

## Thanking in Saudi Academic Emails

Nisrin A. Hariri

University of Leicester, UK

Email: [nisrinhariri@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:nisrinhariri@yahoo.co.uk)

Mobile: 00966-503529006

0044-7598476411

**Abstract:** This paper considers the pragmatic analysis of thanking by testing existing frameworks from interpersonal communication for rapport management (Spencer-Oatey, 2002) against a new dataset that comes from a computer mediated form of communication, namely emails gathered from educational exchanges between students and staff in a Saudi Arabian higher education context. The collected data consists of 140 emails. The thanking in the email were coded against Wong's (2010) framework of thanking. In order to explore their rapport potential, the participants were also interviewed. The key research questions which drive this study are:

- How does the use of thanking or expressions of gratitude vary according to the gender and role of the email sender?
- How is rapport potential of thanking perceived by the participants in this study?

The analysis showed that, although thanking in a Saudi context bears some similarity with thanking in other English contexts, there are some differences in the use, choice and form of thanking, but there are thanking phenomena in the data that have thus far not been accounted for. Likewise, while previous frameworks on thanking remain useful, they may need to be extended to cover more possible thanking expressions that may occur. Wong's (2010) framework in particular, when used in coding the Saudi academic email thanking, showed some limitations in accommodating the Saudi thanking expressions. Thus, it was essential to adopt it and do some modification on it, i.e. add one more thanking classification *other thanking* to make the system more flexible and capable of covering all the thanking strategies that occurred in the data. Wong's (2010) framework might also need to be extended by adding an additional classification that combine both classifications B and C, since the current study found that, in some occasions, it was hard to set boundaries between them. This proposed solution might help in overcoming this problem, through helping to provide a more accurate coding which may consequently be reflected on the accuracy of the results in a given study.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last 40 years, there were plenty of studies that investigated thanking as a speech act (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1976; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Al-Khateeb, 2009; Farina & Suleiman, 2009; Wong, 2010; Pishghadam & Zarei, 2012 and Liao, 2013). Other studies investigated thanking as a lexical item (Hymes, 1971; Rubin, 1983 and Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986, 1993).

Most of the previous applied linguistics studies that explored thanking in artificial data elicited through Discourse Completion Tasks (henceforth DCT) (Al-Khateeb, 2009; Farina & Suleiman, 2009; Pishghadam & Zarei, 2011, 2012 and Lee & Park, 2011) or role-plays (Siebold, 2012). Only a few studies looked at thanking situated in naturally occurring data, particularly in real-life spoken discourse (Wong, 2010 and Koutlaki, 2002) or in written texts found in acknowledgements at the

beginning of MA, PhD theses and textbooks. Additionally, despite the few studies that looked at thanking in a pedagogical context, particularly in English as Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, to the best of my knowledge, there are no studies that focused on emails exchanged between students and lecturers in an academic context.

The majority of thanking studies seem to adopt a second order politeness approach, compared to the very limited number of studies that combined a first order with a second order politeness approach (see the following section for the definitions) (i.e. Koutlaki, 2002). Some pragmatic studies examined gender differences in expressing gratitude (Kashdan et al., 2009; Fauziah, 2010 and Pishghadam & Zarei, 2011). Many studies compared between native and non-native speakers in expressing thanks (Eisenstein & Bodman, 1986; Intachakra, 2004; Cheng, 2005; Farina & Suleiman, 2009; Al-Khateeb, 2009 and

Pishghadam & Zarei, 2011, 2012). Other studies made comparisons between American and British speakers (Hymes, 1971 and Creese, 1991). These studies found that British speakers tended to employ an elaborated expression of "thank you" (Creese, 1991). Hymes (1971) found that the expression of gratitude functions differently in American and British English. In American English, thanking is an expression of gratitude; while in British English it is employed as a discourse marker (Hymes, 1971: 69).

Thanking was also explored in other languages e.g. in Persian and Arabic (Koutlaki, 2002; Al-Khateeb, 2009 and Al-Ali, 2010). Koutlaki (2002) investigated offers and expressions of gratitude in Persian language and how face work contributes to a polite communication between interlocutors. She argued that in a Persian context offers and expressions of gratitude are not perceived as face-threatening act FTA as suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987: 210) for affecting the speaker's negative face and for being indebted to the speaker, but rather were face-enhancing (Koutlaki, 2002: 1734). Coulmas (1978, 1979 and 1981) compared the speech acts of thanks and apology in English and some European languages to those found in Japanese. A similarity was found between thanking and apologies in Japanese for the shared indebtedness concept. In Japanese, thanking was emphasised on the trouble that was made, whereas in western context the focus of thanking was on pleasing.

In this study, thanking is examined in authentic email data, exchanged between students and lecturers in a context that has not been investigated yet (Saudi context) from a role and gender perspective (not just from a gender perspective as other studies have explored). This study is believed to be distinctive for combining both a first and second order politeness approach (for definitions see the following section) that does not only rely on the researcher's judgment of what is polite about the speech act under investigation, but rather takes into account the participants' perspective about the phenomenon in question: thanking. Thus, the current study attempts to bridge a number of the gaps found in previous literature.

## 2. Method

This study explores the politeness phenomenon i.e. the thanking that occurred in the email data through combining a first and second order approach (Watts et al., 1992). Watts et al. (ibid.: 3) described a first order politeness as "the various ways in which polite behaviour is perceived and talked about by members of socio-cultural groups". In contrast, a second-order politeness is a "theoretical construct, a term within a theory of social behaviour and language usage"

(ibid.). The thanking in the email were coded against the Wong's (2010) framework of thanking (see the Appendix) using ATLAS.ti software.

### 2.1. Participants

Twenty participants (10 women and 10 men), who either worked or studied in a Saudi university, participated in this study by providing emails that were written by them and exchanged within the Saudi academic context. Male participants were then divided into male lecturers (5 participants) and male students (5 participants). Similarly, women were divided into female lecturers group (5 participants) and female students (5 participants).

### 2.2. Data

The total number of emails gathered was 140 emails; 70 emails were collected from women and 70 from men (35 from female lecturers, 35 from female students, 35 from male lecturers and 35 from male students). In terms of the qualitative approach, 8 (4 women and 4 men) Saudi participants who have provided some of their emails earlier for this study were interviewed to elicit their opinion about thanking using a semi-structured interview. A number of participants were asked to comment on the importance of thanking, its functions, use and its effect. Since the interview was conducted in Arabic, each extract was translated in English in a way that is very similar to the original. Sometimes if the Arabic translation seems to be not idiomatic, an additional layer of translation is added in this paper, for more clarification. The purpose of using both mixed methods and of using two-stages in sequence was to start the study with a quantitative method to test the thanking phenomenon and then follow it with a qualitative method to explore and elaborate on the phenomenon.

### 3. Defining Thanking

Thanking is conventionally thought of as verbal or written phrases used as an acknowledgment to the interlocutor for a favour that was made or is expected to be performed by him/her for the speaker/writer's sake. The speech act of thanking is part of a wider speech act of expressing gratitude that has been defined and classified differently by various scholars. According to Searle's typology (1976: 12) thanking is defined as the speakers' performance of an act following a previous act that was performed by the hearer which benefited the speaker.

The collaborative nature of thanking between the thanker and the interlocutor has been described by a number of researchers. Searle (1969: 67) defined thanking as an illocutionary act done by the speaker after having received a beneficial act from the hearer. According to Eisenstein and Bodman (1993: 74) thanking is "a speech act that is mutually developed.

It can involve a complex series of interactions and encodes cultural values and customs". The speech act of gratitude was categorised by Austin (1962) as behavetive, in that it focuses on people's attitudes towards others' social behaviour. Searle (1976: 12) placed the speech act of gratitude in the class of expressive, since it shows the speaker's psychological condition towards people and relationships. Brown and Levinson (1987: 210) identified thanking as a FTA as the speaker experiences indebtedness to the hearer. In contrast, Leech (2014: 197) looked at it from a different angle and pointed out that from an interlocutor's perspective, thanking is a face enhancing strategy. According to Leech's categorisation (1983) the illocutionary goal of thanking is appreciation and generating a friendly and polite environment.

Most of these definitions of thanking imply that thanking is often a post-event speech act that normally takes place after an act that was performed by the hearer for the benefit of the speaker as indicated in Searle's typology earlier. Some of these definitions of thanking describe how thanking might enhance social relationships, as in Leech's classification (1983), where the aim of thanking is to generate a friendly and polite environment. All of these definitions and meanings of thanking have shaped the research that has emerged during the last few decades about this important speech act.

#### 4. The Forms of Thanking

Thanking expressions can occur either individually (single) or in combination and can vary from short

phrases e.g. *thanks* to expanded expressions that are boosted (Aijmer, 1996: 44). In this paper, I will be dealing with both single thanking (which is similar to Aijmer's, 1996: 44 simple thanking) and a combined thanking that covers the intensified thanking expressions. Aijmer (1996: 44) differentiated between simple and intensified thanking which is boosted either by combining it with intensifying adverbs e.g. "thank you so much" or with a compound thanks e.g. "thank you, that's lovely". She also found that intensified thanking occurred in almost half of her data (intensified thanks, 53.5% and intensified thank you 40.7%). According to Aijmer (1996: 46) intensified thanking is more common in forming a more polite thanking patterns and phrases. Example 2 below demonstrates the uses of intensified thanking in the current data.

#### Example (2):

What amazing doctor you are. Really you made me so happy. Thank you very much  
Thank you so much  
(Written by FS1, a female student to her lecturer)

Based on previous studies (Haaverkate, 1984; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986; Aijmer, 1996; Intachakra, 2004; Wong, 2010; Zeyrek, 2012; Jauts, 2013) there are varieties of thanking expressions that are commonly used in interpersonal communication including emails and were observed in previous literature. Table 1 below demonstrates the various studies that explored each thanking expression with relevant examples from the current data.

Table 1: Thanking features found in research literature with examples from the email data

The Thanking Feature	Studies where the feature was reviewed	Example from the Data
Thanks	Haaverkate, 1984; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986; Aijmer, 1996; Intachakra, 2004; Wong, 2010; Zeyrek, 2012; Jauts, 2013	وفي مرة قادمة تراسليني أرجو منك استخدام أسلوب أكثر لباقة و شكرا And next time when you contact me I wish you to use a more tactful style and <u>thanks</u>
Thank you	Haaverkate, 1984; Eisenstein and Bodman, 1986; Aijmer, 1996; Intachakra, 2004; Wong, 2010; Zeyrek, 2012; Jauts, 2013	<u>Thank you</u> for your response
Thank you very much	Holmes (1984); Aijmer, 1996; Wong 2010	Really you made me so happy. <u>Thank you very much</u>
Thank you so much	Aijmer, 1996; Wong, 2010	You really deserve it again and again <u>thank you so much</u>
Thanks awfully	Aijmer, 1996	No examples were found from the data
Thanks a lot	Aijmer, 1996	Thanking you a lot
Thanks a million	Aijmer, 1996	No examples were found from the data

Many thanks	Aijmer, 1996; Intachakra, 2004	No examples were found from the data
A combined thanking	Aijmer, 1996	Thanks a lot for your supportive message, I really appreciate it
Expressing gratitude to God: "thank/s God" or "thank goodness"	Jautz, 2013; Pishghadam & Zarei 2012; Zeyrek, 2012	No examples were found from the data
Religious formulaic expression "May God bless you"	Pishghadam and Zarei 2012; Zeyrek, 2012	الله يكتب أجركم الله يكثر من أمثالكم May Allah reward you (plural) May Allah increases other people who are like you (plural)
Thanking in advance	Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011; Chejnova, 2014; Zborowski, 2005	And I thank you in advance for your response
Thank you very much indeed	Aijmer, 1996	No examples were found from the data
Thanks very much indeed	Aijmer, 1996	No examples were found from the data
Cheers	Krung, 1998; Jautz, 2013; Intachakra, 2004	No examples were found from the data
Ta	Krung, 1998; Jautz, 2013; Intachakra, 2004	No examples were found from the data
That's kind of you	Jautz, 2013	No examples were found from the data
I must thank you/ him	Zeyrek, 2012; Jautz, 2013	No examples were found from the data
I owe gratitude to	Aijmer, 1996	No examples were found from the data
I'm grateful	Intachakra, 2004	No examples were found from the data
I appreciate it/ I appreciate the time you spend for me	Cheng, 2005; Pishghadam and Zarei, 2011, 2012	I really appreciate it
How can I thank all of you	Liao, 2013	No examples were found from the data
I really don't know how to thank you	Liao, 2013	No examples were found from the data
It's very kind of you to..	Liao, 2013	No examples were found from the data

In order to discuss the above table, I will first start by discussing the thanking expressions that were observed previously, but did not exist in my data. As shown in Table 1 above some, but not all, of the thanking expressions found in earlier studies also occurred in the email data considered in my research. *Cheers*, for instance, did not occur in any of the emails exchanged between Saudi students and lecturers, even in emails that were originally written in

English. This is possibly because, from a Saudi perspective, the item *cheers* is (to some extent) associated more with drinking alcohol, which is forbidden in their Islamic religion and culture, and perhaps may have influenced the Saudi participants' choice to avoid using it. When a male lecturer was interviewed, he was asked to justify his opinion about not using *cheers* at the end of any of his emails. The participant thought that, apart from the connotation of *cheers* with drinking alcohol, he commented that:

عندنا في ال culture ما نقول cheers thanks ممكن هنا different culture هي cheer يعني thanks يعني cheer in more informal نحن ما يستخدم حتى في academic issue ما بتستخدم cheer بين الدكاترة حتى بين الدكاترة هنا

In our culture we don't say cheers thanks could be here different culture she cheer [cheers] means thanks means cheer [cheers] between the doctors even between the doctors here.

In our culture, specifically in the academic context and in interactions between members of faculty, we don't use cheers we only use thanks. It may be used in different cultures but not ours. (ML1)

Similarly, *ta* as *cheers* did not occur in the current data. According to Krung (1998), both *ta* and *cheers* are typically used colloquially which thus may have restricted its use in the current data, since the current focus is on email data in a quite formal setting (academic).

Although the Saudi culture is governed by Islamic religious rules, expressing gratitude to God has not been used at all in the current email data. It is possibly because this may be more evident in verbal communication rather than in written forms, except in theses and dissertations' acknowledgements (Al-Ali, 2010). However, in the current data, there were few instances where some religious formulaic expressions e.g. *May God/Allah bless you* occurred, which signified the speaker/writer's religious affiliation through asking God to bless the recipient.

Most of the intensified thanking or what I refer to as *exaggerated thanking* forms, such as "thank you very much indeed", "thanks very much indeed", "thanks a million", "thanks awfully" and "many thanks" have also never appeared in the current data. Similarly, thanking forms that are associated with the concept of showing indebtedness as well have no presence in the email data e.g. "I owe gratitude", "I'm grateful", "how can I thank you" and "it's very kind of you". All of which may suggest that in a Saudi academic context, participants tended to employ simple forms of thanking in addition to some of the typical intensified forms e.g. *thank you very much* and *thanks so much*. The Saudi participants (in this study) also tended to avoid using the exaggerated thanking forms which convey indebtedness to the hearer and consequently affect the writer's negative face. So, the participants' avoidance of using exaggerated intensified thanking expressions (mentioned above), may indicate how such expressions may be perceived as both face-threatening and rapport-threatening to the writer. In contrast, the Saudi participants resorted to thanking expressions that perhaps save both the writer's and the receiver's face and that helps in building rapport in their interactions.

I will then look at the thanking expressions that were observed previously and were observed in the current data and finally move to discuss some of the specific forms of thanking that occurred in the current data, but were not observed in the previous work on thanking. Table 1 earlier illustrates that thanking may be expressed using a simple form of thanking e.g. *thanks* and *thank you*, which might sometimes be used as a discourse marker. In contrast, thanking expressions may also occur in intensified forms through including some lexical modifiers *very much* and *so much*. The more the use of intensifications, the more polite the thanking expressions are (Aijmer, 1996: 46). A thanking expression might sometimes be expressed in combination with some other type of thanking such as thanking and expressing appreciation of the act e.g. *Thank you, that's kind of you*.

In the current data, there were few instances where the writer of an email used pre-emptive/anticipatory thanking i.e. *thanks in advance* for a favour that has not happened yet which the writer is expecting the reader to do later, as demonstrated in the following example.

**Example (3):**

And thanks in advance

(Written by FS1, a female student to her lecturer)

While *thanks in advance* formula signals negative politeness and rapport strategy on the surface, which normally shows respect and deference, it could lead to a breakdown in communication. It may impose on the reader and assumes that she/he is going to comply with the request, which therefore might be perceived negatively (Economidou-Kogetsidis, 2011: 3208). This may sometimes threatens the reader's face, especially in asymmetrical relationships e.g. student-lecturer relationship, which in a Saudi context is expected to be quite formal.

A male lecturer in a Saudi university was asked about whether he thought it was appropriate to use *thanks in advance* in an email. He commented that this depends on whether there were frequent contacts between both interactants and the social distance between the writer of an email and the reader. In his opinion, *thanks in advance* is only used in friendly situations, and is inappropriate to use in formal contexts as illustrated below.

Friendliness أنه أخذ شويه علي يعني أنا ما أقدر أقول thanks in advance لأي واحد إلا واحد بيني و بينه contacts many time [times] أنه أرسل لي و أرسلت له و أرسلت له و أرسلت له أي أقول له لكن واحد أول مرة ما أستطيع أني أقول له أخذ شويه علي أنه في مراسلات بيننا مراسلات قد يكون

Friendliness that he became a little bit used to me [means minimise boundaries and the gap] I can't say thanks in advance to anyone except someone between and him contacts many time [times] that he sent to me and I sent to him and I sent to him and I sent to him that I say to him but someone the first time I can't say to him maybe he got used to me a little bit that there are contacts between us between us contacts maybe.

Thanks in advance convey friendliness that he became used to me, well I can't say thanks in advance to anyone except someone whom I had frequent interactions with, but if it is someone whom I'm contacting for the first time I can't say to him. (ML1)

According to this lecturer, it is inappropriate for a student to use *thanks in advance* with a lecturer as this affects the student-lecturer boundaries negatively. The lecturer thought that this also means that the student considered his lecturer as a friend, which is inappropriate especially in countries with high social distance relations as in Saudi Arabia.

و الله مو عادي طلاب أنا ما تعمل أي فرق fair ما تأثر علي كثير لكن هي أنه الطالب يعتبر أنه friend لي لكن أنا ما أبغى أعتبره friend لي أحيانا يقول لي والله دكتور ما أدري ايش فهو يعتبر نفسه فخاصة التعليم عن بعد فيهم هم بيعتبروا أنفسهم أنهم أصحابي فأنا ماني صاحبهم يعني فهم بيعتبروا أنفسهم ال positive positive و ال negative negative هي ما هي appropriate صراحة هي ما هي مناسبة مرة ما أعرف يعني fair غالباً

And Allah [swearing which means well] not normal students it won't make any difference for me fair it won't affect me so much but it is that the student is considering himself a friend of me but I don't want to consider him my friend sometimes he says to me and Allah [swearing which means well] doctor I don't know what so he is considering himself especially distance learning they are considering themselves the positive is positive and the negative is negative it is not appropriate honestly it is not very appropriate I don't know means fair mostly.

It is not normal, to me it doesn't make a big difference, but it's that the student considers himself my friend but I don't want him to be my friend, especially the distance learning students. Frankly, it's not very appropriate. (ML1)

Some of the thanking expressions that were employed in the email data did not occur in the previous studies I did not count instances of the word thank that appeared in the data if it is not an actual thanking e.g. لا شكر على واجب *there is no thank for responsibility*, which is an acknowledgement of thanking and a second part of an adjacency pair that is used following an actual thanking and normally in a negation form. The adjective *thankful* for instance was used as an expression of thanking in many of the email data especially as a closing formula, in order to establish and maintain rapport and social friendliness between participants as illustrated in the following couple of examples.

**Example (4):**

شاكرا و مقدر لكم حسن تعاونكم

Thankful and appreciated to you your [plural] good cooperation  
(Written by MS3, a male postgraduate student to his male supervisor)

**Example (5):**

شاكرا للجميع حسن التعاون

I'm thankful to all the nice cooperation  
(Written by FL5, a female lecturer to her colleagues)

In some occasions the adjective *thankful* is used following an advice or a request. However, in examples 6 and 7 here, the thanking expression *thankful* functioned differently, as a *please* marker, *kindly* or as a mitigating device (see example 9 later). But this thanking expression *thankful* is still considered a form of thanking that includes the stem *thank* in it, as examples 6 (example 6 was reproduced later as example 9 in this chapter) and 7 attest.

**Example (6):**

فأدخل - مشكورا - على موقع الجامعة

So access - thankful - the university's website  
(Written by ML2, a male lecturer to his undergraduate student)

**Example (7):**

فنأمل منكن الحرص عليها مشكورات

We'd hope you keep to this, thankful  
(Written by FL5, a female lecturer who is in charge of an administrative work to her colleagues)

The thanking expression, *thank you deeply* was also employed in the current email data, but did not occur in previous studies. Since the size of favour whether small or big influences the choice of thanking (Aijmer, 1996: 67), the thanking expression in example 8 below may suggest that the interlocutor has done the writer a great favour and seems to have spent more efforts and time (Rubin, 1983). Thus, the size of favour seemed to have influenced the writer's choice (1996: 67) of using the booster *deeply*, which reflects her indebtedness affection possibly.

**Example (8):**

I would like to thank you deeply for helping me

(Written by a female lecturer to a colleague who is higher in status i.e. Professor)

It is interesting to know that example 8 above was originally written in English and not in Arabic. This particular intensifier, *deeply*, seems to be borrowed from or a translation of an Arabic idiom شكرا من الأعماق which means *thank you from the depth*. In Arabic, this is the short expression of *thank you from the depth of my heart*. The most English equivalent of this Arabic idiom is perhaps *thank you from the bottom of my heart*, where the depth conception is metaphorically still expressed in it, just as conveyed in the Arabic equivalent شكرا من الأعماق *thank you from the depth*. This instance shows the participant's attempt to borrow a thanking expression from her first language (L1: Arabic) into the target language (English) which supports the finding that speakers of a foreign/second language tend to transfer strategies that are originally used in their L1 to the target language, which end up with having a negative pragmatic transfer (Al-Kateeb, 2009 and Liao, 2013).

5. Gender Differences

There tends to be a relation between the choice of thanking and gender (Kashdan et al, 2009; Fauziah, 2010 and Pishghadam and Zarei, 2011). Pishghadam and Zarei (2011: 140) found that expressing gratitude was conveyed differently among men and women. Kashdan et al. (2009) particularly found that men express gratitude in a less familiar and more challenging and anxiety stimulating way compared to women and therefore tended to avoid being in debt to help them build and enhance relationships with other people (Kashdan et al, 2009: 33). However, women used thanking more, which gave them the opportunity to initiate, maintain and promote relationships through expressing gratitude (ibid.). Fauziah (2010) examined gender differences in expressing gratitude in the movie, *Rachel Getting Married*. The study found that women expressed thanking in a more polite and lengthy way in almost all occasions. In contrast, men expressed gratitude more in formal situations (ibid.). These findings by Fauziah (2010) might be influenced by the fact that the data under investigation was, to some extent, artificial and explored a different cultural context. However, since the focus in this study is on authentic data, results are not necessarily expected to be in line with what Fauziah (2010) has found. This gender differences were also observed in the current data as illustrated in the following section (e.g. Tables 2 and 4).

6. Thanking Strategies

In order to explore the thanking strategies that were used in the current email data, Wong's (2010) framework (see the appendix) was adopted for its influence and suitability of the Saudi context compared to other systems (e.g. Intachakra, 2004 and Cheng, 2005). Wong's (2010) framework (see the appendix) outlines the linguistic thanking strategies as proposed by Wong (2010) with some examples stated from the current data. The framework has also been modified in the current study by adding an extra classification at the end other thanking so it would be more applicable in the Saudi context and extended in a way that enable it to cover all the Saudi Arabic thanking expressions.

In the above table, A to G thanking expressions are compound thanks (Aijmer, 1996: 48), where the thanking expressions are coupled with other utterances to promote the thanking (Wong, 2010: 1247). The thanking expressions from H to K are single thanks since they occurred once/alone. At the beginning, when coding the current email data, few problems arouse. First, there were some thanking forms in the data that could not fit in any of the thanking classification proposed by Wong (2010) as in example 9 below. To account for these problematic expressions, classification L in Table 2 above was added.

**Example (9)**

فادخل - مشكوراً - على موقع الجامعة

So access –thankful – the university website

(Written by ML2, a male lecturer to his male student)

The email extract in example 9 above is a reply by the lecturer to a student who requested to know his result in one of the periodical quizzes. The student mentioned that his previous bad mark that he had was due to being feverish when he took the test. He then asked for this tutor's help in considering his case and also asked the tutor to add him more marks. The tutor replied that he did not receive the results from the responsible administrative unit yet

and seemed to have preferred not to be involved and thus referred the student to the website, as shown in example 9. In example 9, the thanking expression i.e. the adjective *thankful* which is in the elliptical form of *I'm thankful* does not really show gratitude from the speaker. It rather functions more as a downtoner/downgrader, which softens and minimises the effect of any imposition that may result from the prior request. This interpretation may also be evident if we took *thankful* out of the original example (example 9) and imagined that the message was sent as *فأدخل على موقع الجامعة so access the university website*. This utterance (request) would look more direct and less polite than the original one. So, in example 9 it seems as if the tutor was not saying *I thank you for going to access the university's website* but rather meant saying *access the university website* and I am using *thankful* to be more polite. Through using this particular thanking expression *thankful*, the lecturer not only softened the utterance, but also seemed to construct a polite identity for himself. Thus, this may suggest that there is a relation between the linguistic choice of thanking and the type of identity that the producer attempted to construct for him/herself.

The problematic situation in coding the thanking expressions in examples 9 above highlighted the need for an additional classification which here was labelled as *other thanking* category (classification L in the appendix) to Wong's (2010) framework, in order to account for the problems and accommodate all possible variety of Arabic (and perhaps other languages) thanking expressions. This modification of the framework would particularly be useful in extending the framework to cover other thanking expressions that often occur in spoken interactions. In spoken Arabic, the most common response to a common formulaic greeting question like *how are you* is normally *I'm fine thanks Allah* which may be shortened as *thanks Allah*. Although *thanks Allah* (which is a response that normally occurs as part of an adjacency pair) did not occur in the current email data, this would not guarantee that it will not occur at all, in the future.

When attempting to code the current data according to Wong's (2010) framework, another problem also occurred. On a few occasions, it was quite hard to disentangle classifications B and G (in Table 6-2) in Wong's (2010: 1247) framework, which were: "thanking + complimenting interlocutor or positive evaluation of previous speaker's utterance" and "thanking + stating reason", as demonstrated in the following couple of examples.

**Example (10)**

Thanks a lot for your supportive message, I really appreciate it

(Written by FS2, a female student to her lecturer)

**Example (11)**

شاكراً لك أسلوبك الراقى في كتابة الرسالة، وقلة هم من لا يحملون الضغينة في قلوبهم

I'm thankful for your respectful style in writing the message, and rarely are those whom do not carry hatred in their heart

(Written by FL5, a female lecturer to her student)

As shown in examples 10 and 11 above, the thanking expression that was used in both previous extracts could either be classified under Wong's (2010) framework as a "thanking + complimenting interlocutor or positive evaluation of previous speaker's utterance" or a "thanking + stating a reason". More specifically, expressions like *your supportive message* in example 10 and *your respectful style in writing the message* in example 11 both convey the writer's attempt to positively evaluate the previous speaker's utterance through complimenting the interlocutor's behaviour in his/her previous message. However, the grammatical form of the thanking expressions in both examples (10 and 11) seems to occur in the following pattern:

Thanks/thank you/I'm thankful + preposition (for) + possessive determiner (your) + Adjective.

Thus, it may also be possible to classify the thanking expressions in the previous couple of examples as "thanking + stating a reason", which is the way that was chosen to classify the thanking forms in examples 10 and 11 as well as in other similar thanking expressions in the current data, based on its syntactic form. However, this difficulty in isolating both type of thanking classifications ("thanking + complimenting interlocutor or positive evaluation of previous speaker's utterance" and "thanking + stating a reason") in some situations, might be avoided by adding an extra classification that combines both category B and C in Wong's (200) framework, where it is hard to set boundaries between classifications B and C. The results of analysing the data, using an adapted version of Wong's framework, will be discussed in the following section.

**7. The Frequency of Apologies within the Email Dataset**

The expression of thanking (including both the speech act of thanking and thanking as a lexical items i.e. closing signal) appeared frequently in the current email data. Each email was analysed according to whether it contained an expression of thanks or not. The number of emails that either contained or has not contained a thanking expression is summarised in table 2 below. The results are normalised as the percentage of all emails and contrasted according to

the email writer's gender (All percentages here and henceforth except in Tables 4 and 5) were calculated out of the total number of emails 140).

Table 2: Number of emails with or without a thanking according to a respondent's gender with percentage

Feature	Emails written by women		Emails written by men		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Freq.	%
<b>With Thanking</b>	37	26.43	22	15.71	59	2.14
<b>No Thanking</b>	33	23.57	48	34.29	81	7.86
<b>Total</b>	70	50	70	50	40	100

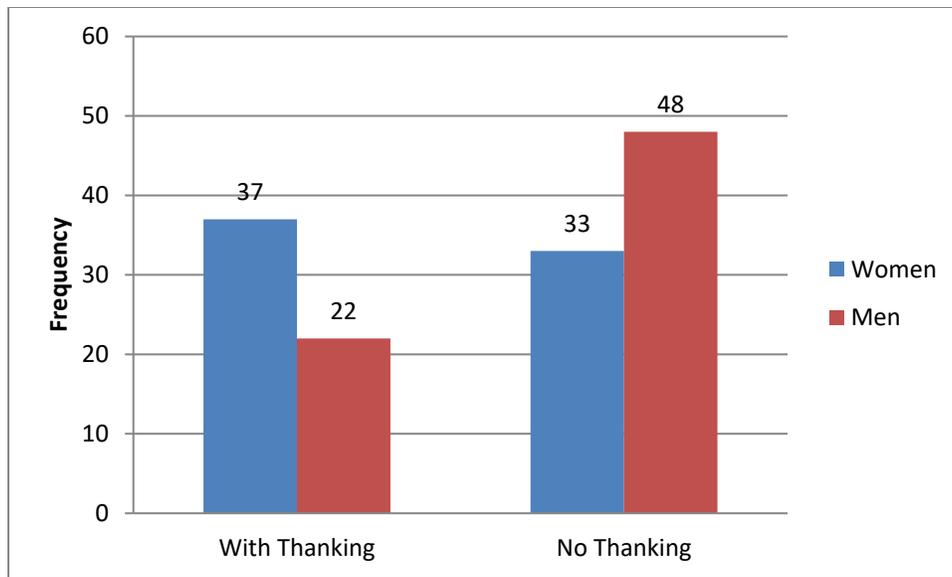


Figure 1: Emails with or without thanking according to participants' gender

As shown in Table 3 and Figure 1 above, out of all the 140 emails, 59 emails (42.14 %) contained at least one expression of thanking, whereas the majority of emails (57.86 % of all emails) did not contain a thanking expression. Table 6-3 also indicates that women participants included thanking more (26.43% of all the emails) in their emails compared to men (15.71% of all emails). If thanking is taken to be rapport building (see Chapter 2, section 2.4.), this might highlight women's greater concern for building and managing rapport with others in interpersonal communication. In contrast, emails that did not include an expression of thanking were sent more by men participants (34.29% of all the emails) compared to women participants (23.57% of all emails), which suggests that men were less concerned with rapport building. Thus, gender seems to have a sort of relationship with the frequent use of expressions of gratitude. This finding is in line with what Pishghadam and Zarei (2011: 144) found about women's greater use of thanking, which allowed them to build rapport, establish and enhance relationships compared to men. Emails that either included or did not include a speech act of thanking were then analysed according to the participants' role, as summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Number of emails with or without a thanking according to a respondent's role and gender in frequencies and percentages

Feature	Emails written by female Lecturer		Emails written by female Student		Emails written by male Lecturer		Emails written by male Student	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<b>With Thanking</b>	11	7.86	26	18.57	5	3.57	17	12.14
<b>No Thanking</b>	24	17.14	9	6.43	30	21.43	18	12.86
<b>Total</b>	35	25	35	25	35	25	35	25

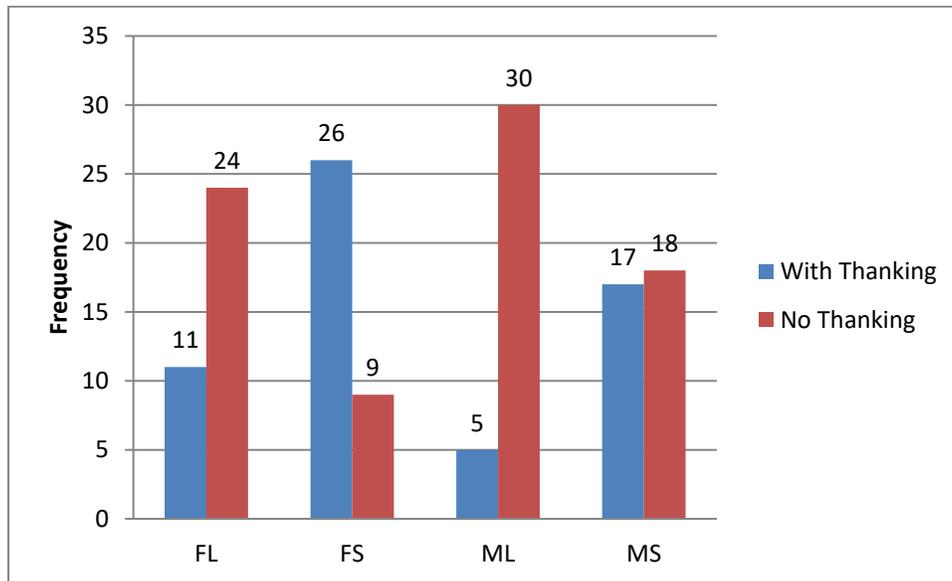


Figure 2: Emails with or without thanking according to participants' role

Table 3 and Figure 2 above indicated that students tended to send emails that contained thanking when contacting their lecturers more (30.71% of all emails) compared to lecturers (11.43% of all emails). The percentage of these emails that contained thanking and were sent by students outranked emails that were sent by lecturers in a ratio of almost 3:1. In contrast, lecturers more often tended not to include thanking (38.57% of all emails) in their emails compared to students (19.29% of all emails). This result was not surprising at all, because students who are normally in a lower hierarchical position are expected to use a more polite language style when contacting their lecturers so they can get what they want. This finding is in line with what Waldvogel (2002) has found in her study that explored 275 emails exchanged in an educational workplace (Victoria University). Waldvogel (2002: 50) found that thanking (at the end of a message) was used more when messages were directed upward than directed downward. This is perhaps because, since students' emails normally contain requests which are rapport-sensitive, students tended to use thanking expressions more to mitigate and compensate the imposition. From a first order politeness perspective and when an interview was conducted, one of the participants commented that students would show that they are writing to a superior by including thanking and gratitude at the end, as demonstrated below.

... الشكر و الامتنان في الأخير في اعتقادي هذا الإيميل يكون يعني ممتاز

Thanking and gratitude at the end in my opinion this email is excellent

Though finishing an email with thanking and expressing gratitude, the email would become excellent, in my opinion. (FS2)

The results in table 3 also suggest that the difference in role was interrelated with differences in gender. Female students sent more (18.57% of all emails) emails that included thanking than male students (12.14% of all emails). Similarly, female lecturers sent more emails that included thanking more (7.86% of all emails) compared to male lecturers (3.57% of all emails). Both male lecturers and students tended to send more emails that did not include thanking (21.43% and 12.86% respectively) than their female counterparts.

The expressions of thanking were then coded to whether the expressions were combined thanking, single thanking or other type of thanking. Each single and combined thanking was divided and coded according to other subcategory strategies of thanking, based on an adapted version of Wong's (2010) system, as summarised in Table 4 below (The thanking classifications A, C, D, F, I and K in Wong's (2010) framework were not employed at all in the current data and therefore were discarded in Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4: The thanking strategies used in the emails according to participants' gender

Feature	Emails written by women		Emails written by men		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Freq.	%
<b>1. Compound Thanking</b>						
<b>B. Thanking + Complimenting interlocutor or + evaluation</b>	2	2.56	1	1.28	3	3.85
<b>E. Thanking + stating intent to reciprocate</b>	1	1.28	0	0	1	1.28
<b>G. Thanking + stating reason</b>	9	11.54	8	10.26	17	21.79
<b>Total of Combined Thanking</b>	12	15.38	9	11.54	21	26.92
<b>2. Single Thanking</b>						
<b>H. Thanking as a closing signal</b>	31	39.74	19	24.36	50	64.10
<b>J. Thanking as a single expression</b>	3	3.85	0	0	3	3.85
<b>Total of single thanking</b>	35	44.87	19	24.36	54	69.23
<b>3. Other Thanking</b>						
<b>Overall Total of thanking</b>	49	62.82	29	37.18	78	100

Table 4 above demonstrate that the majority of thanking strategies that were used in the email data were single thanking, used in 69.23% of the overall thanking strategies found in the data (All percentages in Tables 4 and 5 were calculated out of the overall number of thanking used in the data). Only 26.92% of all thanking strategies were combined thanking. Both women (44.87% of all thanking strategies used in the data) and men (24.36% of all thanking strategies) tended to employ single thanking strategy when thanking much more compared to combined thanking (15.38% and 11.54% respectively).

Among the various subcategories of thanking, thanking as a closing signal (classification H) was the most common type of thanking that was employed, accounting for 64.10% of all thanking strategies used in the data, which is in line with Wong's (2010: 1249) finding. Women participants particularly used thanking as a closing signal much more (39.74% of all thanking strategies) compared to men (24.36% of all thanking strategies). The percentage of women employing thanking as a closing signal outranked men in a ratio of almost 5:3. This finding agrees with what Pishghadam and Zarei (2011: 140) found that expressing gratitude is conveyed differently among males and females

The next most frequent thanking subcategory that was employed in the data was "thanking with stating a reason", classification G (accounting for 21.79% of the thanking strategies used in the data). These expressions normally start with thanks/thank you followed by the preposition *for* and the verb + ing. Women participants in the current data used this type of thanking (thanking with stating a reason) slightly more (11.54% of all the thanking strategies) compared to men (10.26% of thanking strategies). Both "thanking plus complimenting the interlocutor or plus evaluation", classification B (3.85% of thanking strategies) as well as "thanking plus stating intent to reciprocate", classification E (1.28% of thanking strategies) are combined thanking that were also used occasionally in the data. Women participants used the "other thanking" classification that has been added to the framework, slightly more (2.56% of the thanking strategies used) compared to men (1.28% of the thanking used).

There were various thanking subcategories identified by Wong (2010) (see the appendix and table 4 earlier) that were not used at all in the data. Most of these were combined thanking strategies e.g. "thanking + alerts", "thanking + confirming interlocutor's commitment", "thanking + refusing" and "thanking + stating interlocutor's non-existent obligation" which were labelled as A, C, D and F in the appendix. Similarly, there were also a couple of single thanking subcategories that were not used entirely in the data as classifications I and K, i.e. "thanking as a responder to an expression of gratitude" and "thanking as an extended turn". This lack of use of classifications A, C, D, I and K suggests that, in Arabic, specifically in the Saudi academic context the choice of thanking tended to be centred on a somewhat restricted range of thanking.

The expressions of thanking that appeared in the data were also coded in terms of whether they were single or combined thanking but according to participants' role.

Table 5: The thanking strategies used in the emails according to participants' role

Feature	Emails written by female Lecturer		Emails written by female Student		Emails written by male Lecturer		Emails written by male Student	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<b>1. Compound Thanking</b>								
<b>B. Thanking + Complimenting interlocutor or + evaluation</b>	0	0	2	2.56	0	0	1	1.28
<b>E. Thanking + stating intent to reciprocate</b>	0	0	1	1.28	0	0	0	0
<b>G. Thanking + stating reason</b>	7	8.97	2	2.56	2	2.56	1	1.28
<b>Total of combined thanking</b>	7	8.97	5	6.41	2	2.56	2	2.56
<b>2. Single Thanking</b>								
<b>H. Thanking as a closing signal</b>	6	7.69	25	32.05	3	3.85	16	20.51
<b>J. Thanking as a single expression</b>	0	0	3	3.85	0	0	0	0
<b>Total of single thanking</b>	6	7.69	29	37.18	3	3.56	16	20.51
<b>3. Other Thanking</b>								
<b>Overall total of thanking</b>	14	17.95	35	44.87	6	7.69	18	23.08

As shown in Table 5 above, most of the student participants in this study tended to employ more thanking strategies (employing 67.95% of thanking strategies) when contacting their lecturers compared to lecturers (who used 25.64% of thanking strategies). This is in line with what Waldvogel (2002) has found that thanking moves were employed much more in emails that were sent up the hierarchy compared to emails that were sent down. Students thus seemed to realise the social status gap between them and their lecturers and attempted to acknowledge this by adding many thanking strategies to their emails. Female students in particular used more thanking expressions (44.87% of thanking strategies) when contacting their lecturers. The combined thanking strategies were used more by female lecturers (8.97% of thanking strategies) compared to other groups, whereas the single thanking strategies were used more by female students (37.18% of thanking strategies). Female lecturers preferred to use "thanking + stating a reason" more (8.97% of thanking strategies used) followed by "thanking as a closing signal" (7.69% of thanking strategies) as illustrated in the following set of examples.

**Example (12):**

Thank you for all the recommendation letters you send (sent) and for all your valuable advises.  
(Written by FL3, a female lecturer to a senior lecturer who is a colleague)

**Example (13):**

Thanks for taking the effort to apologise for missing classes

(Written by FL3, a female lecturer to a student)

In contrast, female students favoured the use of "thanking as a closing signal" (32.05% of thanking strategies) as illustrated in the following example.

**Example (14):**

Thank you so much

(Written by FS1, a female student to her lecturer)

Male lecturers showed no obvious preference differences, but tended to select "thanking as a closing signal" slightly more (3.85% of thanking strategies). Similarly, male students favoured using "thanking as a closing signal" much more (20.51% of thanking strategies) compared to other thanking expressions as shown in the following couple of examples.

**Example (15):**

... also give results of the stimulation PDF

Thanks

(Written by ML4, a male lecturer to a male student)

**Example (16):**

شاکر و مقدر لكم حسن تعاونکم

Thanking and appreciating your [plural form] good cooperation

(Written by MS3, a male student to his supervisor)

Thus, all the subgroups of participants in this study tended to prefer employing thanking as a closing signal in their emails, but this was more apparent in students' emails (52.56% of all thanking strategies that were used) than in emails sent by lecturers (11.54% of all thanking emails). Since the use of "bald thanking" (Rubin, 1983) through thanking as a closing projects social friendliness and rapport rather than showing gratitude (ibid.), student participants in the current data were more concerned with building rapport with their lecturers compared to lecturers. Students also attempted to establish a more polite identity for themselves through adding thanking expressions to their emails. In the interviews that were conducted, many participants in this study thought that an email would be perceived polite if it was finished with a thanking expression, as demonstrated below.

... إذا كان ينتهي في الآخر بشكرا

If it ends with thanking

An email would be perceived polite, if it ended with a thanking expression

(MS2)

Since requesting and apologising have been argued to be face and rapport sensitive (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Spencer-Oatey, 2000), the expression of thanking might be a suitable mitigating device that can help to reduce any possible negative effects. In order to test whether a thanking expression tended to co-occur with other relevant speech acts (particularly those discussed in this thesis i.e. requesting or apologising), each email was coded according to whether it contain both *a request + thanking* or *an apology + thanking*. Results were summarised in Table 6 below.

Table 6: The expression of thanking and requesting/apologising co-occurrence according to gender

Feature	Emails written by women		Emails written by men		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Freq.	%
Requesting + Thanking	13	9.29	14	10	27	9.29
Apologising + Thanking	4	2.86	4	2.86	8	5.71
<b>Total</b>	17	12.14	18	12.86	35	25

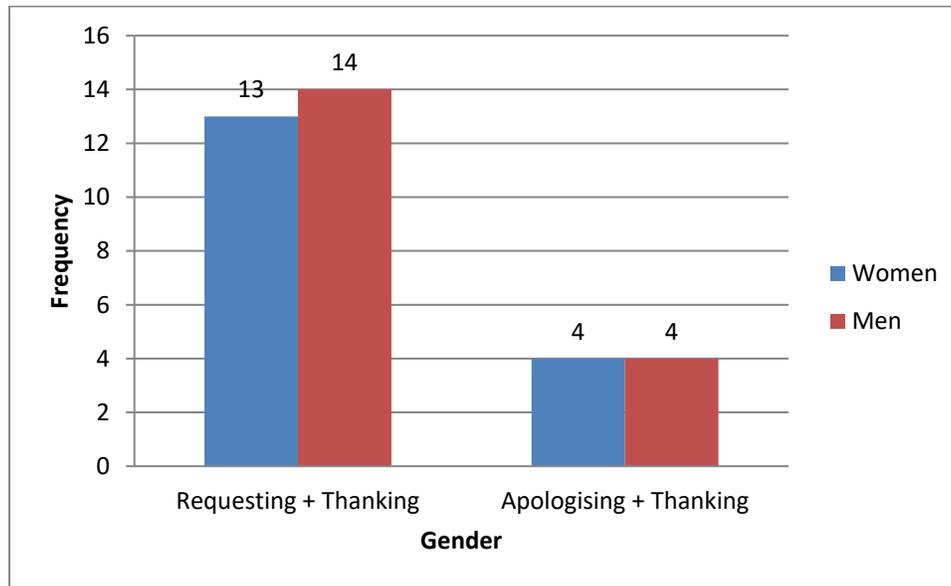


Figure 3: The expression of thanking and requesting/apologising co-occurrence according to gender

As shown in Table 6 and Figure 5 above, thanking tended to co-occur with requesting much more (19.29 % of all the emails that were sent) compared to apologising (5.71 % of all the emails) for both women and men. The percentage for emails that contained *thanking and requesting* outranked emails that contained *thanking and apologising* in a ratio of more than 3:1. Table 6 above did not show any clear differences between women and men in the use of either combination. When results were disaggregated according to role, the following table was given.

Table 7: The expression of thanking and requesting/apologising co-occurrence according to role

Feature	Emails written by female Lecturer		Emails written by female Student		Emails written by male Lecturer		Emails written by male Student	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
<b>Requesting + Thanking</b>	2	1.43	11	7.86	3	2.14	11	7.86
<b>Asking a question + Thanking</b>	1	0.71	3	2.14	2	1.43	2	1.43
<b>Total</b>	3	2.14	14	10	5	3.57	13	9.29

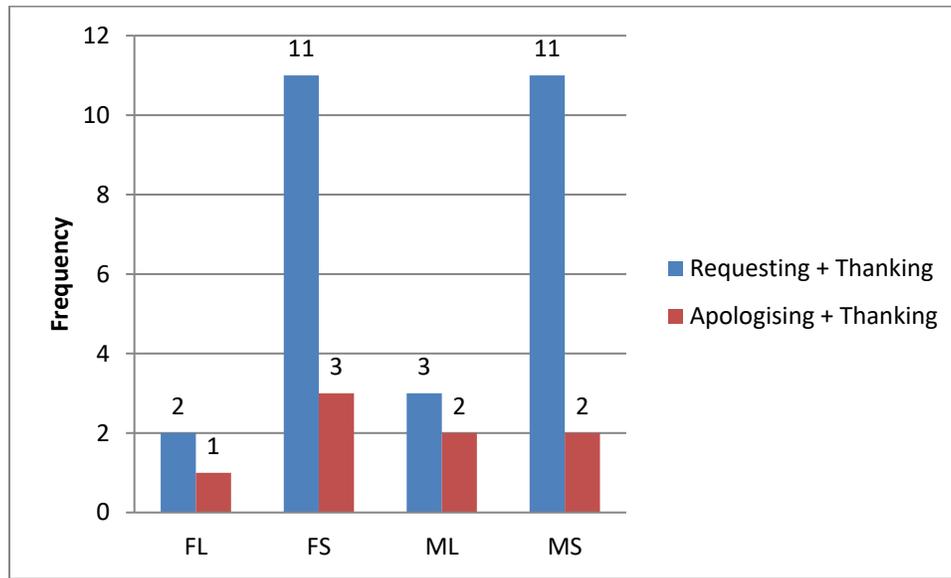


Figure 4: The expression of thanking and requesting/apologising co-occurrence according to role

Table 7 and Figure 6 above, also indicate that students tended to accompany their requests and apologies with thanking much more (19.29 % of all the emails) than lecturers (5.71 % of all the emails). This may convey students' awareness of the rapport sensitivity nature of requests and apologies (particularly requests) and the lower hierarchical level that students belong to compared to lecturers. Thus, students in this study attempted to reduce any possible negative effects that may affect rapport and the lecturers' face by adding a thanking expression to both speech acts.

#### 7. Conclusion

Much of the analysis in this paper confirms earlier research on thanking, namely that people tend to transfer the thanking strategies used in their L1 to the target language (Al-Khateeb, 2009 and Liao, 2013: 71). It also confirms that gender appears to have some influence on the frequent use of expression of gratitude as women used thanking more than men and that expressing gratitude is conveyed differently among men and women (Pishghadam and Zarei, 2011: 140-144). Findings were also in line with what Waldvoeger (2002) found that thanking moves occurred more (8 times) in emails that were sent up the hierarchy compared to emails that were sent down. However, the analysis in this data also showed something specific about the Saudi context.

Although thanking in a Saudi context seems to resemble thanking in some other English contexts, there are some differences in the use, choice and form of thanking. *Cheers* and *ta*, which are both common thanking expressions in English, did not occur in any of the emails exchanged between Saudi students and lecturers. Similarly, expressing gratitude to God and the exaggerated thanking forms did not appear at all in the current data. In contrast, some of the thanking forms that occurred in the current data were not used entirely in previous studies. The adjective *thankful* as well as the thanking expression *thank you deeply* are evidences for thanking expressions that were used in the Saudi context, but were not used in other contexts.

While previous frameworks on thanking remain useful, they may need to be extended to cover more possible thanking expressions that may occur. Wong's (2010) framework in particular, when used in coding the Saudi academic email thanking, showed some limitations in accommodating the Saudi thanking expressions. Thus, it was essential to adopt it and do some modification on it, i.e. add one more thanking classification "other thanking" to make the system more flexible and capable of covering all the thanking strategies that occurred in the data. Wong's (2010) framework might also need to be extended by adding an additional classification that combine both classifications B and C, since the current study found that, in some occasions, it was hard to set boundaries between them. This proposed solution might help in overcoming this problem, through helping to provide a more accurate coding which may consequently be reflected on the accuracy of the results in a given study.

Since the data sample was limited, this study is not aiming to generalize its findings to all Saudi population. The relatively small number of emails that were collected was particularly due to the privacy of email messages. The email data in this study was also heterogeneous and too mixed, in a way that was gathered from participants with different faculties, specialties, backgrounds and ages, and who were enrolled in different Saudi universities.

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#### 9. Appendix

Thanking Strategies	Wong's Examples	Examples from the Data
A. Thanking + alerters	Attention getter alerter: oh Title alerter: Professor Name alerter: Alice e.g. thank you professor	No reported examples
B. Thanking + complimenting interlocutor or positive evaluation of previous speaker's utterance	Appreciation of the act Appreciation of the addressee e.g. thank you. That's very sweet of you	I don't know what to say or how to thank you. What amazing doctor you are. really you made me so happy.
C. Thanking the confirming interlocutor's commitment	No stated examples	No reported examples
D. Thanking + refusing	No stated examples	No reported examples
E. Thanking + stating intent to reciprocate	No stated examples	Thank you very much. And I didn't forget to pray to god [God] to give you whatever you want or ask him in your whole life inshalaa [in Allah's willing
F. Thanking + stating interlocutor's non-existent obligation	No stated examples	No reported examples
G. Thanking + stating reason	Stan, thanks very much for coming along this morning	Thanks for your supportive message.
H. Thanking as a closing signal	Thank you	I wish that this file reaches to as many students as possible. Thanks
I. Thanking as a responder to an expression of gratitude	Thank you	No reported examples

J. Thanking as a single expression	Thank you very much indeed	شكرا لك أستاذة X Thank you lecturer X
K. Thanking as an extended turn	1 <sup>st</sup> turn: Stan, thanks very much for coming along this morning (category G) 2 <sup>nd</sup> turn: It's great to see you (category B) 3 <sup>rd</sup> turn: thank you very much indeed (category J)	No reported examples
L. Other thanking	No reported examples (this classification was added in this study)	فأدخل - مشكورا - على موقع الجامعة So access –thankful- the university's website

#### Thanking Strategies with examples

10/9/2025