92%)	25 (96%)	22 (79%)	14 (58%)

of analyses were conducted to see whether children's responses varied as a function of sex, socioeconomic status, or listener status.

In order to determine whether there were any main effects or interactions among the three independent variables, an analysis of variancelike version of the Chi square test was utilized. A 2 (sex: male, female) \times 2 (socioeconomic status: low, middle) \times 2 (model: peer, adult) distribution-free test of analysis of variance (Wilson 1956) was performed on children's responses. Table 1 shows the number of children in each condition who did and did not respond *thank you*.

The analysis revealed that girls were more likely to respond *thank you* than were boys, $\chi^2 (1) = 7.95$, $p < .01$. This effect was not qualified by any statistically significant higher order interactions. Nonetheless, the sex difference tended to be more pronounced for children of middle income families.

Socioeconomic status also had a significant impact on the use of *thank you*. Children from low income families said *thank you* more frequently than the other children, $\chi^2 (1) = 7.17$, $p < .01$. Because children from middle income families were predominantly white and children from low income families were predominantly nonwhite, a Chi square test of independence was also performed using socioeconomic status and race as variables. No significant effects were found for race. In addition, the effect of socioeconomic status was not qualified by any other higher order interactions.

Finally, there was a significant effect of listener status. Children said *thank you* more frequently to the adult than to the peer model, $\chi^2 (1) = 4.27$, $p < .05$. This effect was not qualified by any higher order interactions, although it tended to be stronger for children of low socioeconomic status.

DISCUSSION

Gleason and Weintraub (1976) found that children under six years of age tended to say *thank you* spontaneously only 21 percent of the time. In a similar study, Greif and Gleason (1980) also found the spontaneous production of *thank you* by preschoolers in the laboratory to be rare (7%) in the presence of the parents. In contrast, the results of the present study indicate that, in the absence of prompting adults, a greater number of 3 1/2- to 4 1/2-year-old children are able to recognize the appropriate context in which to say *thank you*. However, this difference can be accounted for by the effect of socioeconomic status: only 18 percent of the middle income children said *thank you* in contrast with 34 percent of the low income children. Thus, these results replicate those of Gleason and Weintraub (1976) for middle income children. The absence of parents and the familiar context do not appear to promote their use of *thank you*; parental prompts may thus be seen as a necessary part of the routine.

Greif and Gleason (1980) also found that preschool-aged boys and girls were equally likely to say *thank you* spontaneously. The present results indicate that preschool-aged girls say *thank you* spontaneously more frequently than boys. This finding is in accord with other research which supports sex differences in language development (Clarke-Stewart 1973; Maccoby & Jacklin 1974; Nelson 1973). Moss (1974) has suggested that girls receive more social training from adults than do boys and this may result in faster acquisition of the more social aspects of language. Sex differences in the spontaneous use of *thank you* by preschoolers may also have a cultural basis, with Western culture placing more emphasis on the use of politeness routines such as *thank you* by females.

A second factor shown to be of importance is socioeconomic status. Both parents of middle and low income status have been observed to prompt their children to say *thank you* (Eisenberg 1982; Gleason & Weintraub 1976; Greif & Gleason 1980), but there are differences in their styles of teaching. The finding that children of low income families said *thank you* more frequently than children of middle income families supports the idea that low income families stress certain pragmatic routines more. (This effect was not a function of race, which was confounded with socioeconomic status.) An alternative explanation for these results is that they reflected children's degree of appreciation, which may have varied according to the perceived magnitude of the reward. That is, because families of low income are unable to provide their children with as many luxury items as families of middle income, the value of the reward (the stickers) may have been greater for the low income preschoolers. Therefore, they exhibited greater appreciation by saying *thank you* more frequently than children of middle income status. In support of this idea, the adult model observed that the low income children showed greater excitement about the stickers than did the other children.

The present results can also be used to address Piaget's (1959) claims. Piaget argued that children under the age of seven years, especially between the ages of three and five years, find it difficult to accommodate the perspectives of their listeners. The results of the present study, however, indicate that children between the ages of 3 1/2 and 4 1/2 years do adapt to differences in listener status and say *thank you* more frequently to adults than to peers. This finding supports the results of previous studies in which preschoolers recognized differences in listener status and adjusted their use of politeness routines accordingly (Bates 1976; Becker 1982; Ervin-Tripp 1969; Shatz & Gelman 1973; Wood & Gardner 1980).

The present study indicates that under certain circumstances, preschoolers exhibit greater competence in the use of *thank you* than prior research has revealed. Nonetheless, fewer than half of the children in this study said *thank you*. It is not clear how these children differed from those who failed to say *thank you* in the appropriate context. The results show that sex, socioeconomic status, and status of listener affect children's use of *thank you*, and this suggests that individual differences in socialization play an important role. Further research is needed to investigate the role of socialization and how it influences the development of the use of *thank you* and other pragmatic skills. Additional research also needs to be done to explore how conversational contexts allow children to exhibit their abilities.

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