

Call for Papers

The Expression of Indebtedness in Linguistics: Cross-Perspectives between European and Asian Languages

Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University | 10–11 December 2026

Indebtedness arises when an exchange produces a perceived imbalance between interactants, which may originate from either a positively valued act (help, favors, benefits) or a negatively valued one (a violation of a social norm) (Coulmas, 1981; Ohashi, 2008). It is often associated with feelings of gratitude, regret, and guilt, typically correlating with a desire to symbolically repay the debt or compensate for the credit incurred, hence restoring the normal 'balance of payments' (Culpeper & Tantucci, 2021, p. 150; see also Greenberg, 1980).

The expression of indebtedness, often recognised as a simple and universal act, is also a socially and culturally marked practice. Behind seemingly ordinary expressions of thanks or apology lie complex logics of recognition, obligation, politeness, and emotion, which vary considerably across languages, contexts, and societies. Across Asia, indebtedness is often encoded through culturally elaborated notions. Concepts such as the Japanese distinction between *gimu* and *giri*, the Korean ethic of *eunhye*, or the Persian system of *ta'ârof*, among others, illustrate how linguistic practices are embedded in complex networks of moral obligation, hierarchy, and reciprocity. Culturally specific notions highlight that the expression and negotiation of social debts are deeply rooted in local values, encompassing both binding moral obligations and ritualised, context-dependent social practices. In many European languages, similar connections between debt, obligation, and gratitude exist, and the social work of indebtedness remains pragmatically present.

In fact, the principle that benefaction generates a form of relational responsibility appears to be cross-linguistically widespread. All languages provide ways to mark imbalance, acknowledge benefaction, express gratitude or regret, and indicate willingness to restore equilibrium, whether through lexical means, discourse patterns, interactional strategies, or a combination of these.

This conference proposes to explore the forms, functions, and representations of indebtedness, and how these vary in European languages and in East Asian languages (Japanese, Korean, Chinese), Southeast Asian languages (Indonesian languages, Vietnamese, Thai, etc.), South Asian languages (Hindi, Urdu, etc.), and West Asian languages (Persian, Turkish, etc.). The aim is to bring together linguistic and pedagogical perspectives on this transversal phenomenon in order to deepen our understanding of the linguistic dynamics of indebtedness. Proposals may focus **on a single European or Asian language**, or offer a **comparative perspective**. We particularly welcome contrastive studies that examine manifestations of indebtedness across typologically distant languages, or in languages and varieties that have been underrepresented in existing research.

Suggested Areas of Focus

Topics may include (but are not limited to) the following areas:

1. Lexicon, Discourse, and Semantics of Indebtedness

This section examines how lexical and discursive expressions of indebtedness are realised across languages, focusing on how obligation, reciprocity, and moral or emotional debt are encoded through formal variation, semantic nuance, implicit versus explicit realisations, and varying degrees of ritualisation. It invites work on the semantic fields associated with indebtedness (e.g., gratitude, apology, obligation, favour, compensation), lexicalisation patterns, historical developments, and the ways languages construe debt-like relations through metaphor and evaluative meaning.

2. Im/politeness and Cultural Dimensions

Indebtedness is tied to politeness strategies and specific social norms. This section focuses on how gratitude, apology, and acknowledgment of obligation participate in both polite and impolite behaviour. Indebtedness may be mitigated through respectful or deferential expressions, but it can also become a source of tension, resistance, or face-threat when obligations are minimised, rejected, or strategically exploited. The conference welcomes work examining how these dynamics vary across languages and cultures, with attention to formal versus informal uses, hierarchical or asymmetric relations, and ritualised practices surrounding gifts, services, or assistance.

3. Interaction Perspectives

Indebtedness can also be examined through its interactional manifestations. This section welcomes analyses of how expressions of indebtedness, such as thanking, apologising, acknowledging a favour, or committing to reciprocate, are realised in situated interaction and co-constructed between participants. Contributions may explore how these actions emerge within turn-taking organisation, how they are expanded or negotiated through affiliative responses, how interactants deal with repair when obligations are unclear or contested, and how participants use various resources (lexical, prosodic, sequential) to accomplish the pragmatic functions associated with indebtedness. Contributions may also address potential misunderstandings in multilingual interactions.

4. Multimodality and Non-verbal Behaviour

This section extends the notion of indebtedness by exploring how people convey indebtedness not only through the words they use but also, and sometimes primarily, through non-verbal resources (facial expressions, bodily movements, gestures, intonation, etc.). Contributions may explore linguacultural-specific non-verbal expressions of indebtedness (for example, bowing in Asian cultures), how verbal and non-verbal resources contribute to meaning production and inferencing, or focus on the methodological challenges of studying multimodal data.

5. Digital Interactions and E-politeness

With the rise of digital technologies, expressions of indebtedness are adapting to written communication channels such as email, social networks, or messaging apps. This section explores how expressions of indebtedness are conveyed in these new interactional spaces. Studies may also examine the role of emojis, stickers, GIFs, and punctuation in how indebtedness is expressed, perceived and interpreted in digital communication.

6. Applied Linguistics and Language Teaching

How do learners acquire and use expressions of indebtedness in a foreign language? How are these practices shaped in student-teacher interaction? Contributions to this section may address teaching tools, learner corpora, pedagogical practices, and the evaluation of im/politeness in educational contexts.

7. Artificial Intelligence, Conversational Agents, and Simulated Indebtedness

Voice assistants, chatbots, and other conversational agents increasingly integrate conventionalised formulas in their interactions with users. This section examines how these systems express or recognise indebtedness, the cultural politeness models they mobilise (explicitly or implicitly), and the linguistic design choices in different contexts. Contributions may focus on human-machine dialogues, scripted conversations featuring indebtedness, or the ways in which indebtedness is interpreted, simulated, or automated in interfaces across languages.

References

Coulmas, F. (1981). "‘Poison to Your Soul’ Thanks and Apologies Contrastively Viewed", In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *Rasmus Rask Studies in Pragmatic Linguistics, Volume 2, Conversational Routine. Explorations in Standardized Communication Situations and Prepatterned Speech*, 69-91, De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110809145.69>

Culpeper, J., & Tantucci, V. (2021). The Principle of (Im)politeness Reciprocity. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 175, 146-164. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2021.01.008>

Greenberg, M. S. (1980). "A theory of indebtedness", In K. Gergen, M. S. Greenberg, & R. H. Willis (Eds.), *Social exchange: Advances in theory and research*, 3-26. New York: Plenum. doi:10.1007/978-1-4613-3087-5_1

Ohashi, J. (2008). Linguistic rituals for thanking in Japanese: Balancing obligations. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40(12), 2150-2174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2008.04.001>

Submission Guidelines

Oral presentations will consist of a 20-minute talk followed by 10 minutes for questions and discussion. Proposals should include:

1. A title
2. An abstract in **French** or **English** of about 450 words (including references)
3. A list of up to five keywords

Proposals should be submitted via the conference website:

<https://indebtedness.sciencesconf.org> by **April 15th, 11:59 PM (CET)**.

The conference will be held **onsite** at Jean Moulin Lyon 3 University on 10-11 December and will be followed by the publication of peer-reviewed proceedings.

Travel Grants

We are offering four **reimbursement-based** travel grants of up to 300 euros each for students and young researchers presenting at the Indebtedness in Linguistics Conference. These funds are specifically intended to cover travel expenses. To apply, please submit a letter from your supervisor certifying that your home institution does not provide funding for your attendance. The letter should be addressed to eugenia.diegoli@unive.it. Recipients will be selected based on the evaluation scores assigned to their conference submissions during the review process, taking into account relevance to the conference theme, originality, clarity, and overall academic quality.

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