

Saying 'Thank You' and Meaning It

Abstract: Searle held that 'thank you' is an expressive illocutionary act that expresses the gratitude of the speaker. Although this view has been very influential, I argue that it must be rejected because it has counterintuitive implications about when a speaker is being insincere and when she is not. A more satisfactory account can be given if we take 'thank you' to express the normative judgment that a grateful response is required. Although I defend the judgment account from misinterpretations and objections, I ultimately add to it to explain how 'thank you' can pay respect and not just communicate it. I explain this by saying that 'thank you' has an effective use that allows us to pay our respects even if we don't judge that a grateful response is necessary.

According to an influential view from Searle (1969, 1979) an utterance of 'thank you' is an example of an expressive illocutionary act. Expressives do not a commit a speaker to something's being the case as assertives do (1979: 12), and they do not try to make something the case as directives do (1979: 13). Instead, they simply express an attitude that the speaker has towards something. If I congratulate you on publishing your article, I express my joy at the fact that you have published something. I do not mean to get you to publish something or to commit myself to the truth of your having published something. If I feel no joy when I congratulate you, my use is insincere. Searle thinks that in the case of 'thank you,' the attitude expressed is the feeling of gratitude. It follows that 'thank you' cannot be sincere unless the speaker actually feels gratitude.

Despite the enormous influence that this account has had amongst philosophers (Bach and Harnisch 1979: 51; Macnamara 2013), linguists (Norrick 1978: 277; Aijmer 1996: 34), sociologists (Apte 1974: 70), and anthropologists (Appadurai 1985: 237), I argue that it cannot be an adequate account of 'thank you.' While 'thank you' does indeed have an expressive function, it does not express the speaker's feelings of gratitude but instead

expresses the speaker's judgment that a grateful response is fitting. Since 'thank you' expresses a judgment of fittingness rather than an emotion, I will call this account the *judgment account*.

That the judgment account does a better job of explaining our intuitions of when utterances of 'thank you' are sincere will be argued in section one. In section two, I will compare the account to other views with which it might be confused, and in sections three and four, I will explain how 'thank you' can express a judgment rather than an emotion without being classified as an assertive. Finally, in the last section, I will try to accommodate the intuition that sometimes saying 'thank you' is more about *paying* respect than expressing it.

## Section 1: The Meaning of 'Thank You'

As noted above, Searle's account predicts that any use of the phrase 'thank you' which is not accompanied by a grateful psychological state must be insincere.<sup>1</sup> Years earlier, however, Austin (1962) had expressed doubts that feeling gratitude was always necessary in order to express thanks. Austin claimed that sometimes it becomes 'de rigueur' to use 'thank you' and other such expressions even 'when they are felt fitting, regardless of whether we really feel anything at all...' (1962: 78-79). While Austin does not explain or argue for this remark, I think he is right to emphasize judgments of fittingness rather than felt emotions. Consider the following scenario. Samuel's kids are running wild at the airport. Between trying to wrangle his kids and dealing with his luggage, he is having trouble

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<sup>1</sup> Ridge (2006) argues that Searle should have said that a use is sincere if the speaker believes they have the emotion rather than if the speaker actually has the emotion. He uses cases where we are deceived about our own mental states to drive this point home. My own examples do not depend upon us being so deceived and are orthogonal to Ridge's concerns.

orienting himself enough to figure out which way his gate is. He asks someone for the way, and she tells him. He manages to say 'thank you' before returning to his wrangling. Let us suppose that as a matter of empirical fact, Samuel does not feel any gratitude, just stress and anxiety. Suppose further that in calmer moments, Samuel would certainly have felt gratitude, and that Samuel himself believes that a grateful response is occasioned in this circumstance. Should we really follow Searle in thinking that Samuel's thanks are insincere?

Consider a similar case. Suppose that Joslyn makes a mistake in a competition that would normally disqualify her. Her bitter enemy covers for her in order to allow her to stay in the contest. Joslyn is feeling too humiliated and angry to feel gratitude or much of anything else. Nevertheless, Joslyn recognizes that her enemy was not trying just to lord something over her but was genuinely trying to help her. She also recognizes that were her enemy someone else, she would feel grateful for her assistance. In other words, she recognizes that a grateful response is due in this circumstance. Although painful to her, she manages to say 'thank you.' Here too, it seems implausible to follow Searle in thinking that Joslyn's 'thank you' is insincere.

Joslyn and Samuel judged that a grateful response was appropriate but happened not to feel any gratitude. Although less usual, it is possible to imagine a case where someone judges that they ought not to have a grateful response but happens to feel gratitude anyway. Suppose Alison is in an emotionally abusive relationship such that she starts feeling gratitude just because her spouse refrains from haranguing her. Alison comes to recognize this pattern, but her emotions have not caught up to her judgments. Even after the recognition, there are times when she finds herself feeling grateful for things that her judgment tells her she should not feel grateful for. Suppose that in one such instance Alison decides to say 'thank you' after all because she wants to avoid a scene. Now I maintain that

saying 'thank you' in this case *would be* insincere despite the fact that the speaker happens to be feeling gratitude at the moment.

It is useful here to consider a slightly different case. Suppose that Alison feels a surge of gratitude and says 'thank you' even before she is fully aware of what she is doing. The 'thank you' slips out as it were and is instantly regretted. It might be tempting in this semi-voluntary case to say that Alison's 'thank you' is indeed an expression of her mental state even though she doesn't judge that a grateful feeling is appropriate. But, I think in this semi-voluntary case, we have reason to worry that it is a communicative speech act at all. Since it slipped out, Alison is not intending to communicate anything by this speech act, and she certainly does not intend for her audience to recognize her intention to communicate something. Grice (1957) would say that her words only mean something in the same way that smoke means fire. As Grice emphasizes, what a speaker means is tightly connected with what she intends. I maintain that only in cases where a speaker holds that a grateful response is fitting can she intend to express this with a 'thank you.'

What Samuel, Joslyn, and Alison's cases have in common is that their emotional states do not line up with their judgments. They believe that a grateful response is required, but, for some reason, don't happen to feel gratitude right now or vice-versa. Such a disconnect between our judgments and our feelings is a common feature of our emotional life. Often, we feel afraid even when we judge that there is no danger and fail to feel trust even when we judge that someone is trustworthy. In the philosophical literature on emotion, this phenomenon is called 'recalcitrance,' and from this point of view it is hardly surprising to find that our feelings of gratitude can come apart from our judgments of when a grateful response is appropriate. What the cases of Joslyn, Samuel, and Alison show is that in such cases of recalcitrance, the sincerity conditions of 'thank you' are tied to our

judgments not our feelings. When we judge that a grateful response is fitting, saying ‘thank you’ is perfectly sincere and when we don’t it is not. I have called this account the *judgment account* because it argues that ‘thank you’ expresses not the feeling of gratitude but the judgment that a grateful response is called for.

So far, I have been using phrases like ‘a grateful response is fitting,’ ‘a grateful response is appropriate,’ or ‘a grateful response is called for’ to refer to the content of the judgment which ‘thank you’ expresses. I use these rather awkward phrases to try to sidestep the debate about what kind of response gratitude requires. Does it require primarily an act of reciprocation (Simmons 1979: 166-67)? Can a simple ‘thank you’ count as an act of reciprocation (Berger 1975: 302-03)? Does it require an emotional response (Wellman 1999)? Perhaps, it requires both reciprocation and an emotional response (McConnell 1993: 56)? It is possible, I believe, to see that a grateful response is required without taking a position on what this grateful response should be, and it is this indeterminate requirement of gratefulness that represents the sincerity conditions of our use of ‘thank you’.

It is important to stress the normative nature of the judgment. It is often noted that ‘thank you’ is appropriate when someone has benefited us. This suggests a close non-normative competitor to the judgment account defended here.<sup>2</sup> Instead of expressing the normative judgment that a grateful response is appropriate because someone has benefited us, perhaps ‘thank you’ just expresses the more straightforward belief that someone has benefited us. The non-normative account and the normative might well agree on when it is appropriate to say ‘thank you’. According to the view defended here, however, our

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<sup>2</sup> Thanks to \_\_\_\_ for helping me to see this alternative.

judgment entails not only that certain conditions have been met but also entails that these conditions make some sort of demand on us. It is not just that a person has benefited us but also that this benefit calls for something from us.

The normative account and the non-normative account do not differ in the conditions of application, but it is still possible to test our intuitions. Suppose that Samir has decided that grateful responses are part of a morality system that he does not accept. Samir understands however the rather complicated conditions under which 'thank you' is said. Perhaps, he even grasps nuances and follows Berger (1975: 299) and McConnell (1993: 42) in thinking that thanks are sometimes appropriate when the benefactor tries to benefit us and fails. The question is whether on his lips 'thank you' is sincere or not. Despite the accuracy of his concept, he lacks a belief that this situation calls for any sort of grateful response from him. My judgment account which insists on the normativity of the expressed belief would hold that Samir's 'thank you' is insincere. According to the non-normative account, however, Samir's 'thank you' could be perfectly sincere since it just expresses a belief that these background conditions are met. I take it that our own intuitions would render this usage insincere. For this reason, 'thank you' not only identifies benefiting situations but also acknowledges that these situations call for some sort of grateful response.

To say that 'thank you' expresses a belief raises a worry about categorization. According to Searle, the difference between assertives, like 'grass is green' and expressives is that the former express a belief and the latter express an attitude or an emotion. If I am correct then it turns out that 'thank you' and other phrases like it actually express a kind of belief, albeit a normative one. Perhaps, then my account should be read as an argument for

classifying 'thank you' as an assertive rather than an expressive. I return to this in the third section of this paper.<sup>3</sup>

## Section 2: A Comparison with Other Views

Others have expressed dissatisfaction with Searle's classification. I will consider three accounts that depart from Searle's and which in some way or another come close to my own. In distinguishing the judgment view from these others, I hope to shed further light on the implications of my view. Consider first, Camenisch's view (1981: 7) who suggests that 'thank you' is a commissive, i.e. a speech act which functions to commit the speaker to some action in the future.<sup>4</sup> This understanding comes close to the judgment account I have been defending since a belief in a normative judgment and a commitment to act in accordance with a normative judgment come very close. If I come to believe that it is wrong to eat meat, it seems like I thereby commit myself to avoiding eating meat and commit myself to developing feelings compatible with this commitment. Similarly, a commitment to act gratefully in the future and to develop grateful feelings and dispositions seems close to what it means to judge that gratitude is due in this situation. Ultimately, however the two views come apart. After all promising to  $\phi$ , vowing  $\phi$ , or swearing to  $\phi$  are not the same thing as coming to believe that  $\phi$ -ing ought to be done, since we could promise, swear or vow to  $\phi$  for reasons that have nothing to do with its rightness. Suppose, for example, that someone has harmed one of my children and spared the other. I feel anger rather than

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<sup>3</sup> One might wonder whether *all* expressives are better understood as indicating normative judgments rather than emotions or feelings. Later, however, I will discuss 'ouch' which seems tied to the emotion of pain and not any normative judgment.

<sup>4</sup> See Searle (1979: 14) for an account of commissives. See also Manela (2015) who links Camenisch's commissive account as a solution to the problem that we can sometimes say 'thank you' when we don't feel anything.

gratitude, but unless I promise to develop grateful feelings and act gratefully in the future, the life of the spared child is also in danger. In such a case, I can vow to act and feel in this way without thinking that gratitude is owed. Camenisch's account would entail that such a 'thank you' is sincere; the judgment account entails that it is not. Our linguistic intuitions, I believe, support the judgment account in holding this usage to be insincere, though perhaps if I am successful in my vow, it will be sincere one day.

Bach and Harnish have noticed that sometimes 'thank you' is said out of politeness without any accompanying gratitude. Consequently, they claim that 'thank you' (and other expressives which they call 'acknowledgments' (1979: 51-55)) have a 'perfunctory or formal' use, whereby the speaker expresses her intention to satisfy a social expectation (42). To see how this social-expectation use differs from my own judgment account, we need to consider a case where they come apart. Suppose, then, that society expects the speaker to say 'thank you,' but the speaker doesn't believe that a grateful response is appropriate. Let's say that Aunt June has given a present to her niece Samantha. As it so happens, Samantha doesn't feel like gratitude is fitting because, while Aunt June's gift is well-intentioned, she does not view it as a benefit. She feels like no gratitude is owed, but understands that politeness requires a 'thank you'. Out of a desire to conform to social expectations, Samantha utters a 'thank you'. If saying 'thank you' could just express the intention to conform to society's norms then Samantha's 'thank you' would not be insincere in such a context. I believe that common usage, like the judgment account, holds that 'thank you' in this situation is not sincere.

Although Stohr (2006, 2012) is mainly interested in manners generally and does not explicitly address the semantics of 'thank you,' she does discuss the duty to give thanks



even when you do not feel like it, and her account comes close to my own. Consider, for example, the following passage:

I argued that a polite expression of gratitude when we are not feeling grateful expresses how we think we should feel. It might be deceptive as a report of my moral attitudes and commitments. If expressions of gratitude are always supposed to be current status reports, then there may be a problem. But there is no reason to think that they must be that way. Politely thanking someone for an awful present does not necessarily declare that I am grateful; it only declares that I believe that gratitude is the morally appropriate response to being given a gift (Stohr 2012: 112-13).

This passage comes close to outright endorsing a judgment account of ‘thank you’ like the one defended here. Especially of note in this regard is the last sentence where she claims that a polite ‘thank you’ ‘declares that I believe that gratitude is the morally appropriate response to being given a gift.’ But even in this very passage, she says things inconsistent with this understanding. For example, on the judgment account there should not be any kind of polite deception going on in the case of the polite ‘thank you’. If thanking someone just expresses the belief that gratitude is the morally appropriate response then there is no deception in saying it at the moment when you don’t happen to feel gratitude. Provided that you presently have the accompanying moral belief, then there is no problem with taking the ‘thank you’ to be a ‘current status report’—it reports the belief that gratitude is owed.<sup>5</sup>

Stohr is driven to vacillation here by her overall theory of manners. Stohr believes that manners are part of keeping up appearances. To this end, we all have a responsibility to cover up our baser instincts so as not to ‘lower the standards for everyone’ (Stohr 2012: 85), and we have an obligation to go along with each other’s pretenses rather than exposing

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<sup>5</sup> In a moment I will argue that it is not quite right to view it as a ‘report’ since reporting on my mental states is not the same thing as indicating mental states even when the attitude indicated is a judgment. A status report is an assertive not an expressive illocutionary act.

them (2012: 86-87). But this means that manners are a kind of ‘mutual pretense’ (2012: 96). Saying ‘thank you’ when you don’t feel gratitude is an instance of this mutual pretense. In order to do this though, ‘thank you’ has to retain some of its implications that the speaker feels gratitude. Because it is a mutual pretense, this implication is not fully believed, but it nevertheless has to be implied. This is why, I believe, Stohr needs to leave some trace of an implication that we are currently feeling the emotion of gratitude. The problem with mutual pretenses is that they are unstable. When the mutual pretense articulates itself, the pretense has to drop away. If everyone knows that we are expressing allegiance to our better selves with ‘thank you,’ then there is no longer any deception in saying it when we don’t feel it. What we are left with when the mutual pretense is stripped away is the judgment account.

### Section 3: Expressive and Assertive Functions

I have just argued that ‘thank you’ expresses the judgment *a grateful response is appropriate*. But, surely the sentence ‘a grateful response is appropriate’ also expresses that judgment. This seems to imply that you could substitute one phrase with the other. In other words, it seems to imply that instead of saying ‘thank you’ we could equally say ‘a grateful response is appropriate.’ But, saying the latter does not communicate the same thing as the former. An objector might conclude from this that there is something wrong with my analysis.

This objection, I believe, misses the mark. Kaplan (1999: 12) notes that two phrases can have the same ‘semantic information’ but have different expressive functions. Consider his examples of ‘ouch’ and ‘I am in pain’ (Kaplan 1999: 11). According to Kaplan ‘ouch’ has an expressive function and is judged either sincere or insincere based on whether the

speaker really is in pain or not. 'I am in pain' on the other hand has a descriptive function and is judged true or false based on whether the speaker of the sentence is in pain or not. The sincerity conditions of the expressive and the truth conditions of the assertion are the same, and, it is in this sense, that Kaplan thinks they carry the same semantic information. But they are clearly not synonyms because they have different functions and therefore are judged by different standards.

I want to say that the same basic relationship holds between 'a grateful response is appropriate' and 'thank you' as holds between 'I am in pain' and 'ouch'. I will assume metanormative realism which holds that the form of normative judgments is not misleading and that 'ought' functions like other descriptive words.<sup>6</sup> In this case, the parallel between 'ouch' and 'I am in pain' is almost exact. 'A grateful response is appropriate' and 'I am in pain' both have a descriptive function. Because they have a descriptive function, they are assessed for their truth conditions. But 'ouch' and 'thank you' have expressive functions and are therefore assessed primarily for their sincerity conditions. The truth conditions of the former terms are the same as the sincerity conditions of the latter terms, but that does not mean that the two expressions are synonymous.

It is easy to be misled here because 'ouch' expresses a feeling whereas 'thank you' expresses a judgment, and feelings do not have truth values whereas judgments do. It might be thought that phrases automatically inherit a truth evaluable standard when they indicate

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<sup>6</sup> If we assume metanormative expressivism, the parallel becomes less exact but ultimately still holds. Modern expressivists like Blackburn and Gibbard will want to account for the difference between pure expressives like 'ouch' and moral expressives which can be negated and combined with other sentences (Blackburn 1984; Gibbard 2003). In other words, they will have to account for the fact that normative judgments function like descriptive judgments and are ordinarily assessed by the same standards. Even if they end up only having quasi-truth conditions (Blackburn 1984) this will distinguish moral judgments from simple expressives like 'ouch.' It will then be possible to argue that 'thank you' is a pure expressive without quasi-truth conditions and 'a grateful response is appropriate' is a complicated expressive that has sincerity conditions and quasi-truth conditions. Again, the two expressions will not be synonymous.

a judgment that has a truth value. But, again following Kaplan, this need not be the case. Consider the case of 'oops' (1999: 12). Kaplan analyzes 'oops' to have the same sincerity conditions as the phrase 'I observed a minor accident' has truth conditions, but Kaplan insists that this phrase is nevertheless an expressive.<sup>7</sup> 'Oops' can be an expressive success even if the judgment 'I observed a minor accident' is an assertive failure. If, for example, the speaker turns out to be mistaken that there was a minor accident, then it will expressively succeed in indicating a false belief. 'Thank you' can be analyzed in the same way. The judgment is an expressive success even if the normative judgment whose presence it indicates is itself mistaken.

This leads naturally to questions about why we have a phrase to indicate the presence of normative judgments about gratitude and don't have phrases to indicate the presence of other normative judgments. With other normative judgments, we indicate belief in them by asserting their truth. We do not need a purely expressive phrase to indicate their presence. There is no special phrase, for example, to indicate our belief that *murder is wrong*. We can indicate it by asserting it.

When we express a normative judgment by asserting its truth, we do indicate our belief in the judgment but we also, and more importantly, submit it for evaluation in terms of its truth conditions. One way to capture this feature of assertion is to follow Stalnaker (1999) in thinking that an assertion seeks to get its audience to add the assertion to the common ground. When, for example, we say 'I am in pain' we not only indicate our pain, but, more importantly attempt to get our audience to add it to their stock of beliefs. (Even when I say 'I believe I am in pain,' I am saying something that could be true or false.) 'Ouch,'

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<sup>7</sup> According to the non-normative account discussed in section 2, 'thank you' would be exactly analogous to 'oops.' It would indicate the presence of a non-normative belief that certain circumstances obtained in the world.

on the other, hand indicates the presence of our pain without putting the question of whether I am in pain forward for evaluation. For this reason, 'ouch' is fixed to our current situation. 'Ouch' cannot be used to express another's pain nor even our own pain at another time.<sup>8</sup> When we say 'ouch' we direct the speaker's attention to our occurrent pain.

When we compare 'thank you' to 'a grateful response is appropriate,' we get a similar picture. 'A grateful response is appropriate' invites our addressee to evaluate the claim for its truth whereas 'thank you' directs the addressee's attention to the fact that we *believe* that a grateful response is appropriate. Just as with 'ouch,' what is important is that we judge as we do, not whether the judgment is true or false. 'Thank you,' just like 'ouch,' is tied to the immediate context of utterance. It cannot be used to indicate that someone else ought to have a grateful response, that I ought to have a grateful response to someone besides the addressee, or even that I ought to have had one to the addressee yesterday. What is important between us is not that you agree with me that gratitude is due but that you recognize that at this moment I judge that way.

#### Section 4: The Function of 'Thank you'

I have argued that whether a phrase is an expressive or an assertive doesn't have to do with *what* the phrase expresses or asserts, i.e. whether it is an emotion or a judgment, but has to do with the illocutionary function of the phrase. 'Thank you' I have been arguing counts as an expressive because its illocutionary function is better served by our indicating the presence of a belief rather than our presenting the belief to be added to the common

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<sup>8</sup> Sympathetic uses of 'ouch' are possible but derivative and marked by some sort of accompanying contextual clue that this is what is going on. Even so, they may be meant to express shared pain and may not ultimately violate the occurrent feeling requirement.

ground. This argument has depended on background assumptions about the function of 'thank you'. In this section, I will attempt to make these assumptions explicit.

Many have noted that the social function of gratitude is to express recognition, acknowledgment, and respect (Berger 1975: 302-05; Buss 1999: 802). When someone, especially a stranger, does something for us there is a worry that we think that the service is our due. Perhaps, we think that we are owed the service because they are lower than us. Perhaps we simply don't even notice them or the service. An utterance of 'thank you' serves to assuage these worries. It is an act of recognition. Sarah Buss groups it with other 'tokens of politeness' (1999: 802) whose function is to assure people that we respect them. Conversely, failing to thank someone can be an act of rudeness or even an insult. It is this part of the phenomenon of thanking that makes it such a source of emphasis in parenting practices. We want our children to recognize and acknowledge the actions of others and not merely accept them as if it is their due. We want, in other words, to let our benefactors know that we do not take them for granted.

If being taken for granted as a benefactor is the concern, what might serve to relieve this concern and what might serve to aggravate it? One might be tempted to say that what the benefactor needs to know is whether the beneficiary *feels* gratitude for the benefit. If he does feel gratitude then the benefactor knows that she isn't being taken for granted. If, on the other hand, he doesn't feel gratitude then she *ought* to worry that he is taking her for granted. But consider again the case of stressed out Samuel at the airport with his kids. Would a benefactor really feel taken for granted if she found out that he felt no occurrent gratitude but fully acknowledged that a grateful response was appropriate? Conversely, suppose that the benefactor found out the someone felt gratitude but regretted it and was trying mightily to overcome it? I suggest that what a benefactor needs to know is whether

the recipient judges that a grateful response is appropriate—that the recipient recognize that she has been the object of a morally significant benefit and that she is normatively on the hook to make some grateful response. Feeling gratitude often *does* recognize this, but in cases where our judgments do not correspond with our feelings, it is the judgment that is important for securing the social function. Since the anxiety of beneficence is relieved by the presence of such a normative judgment, it stands to reason that there are ways to indicate such a presence. ‘Thank you’ exists to serve this function.

An utterance of ‘a grateful response is required’ also indicates the presence of this belief, but it does a worse job of securing the social function. Since the purpose of assertions is to add something to the common ground, the addressee of such an assertion must take us as seeking her assent, not seeking to assure her of our respect. The assertion is fully successful if the beneficiary comes to also believe that a grateful response is required. The expressive is fully successful if the addressee comes to believe that *I believe* a grateful response is required. The latter is what is important when it comes to relieving the worry of being taken for granted.

It is helpful to compare my account to another account which makes recognition and acknowledgment a central theme. Macnamara (2013) agrees with Searle that ‘thank you expresses felt gratitude (2013: 894), but she also thinks that ‘thank you’ does more than just *express* recognition, it also exhibits the ‘call-and-response structure’ (Macnamara 2013: 904) of ‘recognitives’. Following Kukla and Lance (2009), Macnamara understands a recognitive to be a kind of speech act that both expresses recognition of another and also seeks acknowledgment of this recognition. The paradigmatic instance of a recognitive is a hail. When, for example, Bob says ‘Hi, Alice’ he recognizes her as Alice, and if she replies with ‘Hi’ she acknowledges his recognition. ‘Thank you’, according to Macnamara, is a

recognitive that expresses recognition and seeks an acknowledgment of this recognition. Her full account goes something like this. Suppose Alice does Bob a good turn. Bob feels gratitude. When Bob expresses his gratitude, he calls for his addressee to respond.<sup>9</sup> His call is successful if Alice replies by saying, 'You're welcome'.

Macnamara's view departs from the one defended here in two respects. First of all, I do not think that 'thank you' exhibits a call-and-response structure. As an expressive, it is completely successful if the addressee realizes that I recognize her action. Just as an utterance of 'ouch' is successful if those around me become aware of my pain so too an utterance of 'thank you' is successful if the addressee becomes aware of my belief that a grateful response is fitting. In both cases, I can only *know* that it is successful if my audience gives me a sign, but the expressive doesn't intrinsically aim at that sign. In fact, if we wanted to invoke the call-and-response structure, then it seems much more likely that 'thank you' is the response to an act of beneficence—what Macnamara calls an acknowledgment (2013: 908), not something that is itself seeking an acknowledgment. On my view, then, first Alice does Bob a good turn. Next, Bob recognizes this good as meriting gratitude. Finally, he acknowledges this by saying 'thank you'. That there is a widespread practice of 'thank-you' notes that expect no 'you're-welcome' notes is confirmation of my claim. That we thank the people who have helped us in the 'acknowledgments' section of our papers expecting no 'you're welcome' in reply is further confirmation.

But there is a deeper difference between Macnamara's view and my own. Both Macnamara and I believe that saying 'thank you' is a communicative act, but we disagree on

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<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that the recognitive nature of 'thank you' is itself a product of the recognitive nature of the gratitude that it expresses. Macnamara (2015) argues that the reactive attitudes, gratitude included, are themselves communicative entities. Reactive attitudes are like unsent messages. Giving voice to them is like pressing send.



*what* is communicated. Macnamara holds that the content of the communication is about the addressee—that the addressee has done something morally praiseworthy for me. We might say that Macnamara has an appraisal account of gratitude. The judgment account holds that what is expressed is that a grateful response is fitting. It may seem that Macnamara’s appraisal account directs our attention to the right object, namely the benefactor whereas my account seems to be about me. My reply is to note that though the expressive does indicate *my* mental state, this mental state, namely my gratitude, has the addressee as an object. In other words, I indicate something about myself but the thing indicated is about the other person. This seems to me just right. Beneficence imposes a normative demand on me whereas evaluating the benefactor does not. After all evaluative phrases like ‘That’s so kind of you’ can be directed at beneficence acts that don’t have me as the target, and when they are I accept no normative burden. ‘Thank you’ on the other hand is only appropriate if I am the target of the action and accept a normative burden. The judgment account explains this acknowledgment by indicating the presence precisely of the moral judgment that recognizes the authority of the demand.

## Section 5: Beyond an Expressive Function?

Some might agree that the judgment account is right as far as it goes but maintain that it is incomplete. Amongst gratitude theorists it is common to hear that ‘thank you’ not only expresses respect but ‘pays respect’ (McConnell 1993: 4, 16, 42; Berger 1975: 303; Manela 2015). According to these theorists, saying ‘thank you’ is not just a communicative act but is itself a respect token. It is something that is given by one person towards another. I am sympathetic to this intuition, and in this final section I attempt to explore this

possibility. In particular, I will attempt to capture these intuitions by arguing that utterances of 'thank you' can have what Bach and Harnish call an effective function (1979: 113-15).<sup>10</sup> Sometimes, in thanking someone I do not just express my normative judgment, I effect a change in the relationship status that exists between the speaker (i.e. the beneficiary) and the addressee (i.e. the benefactor).

According to Bach and Harnish, we live among conventions that make certain utterances actually bring institutional facts into existence (1979: 114). Thus, when I say 'Sold,' 'I resign,' or 'I do,' existing conventions make it the case that institutional facts have changed whether it is to transfer ownership, change my chess record, or change my marital status. My rights and statuses have changed merely in virtue of having said these words. What is important for these status changes is not the underlying attitudes of the speaker, but the fact that the speaker has said the words. Even if the potential bride has deep reservations, no desire to marry, and intends not to honor her commitment, she is still married after she says 'I do,' and whether the chess player believes her position is hopeless or believes she has mate in two, she has still lost the game after she says, 'I resign.' Fundamentally, effectives are not trying to communicate something about the speaker but trying to accomplish or effect something in the world. The fact that these effects are social effects should not obscure the function that these phrases play.

As Austin has shown in depth, effective utterances, which he calls 'performatives,' can fail to attain their object both for reasons peculiar to themselves (Austin 1962: 14-15) and reasons having to do with their status as actions (Austin 1962: 21). Austin calls the first

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<sup>10</sup> There is disagreement on terminology here. Searle calls such phrases 'declarations' (1979: 26) whereas Kaplan calls them 'performatives' (1999: 20). Austin himself might call them 'strict performatives' (Austin 1962: 160), though, of course, he ultimately rejects the performative-constative distinction. I follow Bach and Harnish's terminology because they are particularly clear about the relationship between effectives and conventions.

sort 'misfires' (Austin 1962: 16). In our chess example, this might happen if the speaker is a kibitzer and not the person playing or if her opponent has already resigned. Although Austin does not give a name to the sorts of failures that may beset actions as such, examples might include situations where the person playing chess uttered 'I quit' mistakenly or when she was under duress. In all of these cases, the speaker does not succeed in resigning despite uttering the words. My point here, however, is that these failure conditions are independent of the communicative intentions of the speaker. The action of resigning succeeds or fails independently of whether the speaker really takes her position to be hopeless.

While the effectives that Bach and Harnish mainly consider are ones that have a clearly defined institutional meaning, it is possible to extend the analysis.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Kaplan (1999: 26) suggests that honorifics and derogations have the primary purpose of effecting something in the social realm rather than communicating the intentions of the speaker. When a soldier addresses an officer as 'sir' she doesn't so much express an attitude as perform an act of honoring. Similarly, when we tell someone 'f--- you,' we don't just express an attitude of contempt and disrespect, we actually insult them. Suppose that a speaker feels no anger or contempt but tells us to f--- off in order to gain status in her group. We have still been insulted as surely as the unwilling bride has been married. Convention has marked out these signals as signs of standing, and if we use the sign then we have succeeded in insulting the addressee or honoring her. The insult happens not because the speaker has communicated something about the way she feels but because convention has marked out these phrases for such a purpose.

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<sup>11</sup> Popa-Wyatt and Wyatt (2018) explore a speech-act interpretation of the derogatory power of slurs. They too extend the analysis of effectives so that they have a status-shifting power.

Like the more straightforward effectives envisioned by Bach and Harnish, honorifics and derogations work by changing the social facts. When we say 'I quit' or 'I do' there is a specific institution which delimits the change in status that is brought about through this remark. When we say 'f--- you' or 'sir,' the change is brought about through the more nebulous institutions that determine social standing and status. The insulter has lowered (or attempted to lower) our social standing and the honorer has raised (or attempted to raise) our social standing by using these conventional markers. While it is true that some people might feel the sting of the insult because they interpret it as expressing an underlying contempt, there is just as strong an instinct to feel the social sting of being treated like this regardless of any feelings of underlying contempt. If someone (publicly) tells me to f--- off, I feel lowered if I think that they meant to insult me regardless of whether I think she felt any contempt.

Just as with straightforward effectives, the honor or insult might be cancelled if we find out that the honor or insult was accidental or under duress. If a four-year old tells us to f--- off we might smile and wonder about her surroundings. Similarly, finding out that someone had been held at gunpoint and instructed to say it would cancel the insult. But finding out that the person did not actually feel contempt will not. If our teenage daughter tells us to f--- off in order to impress her friends, finding out that she actually does not have any angry feelings toward us does not cancel the derogation. The derogation or honorific must be intentional in the sense that the speaker meant to derogate or honor us, but it need not be expressive of any occurrent mental state. Honorifics and derogations, like other straightforward effectives, are meant to accomplish something socially not express something.

Gratitude theorists have pointed out that ‘thank you’ is often a way of paying respect and not just indicating respect. I want to suggest that the best way to capture this intuition is to understand ‘thank you’ as a kind of honorific which often performs its effective function independently of the feelings of the speaker. Consider the following case. Suppose that Jolene is Grace’s long-suffering executive assistant. At the annual holiday party, Grace gives out gifts to everyone on staff. Although Jolene expects something special in acknowledgment of her year of anticipating Grace’s needs, she receives a succulent like everyone else. Since everyone else has thanked Grace, Jolene’s lack of ‘thank you’ would certainly be noticed. The whole scene smacks of ‘kissing the ring’. Failing to say ‘thank you’ would insult Grace and saying ‘thank you’ would (minimally) honor her. Jolene might judge that she has prudential reason to avoid insulting her boss even if she doesn’t think that she ought to feel gratitude. Respect has been paid even if she doesn’t think that thanks are owed. The tribute is paid not by any calculation of Jolene’s communicative intentions. Instead, it is paid by means of the conventions surrounding the use of ‘thank you’.

I have now offered, not one but *two* accounts of the meaning of ‘thank you’. In the first four sections, I argued that utterances of ‘thank you’ are expressives and in this section, I have explored the possibility that they might also be effectives. It is natural to wonder how these two accounts fit together.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, as in Jolene’s case, sometimes the effective function can be accomplished at the expense of its expressive function. Does this possibility render the two accounts inconsistent? I don’t think so. Following Searle (1979: 33), we can distinguish between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ illocutionary acts. As Searle notes, we often use one speech act to accomplish a speech act of another kind. Consider, to use Searle’s

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to \_\_\_\_\_ for pointing this out.

example, the sentence 'Can you reach the salt?' (1979: 30). At one level the sentence is a question, and at this level, the appropriate thing for the addressee to do would be to answer, 'Yes, I can.' But at another, primary level, it is a request, and the appropriate thing for the speaker to do is to pass the salt. A similar thing can be said in Jolene's case. At a secondary, literal level, Jolene's 'thank you' is an expressive that indicates Jolene's normative judgment that a grateful response is required. But primarily Jolene's 'thank you' is an effective which honors her boss and doesn't have any expressive implications. There is no tension between the two accounts, it just turns out that sometimes a speech act with one illocutionary force can be used to accomplish a speech act with a different illocutionary force.

Recall that the gratitude theorists have pointed out that often 'thank you' not only expresses respect but also pays respect. In this section, I have accommodated this intuition by explaining that 'thank you' can also be an effective. All that was required was that there is a convention in place that connected honor and derogation with certain phrases. The gratitude theorists are drawing our attention to the fact that 'thank you' is one of these phrases.

Conclusion:

In this paper, I have argued that the 'thank you' does not express an occurrent feeling of gratitude, but rather expresses a judgment that a grateful response is appropriate. Although this account does a better job accounting for our intuitions of when it is appropriate to say 'thank you' and when it isn't, it challenges a traditional understanding of expressives that they must always express emotions. I try to show that expressives should

be defined by their illocutionary function not by their content. Finally, I attempt to accommodate a widespread intuition shared by gratitude theorists that ‘thank you’ can sometimes be a non-communicative act. In such cases, I argue that the primary function of ‘thank you’ is an effective which raises the status of the addressee.

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