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My Problem with "No Problem"

We all have exchanges such as "How are you?" – "I'm good" that are spoken in an almost formulaic combination. They grease the skids of social interaction and are said almost unconsciously. For most of my life, "Thank you" – "You're welcome" has been one of these combinations. However, over the past five years or so, I've observed that the phrase "No problem" (or its variant, "Not a problem") has gradually replaced "You're welcome" as the most common reply to "Thank you." And, frankly, I have a problem with "No problem."

The exchange "How are you?" and "I'm good" has at least a cordiality and personal quality to it, if only because it uses personal pronouns. "No problem," on the other hand, eliminates the personal pronoun and takes the interactive quality out of the exchange. The person doing the thanking is not even addressed directly in this response. The focus is entirely on the situation of the person who has been thanked. "No problem" says, "Don't worry about it; helping you didn't inconvenience me." (or, at least, "didn't inconvenience me enough to make me care about it"). "You're welcome," on the other hand, says, "I was happy to help you" – which, to my ears, is a much warmer response.

"No problem" is, of course, a perfectly appropriate response in the right situation, such as when the person who is being helped expresses the feeling that he's asked too much of the person helping. For instance, if a customer in a store doesn't have a price tag, and the clerk has to go out onto the floor to get the price, when the clerk returns the customer might say, "I'm sorry to inconvenience you." The appropriate response to that would, indeed, be "No problem," because, in this situation, the words reassure the customer that the inconvenience was not too great.

Said in response to "Thank you," however, "No problem" implies that doing *anything* for someone else is regarded as an imposition that needs to be "forgiven" by the helper, reassuring the person helped that, though indeed it *was* an imposition, it was still "No problem." I don't know about you, but when I say "Thank you" it's not because I think I've imposed on someone but because I'm grateful for his or her help and

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want the person to know that I appreciated it. I don't feel as if I need to be reassured that I haven't caused that person a "problem." Being told that I've been "no problem" feels more like an insult than a gracious response to gratitude.

We'll never know who the first person was to respond to "Thank you" with "No problem," but what disturbs me is that it has caught on so quickly and completely. These days, I'm much more surprised to hear "You're welcome" (especially from a younger person) than to hear "No problem" in response to my "Thank you." What does this change signify?

To me, it signifies a loss of graciousness in everyday discourse. "You're welcome," as in "You are well come," implies that the person helping you is glad to have seen you and has taken pleasure in helping you. "No problem," on the other hand, implies that the person is just glad you didn't cause him any more trouble than you did. How much more ungracious can a person be? Now, I understand that most people who say "No problem" aren't actually thinking this way, consciously. But there must be something significant going on at an unconscious level in a society that has adopted this less gracious form of discourse.

Are we becoming more selfish? Less concerned about the needs of others? There are other societal indicators that this is true, and I'm guessing that this social change is being reflected by a shift in the language we use every day. That worries me – and the fact that it's an unconscious shift makes it all the more worrisome. If, at an unconscious level, more and more of us are thinking of helping people as an imposition, something that requires reassuring our fellow human beings that they're not being a problem, then we're a poorer society for it.

Whether or not I have convinced you that this linguistic shift is worth being concerned about, I appreciate your taking the time to read what I have to say the subject. So, I want to say thank you.

I know, I know. "No problem."