

'I've Never Thanked My Parents for Anything'



I have been living in the United States for more than a decade, and I now say thank you about 50 times a day. Most of the time, I do it without thinking. I say thank you to the bus driver who takes me from point A to point B along with 20 other people. He usually can't even hear me. I say thank you to the cashier at the coffee shop. I say thank you to the stranger who holds the door open for me at a restaurant. I say thank you to my wife and my 5-year-old daughter several times a day for various things: turning the volume of the television down or up, flicking the light switch on or off, asking me if I want to eat something or do something with them.

When I first moved to the United States, all this took some getting used to. I didn't know I was supposed to thank someone who took my money for something I bought at a store. I didn't know I was supposed to thank people when they asked how I was doing (and almost everyone who walks by me says "Hyadoin" to me). I had no idea how I was supposed to respond to the police officer who gave me a speeding ticket and then said, "Thanks, and have a good day."

I grew up in the northern Indian city of Lucknow, in a culture in which saying thank you is not done lightly. I learned to say thank you in English in elementary school, and when I thanked anyone, I said it in English, which was less awkward and more casual than doing so in Hindi. I reserved my thanks for those who had done huge favors for me. And I rarely thanked my friends or classmates. When I did, they either smiled quizzically at me or interpreted the act as a kind of joke—a playful way to practice English. I've never thanked my parents for anything. In the Hindi language, in everyday gestures and culture, there is an unspoken understanding of gratitude.

Saying *dhanyavaad*, or “thank you” in Hindi, would almost be sarcastic. It seems inadequate. When I thank anyone in Hindi, I make sure to look the person in the eye. Saying *dhanyavaad* to someone without looking at him or her is just as good as not saying it at all. As a kid, I never heard anyone my age say thank you in Hindi. I *did* hear my father say *dhanyavaad* to people his age, but he did it as sincerely as possible, with his hands joined in front of his chest in the solemn gesture of *namaste*. He wasn't just thanking someone for something, but asking for an opportunity to return the favor. That's how I came to understand expressions of gratitude.