

A Comparative Sociolinguistic Analysis of Thanking Strategies in Mbə kum

By

Divine N. Ndimofor

Department of Linguistics, University of Buea

Email: divine.ndimofor@ubuea.cm

Tel: 675403532/697379594

Abstract

This study addresses the speech act of thanking in Mbə kum. It investigates native speakers' behaviour in expressions of gratitude on the basis of an intra-cultural comparison of men and women in terms of perception and production performances. Data used was obtained from 30 Female Native Speakers of Mbə kum (NS-F) and Male Native Speakers of Mbə kum (NS-M). The participants provided answers to an oral Discourse-Completion-Task (oDCT) questionnaire which consisted of 20 situations. A total of 1200 responses were collected and coded following the coding system used by Eisenstein, M. & Bodman, J. (1986, 1993), Songthama I. (2004) and Gila A. & Svenja A. (2006). Results reveal that there are thirteen thanking strategies in the linguistic repertoire of the participants. Though the NS-F group used more strategies than the NS-M group, participants from both groups used least effort strategies more frequently to express gratitude.

Keywords: *Thanking, oral Discourse Completion Test, intra-cultural, Mbə kum*

I. Introduction

Expressing thanks or gratitude plays an indispensable role in societal interaction. According to Eisenstein & Bodman (1993), it is only when the function of gratitude is expressed appropriately can it “engender feeling of warmth and solidarity among interlocutors” (p.64). They further suggested that “expressing gratitude might not be merely a language function that existed as a response to beneficial event but might be negotiated and interactive event that had greater social significance” (p.71). Thanking expressions are meant to satisfy the face wants of both the speaker and the listener (Intachakra, 2004). On the other hand, failure to express thanks might be regarded as impoliteness or being rude. However, compared with other speech acts, expressing thanks is explicitly introduced at the early stage of life (Bates, 1981; Becker & Smenner, 1986; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993; Gleason, 1987; Hinkel, 1994; Lin & Yu, 2006).

Despite the fact that expressing gratitude has a universal function, cultural differences none the less contribute to an in-depth discrepancy among cultures with respect to expressing gratitude. Apte (1974) investigated expressions of gratitude in Hindi and Marathi-two South Asian languages and found out that

“any verbalisation of gratitude is considered taboo, and it is insulting or looked down upon when family members or close friends interact with each other”. This is due to the fact that among the participants’ value system offer providers would think it is their duty to provide offers to their family or close friends. Coulmas (1981 a) observed how Japanese express gratitude and his finding showed that instead of ‘arigato’, equivalent to ‘thank’ in English, Japanese use ‘sumimasen’, equivalent to ‘I’m sorry’ in English more frequently when expressing gratitude. This could result from the fact that Japanese are more “debt-sensitive” (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Coulmas, 1981a; Eisenstein & Bodman, 1993). For Japanese, the individuals receiving favours from others usually think they must have intruded on the interlocutors; therefore, they tend to express their indebtedness in situations where expressions of gratitude are expected in other cultures. Similarly, Tames (1981) conducted research on the comparison of British’s and Japanese’s expressions of gratitude and found out that “where the English say I’m sorry, Japanese say ‘I can never repay’; the Japanese ‘Hello’ is literally ‘Excuse me’ and ‘Thank you’ is ‘I feel ashamed’”

Though thanking expressions are encountered on frequent basis daily, native speakers are usually unaware of the underlying rules of expressing thanking (Eisenstein & Bodman 1993). To interact successfully among speakers of a language native speakers of that language have to be conscious not only of the grammatical rules governing that language but equally have to be conscious of the rules of speaking the language. Knowing ‘how to say it correctly’ does not guarantee knowing ‘how to say it properly’ (Aher & Simpson, 1994; Blum-Kulka, 1982, 1983; Cohen, 1996; Coulmas, 1981; Rintell, 1981; Thomas, 1983). In the process of learning a language it is the grammatical features that are being emphasised rather than the pragmatic ones. Since expressing thanks has its societal function, it is necessary for learners to acquire the rules of expressing thanks in a language. However, compared to other speech acts like apologies, requests, and complaints, studies on expressing thanks seldom drew researchers’ attention. Besides, the few studies that exist on the topic in other world languages usually focused only on the inter-language aspect without looking at the intra-language, which could serve as the research springboard. It is thus the aim of this study to make a comparative analysis of the thanking expressions used by men (henceforth NS-M) as opposed to women (henceforth NS-F). This study therefore provides answers to the following question: What are the formulaic expressions of thanking used by the NS-M and NS-F?

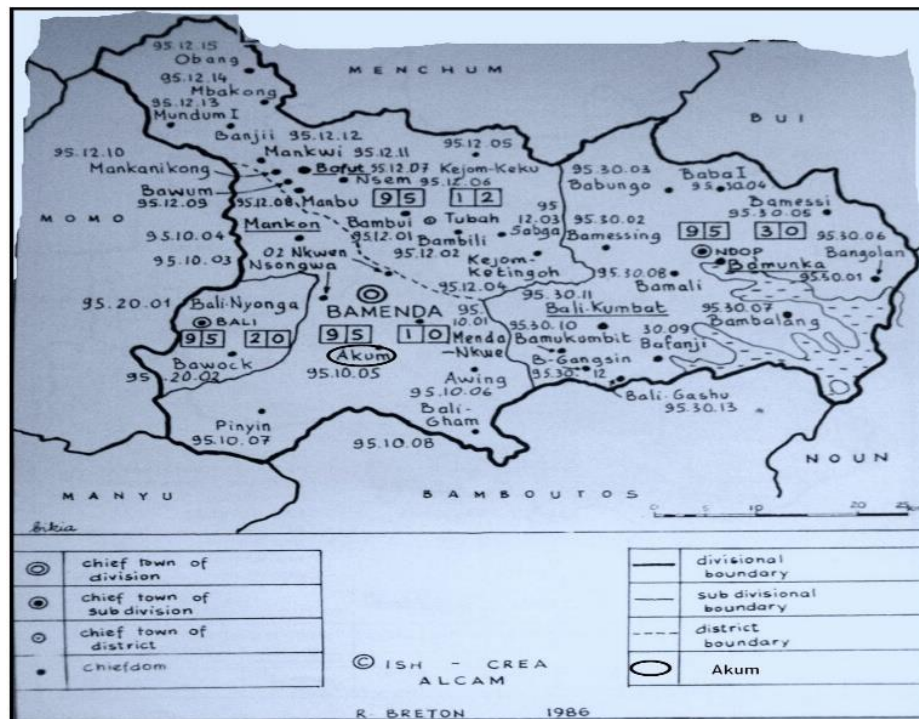
II. Location of Mbə kum

According to Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons and Charles D. Fennig (2020) Mbə kum (Bagangu) is one of the eight dialects that make up Ngemba (alongside Njong, Mbutu, Shomba, Mangkunge, Mbrerewi, Anyang and Alatening). It is classified as follows: *Niger-Kordofanian, Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Bantoid, Southern, Wide Grassfields, Narrow-Grassfields, Mbam-Nkam, Ngemba, Mbə kum (Bagangu/Akum)*

It is worth saying the Mbə kum is spoken in the Fondom located in Santa

subdivision in Mezam division of the North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. Ndimofor, C. (1980) points to the fact that “the Fondom extends for close to twelve kilometres along the Bamenda-Bafoussam highway beginning from mile three from the Bamenda Government Station in the North West Region of the Republic of Cameroon. She is situated on a sloping hill that has its highest point towards Awing and its lowest point towards Mbatu”. The map below is adapted from Breton, R. & Bikia, G. (1986) and it shows the location of the Fondom of Akum in Mezam division.

Map 1: Location of Akum in Mezam Division



III. Methodology

This study is interested in investigating the different ways used by male native speakers (henceforth NS-M) of Mbə kum as opposed to their female (henceforth NS-F) counterparts to express thanks. Being a sample survey research, a cross sectional method was used to compare the thanking expressions on the basis of two contextual factors-social distance and gender of interlocutors. Participants of the study were chosen among native speakers of Akum (with their ages ranged between 18 and 83 years). These participants were made up of 30 NS-M and 30 NS-F respectively. To make sure that the responses collected from the participants were typical responses rather than influenced by another language, all participants were selected only from native speakers of Mbə kum who have spent at least ten years in the Fondom without relocating to another place. Consequently, all participants were interviewed to determine eligibility for participating in the study before the questionnaires

were administered. Care was taken to make sure that participants included the educated as well as the uneducated.

The data used for this study was collected using an oral discourse completion test/task (Cohen & Olshtain, 1981; Ndimofor, 2019) considered one of the most common methods in pragmatic studies (Rinnert & Iwai, 2002). Mindful of the fact that all the participants could not read nor write in Mbə kum, the questions were read out for them and they in turn provided the answers orally which were audiotaped with their approval. Each participant provided responses to 20 scenarios related to their daily lives which were then used to evaluate the type of greeting strategy used. Each of the scenarios in question consisted of a brief description of a situation and a scripted dialogue from which one turn was omitted. Respondents were then asked to provide answers (orally) to the missing turn. To avoid the influence of time limitation on the findings, there was no time limitation for participants to complete the task and the average length of time spent on finishing the questionnaire was 20-30 minutes.

The coding system used in this study was adapted from Eisenstein, M. & Bodman, J. (1986, 1993), Songthama I. (2004) and Gila A. & Svenja A. (2006). In order to control the effect of subjective judgment, the procedure of coding was double checked by a Professor in Department of Linguistics, University of Buea who is very familiar with the whole design.

IV. Findings and Discussion

In this section, results of the present study are presented paying attention to the research question of the study: (1) What are the formulaic expressions of thanking used by the NS-M and NS-F? A total of 1200 responses were collected from the two groups of participants. Each of the groups under study produced a total of 600 responses. Adapting the coding system used in some previous works, (Eisenstein, M. & Bodman, J., 1986, 1993; Songthama I., 2004 and Gila a S. & Svenja A., 2006), the responses were classified under the following strategies:

Strategy A: Explicit expression of thanking

This strategy consisted of expressions clearly involving words of thanking like ‘thanks’, ‘thank you’ and ‘I am grateful’ in English. The following were obtained from the data of the participants in both groups:

- 1) *Miyá*
 ‘Thanks’
- 2) *Miyá o*
 Miyá o
 Thank you
 ‘Thank you’

- 3) *Mə ghá ná' chiə*
Mə ghá ná' chiə
Me give well sit
'Thank you'

Strategy B: Showing the intention to reciprocate

Strategy B consisted of strategies that indicated intention to repay or reciprocate. In the study repayment means paying something back while reciprocity means to offer or do something in return. Examples from the data included the following:

- 4) *Miya o, mə ló twu o ázónə*
miya o, mə lótwu o ázónə
Thank you me tense+ pay you tomorrow
'Thank you, I will pay you tomorrow'

Strategy C: Suggesting indebtedness

This strategy consisted of expressions from the data that indicated indebtedness or apologetic thanking.

- 5) *Miya o, mə zhí ŋgə mə gwem o*
Miyá o, mə zhí ŋgə mə gwem o
Thank you me know that me owe you
'Thank you I know that i owe you'

Strategy D: Indicating Caring

Strategy D consisted of strategies that indicated caring, understanding, benediction and leave taking as shown in the examples below:

- 6) *O nɪ nywi a. Mə ghá tɪ ko' miya*
O nɪ nywi a. Mə ghá tɪ ko' miya
You be god my. Me give big thanks
'You are my God saviour. I thank you very much'

Strategy E: Complimenting

This strategy consisted of expressions that explicitly indicated compliments and these compliments could either be on benefactors or objects.

- 7) *Miya, miya, mbə ghrə zí zérə mboŋ tɪ sɪ nə. Mə kónj zérə.*
Miya, miya, mbə ghrə zí zérə mboŋ tɪ sɪ nə. Mə kónj zérə.
Thanks, thanks phone this it fine so much. Me love it
'Thanks very much, this telephone is gorgeous. I love it'

Strategy F: Expressing Relief

Strategy E was employed when the speaker felt his or her trouble was solved because of the benefactors' help.

- 8) *Tì gho mí mə ghé lí ghə Tsé? Miya boŋ sun a.*
Tì gho mí mə ghén lí ghə Tsé? Miya boŋ sun a.
without you like me go so where Che thanks fine friend my
'Where would I have gone, Mangwi? Thank you, my intimate friend,'

Strategy G: Terms of Calling

This strategy does not only function as identifying the presence of the interlocutors but also identifying the relationship with the interlocutors. It included stating the person's name or stating terms of address.

- 9) *Mama mə ghá tì ko' miya*
Mama mə ghá tì ko' miya
mother me give big thanks
'Thank you, mother,'

Strategy H: Value Judgement

Strategy H indicated that the speaker cherished the relationship between him or her and the interlocutor and the beneficial act she or he received:

- 10) *Mə zé ŋgə mbə ghrə zí nə n jì ŋkáb zo*
Mə zé ŋgə mbə ghrə zí nə n jì ŋkáb zo
Me see that telephone this really eat money your
'I am certain that this phone is very expensive'

Strategy I: Further Talk

Strategy I was used to elaborate the topic or maintain the conversation especially when the request or the offer was accepted. The strategy was also used to state the significance of the beneficial act.

- 11) *Mə nə n gha miya, akwí'tə za nə n zán a.*
Mə nə n gha miya, akwí'tə za nə n zán a.
Me really give thanks, knee my really hurt me
'Thanks so much, my knee hurts real badly'

Strategy J: Accepting the offer

Strategy J was used to respond to an offer. This was noticed most especially in situations wherein the benefactor accepted to offer his or her services to the beneficiary.

- 12) *A bə li dógha. Mə gha miya*
A bə li dógha. Mə gha miya
It is so doctor. m give thanks
“It is alright Doctor. Thank you..”

Strategy K: Opt-out

Strategy K was employed in the few cases wherein the participants received beneficial acts but chose to say nothing in specific situations.

- 13) *Míkə a nĩ nĩ mú na*
Míkə a nĩ nĩ mú na
because she is mother my...
“Because she is my mother...”

Strategy L: Warning

Strategy L was equally rarely used. It was counted when the speaker tried to give the warning words to the interlocutor.

- 14) *Ká mə tún a. Chí mə leghnə ko fir a*
Ká mə tún a. Chí mə leghnə ko fir a
Neg. me refuse I. Can me forget not blame I
“I have not refused. Do not blame me if I forget”

Strategy M: Asking Question

Strategy M was made up of follow up questions after receiving a beneficial act. The questions functioned as responses to beneficial acts instead of irrelevant topics.

- 15) *O bísí ngə o bĩ ghə n, kə n lə ?*
O bísí ngə o bĩ ghə n, kə n lə ?
you tense+say that you tense+go, not it?
“You said you will go, isn’t it?”

The thirteen thanking strategies discussed above are tabulated below according to the numbers produced by the different groups in question and their various percentages given.

Table 1: Distribution of strategies used by the NS-M group

Strategies	N° of Responses	Percentage
Strategy A: Explicit expression of thanking	194	32.33
Strategy B: Showing the intention to reciprocate	66	11
Strategy G: Terms of Calling	60	10
Strategy D: Indicating Caring	50	8.33
Strategy I: Further Talk	48	8

Strategy H: Value Judgement	38	6.33
Strategy C: Suggesting indebtedness	32	5.33
Strategy E: Complimenting	32	5.33
Strategy J: Accepting the offer	26	4.33
Strategy M: Asking Question	24	4
Strategy F: Expressing Relief	20	3.33
Strategy K: Opt-out	10	1.67
Strategy L: Warning	0	0
TOTAL	600	100%

The table shows that out of the 600 responses gotten from the NS-M group, *Explicit expression of thanking* strategy was the most frequently used thanking strategy. It accounted for 23.33% of all thanking strategies used by this group. The next four most frequently used strategies were *Showing the intention to reciprocate*, *Terms of calling*, *Indicating Caring* and *Further talk* accounting for 11%, 10%, 8.33% and 8% respectively of all strategies used by the group in question. On the other hand, this group did not use the strategy *warning*. No particular reason could have accounted for this observation. The strategies that were less frequently used by this group were: *opt-out*, *Expressing relief*, *Asking question* and *Accepting the offer* accounting for 1.67%, 3.33%, 4% and 4.33% of all strategies used respectively.

Table 2: Distribution of strategies used by the NS-F group

Strategies	N° of Responses	Percentage
Strategy A: Explicit expression of thanking	158	26.33
Strategy B: Showing the intention to reciprocate	72	12
Strategy G: Terms of Calling	62	10.33
Strategy D: Indicating Caring	56	9.33
Strategy I: Further Talk	52	8.67
Strategy M: Asking Question	40	6.67
Strategy H: Value Judgement	34	5.67
Strategy C: Suggesting indebtedness	28	4.67
Strategy F: Expressing Relief	26	4.33
Strategy J: Accepting the offer	24	4
Strategy L: Warning	20	3.33
Strategy E: Complimenting	18	3
Strategy K: Opt-out	10	1.67
TOTAL	600	100%

As seen in Table 2 above the NS-F group used the thanking strategy *Explicit expression of thanking* more times than any other strategy. This strategy alone accounted for 26.33% of all the strategies used by this group. This same phenomenon was observed in the data of the NS-M group. The next most frequently used strategies by the NS-F group were: *Showing the intention to reciprocate*, *Terms of calling*, *Indicating Caring* and *Further talk* accounting for 12%, 10.33%, 9.33% and 8.67% respectively of all strategies used by the group. This group used all the thanking strategies attested in the linguistic repertoire of the community under study. It is interesting to observe that the strategy *warning* which was not found in the data of the NS-M group was used more times than the *Opt-out* (1.6%) and *Complimenting* (3%) strategies by the NS-F group. The strategy *Warning* was used 20 times in the data of the NS-F group accounting for 3.33% of all their strategies.

Table 3: Distribution of strategies among the two groups in terms of numbers

STRATEGY	NS-M	NS-F	TOTAL (NS-M+NS-F)	%
A	194	158	352	29.33
B	66	72	138	11.5
G	60	62	122	10.16
D	50	56	106	8.83
I	48	52	100	8.33
H	38	34	72	6
M	24	40	64	5.33
C	32	28	60	5
E	32	18	50	4.16
J	26	24	50	4.16
F	20	26	46	3.83
K	10	10	20	1.66
L	0	20	20	1.66
Total	600	600	1200	100

As Table 3 above shows, the five most used strategy by the two groups in question in descending order were: *Explicit expression of thanking* (29.33%), *Showing intention to reciprocate* (11.5%), *Terms of Calling* (10.33%),

Indicating care (8.83) and *Further talk* (8.33%). On the other hand, the five less frequently used strategies were: *Warning* (1.66%), *Opt-out* (1.66%), *Expressing relief* (3.83%) and *Accepting offer* and *Complimenting* (4.16% each). It is interesting to note however that the NS-F used more the *Asking Question* strategy (7th most used strategy by both groups) than *Value judgment* strategy (6th most used by both groups). It is observed that the NS-F group used all thirteen strategies attested in the data collected while the NS-M used twelve strategies. It could be argued here that women have a better mastery of the language and as such are capable of manipulating the language to reach all desired goals. Finally, the NS-M used the *Explicit expression of thanking* strategy more than any other strategy as well as more than the NS-F group. This corroborates other studies on the language (Ndimofor,2019) that men in this community use more direct strategies than women.

V. Conclusion

The main thrust of this paper has been an analysis of the speech act of thanking from a sociolinguistic perspective. In this vein, I have compared thanking strategies obtained from two groups of native speakers (men and women). It was observed that a total of thirteen different strategies are used in the community in question to express thanking. These strategies were: *Explicit expression of thanking*, *Showing intention to reciprocate*, *Suggesting indebtedness*, *Indicating caring*, *Complimenting*, *Expressing relief*, *Terms of calling*, *Value judgement*, *Further talk*, *Accepting the offer*, *Opt-out*, *Warning*, and *Asking question*. The two groups investigated showed a similar pattern in the way these strategies are used. For example, the three most frequently used strategies by both groups as well as the less used strategies for both groups were the same. Similarly, in order not to fail to express gratitude participants from both groups choose to use the 'least effort' strategy *Explicit expression of thanking* most frequently. In a nutshell, I brought out the different thanking strategies and responses which are commonly used by the different age groups in the Akum community, as well as the formulaic expressions of thanks that these different groups prefer to adopt.

REFERENCES

- Apte, M. (1974). "Thank you" and South Asian Languages: A comparative Sociolinguistic study. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 3, pp 67-89.
- Asher, R., & Simpson, J.(Eds.). (1994). *The Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*. (Vol 6) Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Bates, E. (1981). *Language and Context: The Acquisition of Pragmatics*. New York: Academic Press

- Becker, J. & Smenner, P.** (1986). The spontaneous use of thank you by preschoolers as function of sex, socioeconomic status, and listener status. *Language in society*, 15(4), pp 537-546.
- Blum-Kulka, S.** (1982). Learning how to say what you mean in a second language: A study of speech act performance of learners of Hebrew as a second language *Applied Linguistics*, 3, pp 29-59.
- — — (1983). Interpreting and performing speech acts in a second language: A cross-cultural of Hebrew and English. In N. Wolfson and E. Judd (Eds), *sociolinguistics and language acquisition*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House. pp 36-55.
- Blum-Kulka, S., House, J., & Kasper, G.** (1989). Cross-cultural pragmatics: *Requests and apologies*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Blum-Kulka, S. & Olshtain, E.** (1986). Too many words: Length of utterance and pragmatic Failure. *Studies in second language acquisition*, 8(2), pp 165-79
- Bodman, J. & Eisenstein, M.** (1986). "I very appreciate:" Expressing of gratitude by native and non-native speakers of American English. *Applied linguistics* 7, pp 167-85
- Breton, R. & Bikia, G.** (1986). Atlas Administratif des Langues Nationales du Cameroun (ALCAM), CERDOTOLA, A.C.C.T, CREA, Yaoundé
- Brown, p & Levinson, S** (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Coulmas, F.** (1981). Poison to your soul: Thanks and apologies contrastively viewed. In F. Coulmas (ED), *conversational routine* (pp. 66-91) The Hague: Mouton.
- Dieu, M. & Renaud, P.** (1983). Atlas Linguistique Centrale. CERDOTOLA, DGRST, Yaounde, pp 142.
- Eberhard, David M., Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig** (eds.). 2020. *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*. Twenty-third edition. Dallas, Texas: SIL International.
- Eisenstein, M. & Bodman, J.** (1993). Expressing Gratitude in American English. In G. Kasper and S. Blum-Kulka (Eds *interlanguage pragmatics* New York: Oxford University press, pp. 64-81.
- Gila A. S. & svenja A.** (2006). Expressions of gratitude in corpus and DCT data: vocabulary, Formulaic sequences, and pedagogy. *System*, 34, pp119-13
- Hinkel, E** (1994). Pragmatics of interaction: Expressing thanks in a second language. *Applied Language Learning*, 5(1), pp 73-91.

- Kimura, K.** (1994). The multiple functions of *sumimasen*. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 5 (2), pp 279-302.
- Koike, D. A** (1989) Requests and the Role of Deixis in Politeness. *Journal of pragmatics* 15: pp 187-202.
- Lin, Yuh-Huey & Yu, Hsiu-Min** (2006). Perception differences in the expressions of gratitude in Mandarin Chinese: Male vs. female speakers and contextual factors. 2006 *International Conference on Arts and Humanities*, Conference held at Honolulu, Hawaii.
- Ndimofor, C. (1980)**. Proverbs of Akum (Mbalah mbakum): A case study in Language and Folklore. Unpublished Masters' Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the award of the teaching of English (TEFL).E.N.S Yaoundé.
- Ndimofor D. (2019)**: A Sociopragmatic Analysis of Refusals in Mbakum. *African Journal of Applied Linguistics (AJAL)*. 8. pp. 104-116.
- Rinnert, C. and Iwai, C.** (2002). Variation in Complaint Strategies in Three Regions. Available at:
<http://jaltpublications.org/archive/proceedings/2002/372.pdf>.
- Rintell, E** (1981). Sociolinguistic Variation and Pragmatic Ability: A look at learners. *International Journal of Sociology of Language*, 27:11-34.
- Searle, J.** (1976) A classification of illocutionary act. *Language in Society*, 5: pp 1-23.
- Songthama I.** (2004). Contrastive pragmatics and language teaching: apologies and thanks in English and Thai. *RELC*, 35. 1, pp 37-62.
- Tames, R.** (1981). *The Japan Handbook: A Guide for Teachers*. Kent: Paul Norbury Publishers Limited.
- Thomas, J.** (1983). Cross-cultural Pragmatic Failure. In He Zhau-Xiong (ed.), *Selected Readings for Pragmatics*. Shanghai:Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, pp 677-714