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Saying goodbye to and thanking bus drivers in German-speaking Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

The present study investigates the dynamics of leave-taking and thanking on buses in rural versus urban settings. Employing a mixed-methods approach, Study A involved an online survey with 1000 participants from 125 locations in German-speaking Switzerland, while Study B observed 236 passengers' behaviors in urban and rural contexts whereby contextual factors such as location of exiting, time of day, and passenger demographics were systematically varied. Results revealed an urban-rural divide, with rural areas demonstrating more frequent leave-taking and thanking. Factors like door location on the bus, number of exiting passengers, and passenger age influenced the realization of these speech acts, with front-door, solo exits and older passengers displaying more leave-taking and thanking. Furthermore, in rural areas, bus drivers often initiated the interactions. Subsequent qualitative interviews after the conduction of Study B revealed several possible reasons for the urban vs. rural divide: in the rural countryside, bus lines can be geographically more exposed. Roads can be dangerous, particularly in wintertime. This could increase the probability of wanting to bid farewell to the bus driver and to express gratitude for bringing them home 'safely'. This research sheds light on the subtleties governing social exchanges within public transportation contexts.
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1. Introduction

Upon disembarking from a bus in the countryside, the act of exchanging pleasantries takes on a distinct charm, a ritual often observed as passengers bid 'goodbye' or offer appreciative words to the bus driver. This scene embodies a cultural custom apparently more prominently found in rural areas compared to urban places. According to the Gazette and Herald (2022), North Yorkshire residents rank second in the UK for expressing gratitude to their bus drivers. The Midlands, East of England, North East, West, and North Yorkshire residents display the highest tendency to thank bus drivers, while Londoners show the least inclination. A study of 2000 passengers and 1158 bus and coach drivers commissioned by the Confederation of Passenger Transport found that nearly 40% of drivers receive over 50 expressions of gratitude daily, surpassing other sectors like healthcare and retail. About 80% of British people thank their driver, with 90% of drivers stating that receiving thanks positively impacts their wellbeing.

The practice of greeting and thanking bus drivers upon disembarkation is not solely confined to British culture – it is also a common custom in several Australian cities. American expats in Australia have observed this behavior among locals. This

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phenomenon, reported by the New York Post in 2023, surprised these American expats. Such cross-cultural differences highlight social customs that transcend geographical boundaries. Yet, despite these observable differences, the dynamics underlying these social interactions remain largely unexplored. The depth of our understanding regarding the stratification of the key speech acts here, leave-taking and thanking, remains in its infancy, particularly when examined through a sub-national or regional lens. We know little about the influences that shape these behaviors: factors like the gender and age of participants, the specific location of one's departure within the bus, and other contextual factors that are associated with these speech acts are under-researched.

This paper explores the nuances of leave-taking and thanking within public transport settings in German-speaking Switzerland, aiming to enhance our understanding of social interactions. Whilst leave-taking and thanking have been discussed in the traditional speech act literature (e.g. Searle, 1969), and indeed we will take on board that literature, our understanding of speech acts is more in tune with that of Culpeper and Haugh (2014: Chapter 6). "Speech acts are not fixed by the words or behaviours with which they are performed" (Culpeper and Haugh 2014: 181); instead, to use Mey's (2020: 445) words, they are dependent on the "situation being able to 'carry' them". Culpeper and Haugh (2014: 181-5) argue that they are fuzzy, complex concepts, encompassing formal, co-textual and contextual (including interpersonal) features. In particular, they argue that pragmatic acts, as they term them, are not simply dependent on "what one speaker has in mind" but also on "participant responses" and "the broader activity of which they are a part" (Culpeper and Haugh, 2014: 196). This fits our study, which encompasses a wide range of contextual features and participant responses. It is worth noting that both leave-taking and thanking are expressive speech acts, whereby, in Searle's (1979) view, the words fit the psychological world of the speaker. The pertinent point here is that it is expressive speech acts that play a key role in dealing with social and interpersonal relations (Taavitsainen and Jucker, 2010: 159). Our paper will inevitably touch on issues of politeness.

Our research comprises three components: an online survey with 1000 participants analyzing these behaviors on buses, observational data collected from four bus lines in German-speaking Switzerland, and two qualitative interviews to delve deeper into the distinctions between these two speech acts. The paper starts with the literature overview, before presenting Study A (online experiment), which is followed by Study B (observational data), a methodological comparison of the two studies and the general discussion.

2. Literature overview

This study aligns with the field 'variational pragmatics'. The bulk of existing research in this field started to emerge around 20 years ago and was spearheaded by Schneider (2005; Schneider and Barron 2008b). The focus was mainly placed on pluricentric languages like English, Spanish, and German. Thematically, existing studies have looked at apologies (Wagner, 1999), invitations (García, 2008), reprimands (García, 2009), requests (Breuer and Geluykens, 2007), offers (Barron, 2005b), and compliments (Herbert, 1989). What has been less examined is intra-national variation (see Schneider and Placencia, 2017; van Dorst et al., 2024). Our work will help boost this. Lack of research on sub-national pragmatic variation stands in contrast to the meticulous documentation of diverse linguistic facets within many Western European languages. As Schneider and Barron (2008a, p. 3) point out: "[D]ialectology has focused overwhelmingly on the central levels of the language system, i.e., on pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, whereas language use in terms of communicative functions, linguistic action and interactive behavior has been almost completely ignored. This applies to traditional dialect geography as well as to contemporary social dialectology […]." Take a language like Swiss German, for example, there is abundant literature on regional variation in phonetics (Christen, 1988, 1998, 2001; Haas, 1973; Leemann et al., 2014; Leemann and Kolly 2016; Leemann, 2016; SDS, 1962–2003), morphosyntax (Richner-Steiner, 2011; SADS, 2022; SDS, 1962–2003; Steiner et al., 2023), and lexis (Glaser, 2008; Juska-Bacher, 2010; SDS, 1962–2003). This obvious gap in research on sub-national pragmatic variation was pointed out by Schlieben-Lange and Weydt (1978) long ago. Moreover, it is not only sub-national, regional variation that should be explored, but also variation constrained by social elements (e.g., gender, age, attitudes towards regional origin, personality traits) and their correlation with the execution of speech acts. Existing research indicates that social and emotional aspects significantly influence the realization of speech acts, as evidenced in studies like Chalupnik et al. (2017) regarding gender, Bella (2009) on age, and Chen and Li (2023) concerning personality traits.

The speech acts of leave-taking and thanking that seem central to disembarkation from a bus have been, as stated at the outset of this article, relatively understudied even from a pluricentric perspective. Taking one's leave, expressing farewell, saying goodbye, and so forth are encompassed by the label leave-taking. These are not the speech acts discussed at length in the traditional speech act literature (e.g. Austin 1962; Searle 1969), or even in speech act literature generally. Searle (1969: 64-5) describes greetings as a speech act, and here we should remember that leave-takings include what are sometimes referred to as greetings-at parting. In Searle's (1969: 64-5) view, "in the utterance of 'hello' there is no propositional content and no sincerity condition"; the speech act here is captured solely by the preparatory condition "that the speaker must have just encountered the hearer" and the essential rule "that the utterance counts as a courteous indication of recognition of the hearer" (Searle 1969: 64). It is easy to adapt this to leave-taking by changing the preparatory condition and maintaining the essential rule: the speaker must just be about to leave the hearer, and the utterance counts as a courteous indication to the hearer of that pending state. However, Searle's account, though it recognizes that politeness is involved (cf. 'courteous'), is a limited description of leave-taking: the distinguishing feature is ultimately just one preparatory condition to do with leaving a hearer. One aim of this paper is to identify the regular features of leave-taking in our specific context. This is not to say that speech act theory could not be developed to encompass a broader view of speech acts. Indeed, Edmondson and House (1981),

a model that is revised and extended in Edmondson et al. (2023), create a taxonomy of speech acts in which one group of speech acts are characterized by the fact that they occur at the 'closing' of interactions – they are interactional acts. Indeed, a, possibly the, seminal work on leave-takings emerged from Conversation Analysis: Schlegloff and Sacks's (1973) *Opening up Closings*. The authors state that what they are "really dealing with is the problem of closing a conversation that ends a state of talk" (1973: 324). For example, a standard technique might be a reciprocal exchange of goodbyes. This, however, is not, strictly speaking, applicable to the passengers on a bus who are not ending a state of talk with the driver. Indeed, Schlegloff and Sacks (1973: 325) explicitly state that their observations do not hold for "passengers together in an automobile".

Another approach to our leave-taking bus disembarkation activity, and one that complements Searle's idea that the speaker is about to leave the hearer and the utterance counts as a courteous indication to the hearer of that pending state, is provided by Goffman (1971). Goffman (1971:79) states that

> greetings and farewells provide ritual brackets around a spate of joint activity […]. More generally, greetings mark a transition to a condition of increased access and farewells to a state of decreased access. […] They are ritual displays that marked a change in degree of access. I propose to call such behaviour "access rituals".

Whilst on the bus, people function as passengers being conveyed by the bus driver; together they participate in the activity of public transport. When they step off the bus, they transition away from that activity, they are no longer passengers. A leave-taking, by for example saying *goodbye*, is a supportive ritual marking the termination of the joint activity, and the decrease in access to each other that the driver and passengers had. Of course, it is not a given that this social situation is seen this way by all. The fact that people may see it differently and act in different ways accordingly is partly what we are investigating here.

As Ogiermann and Bella (2021: 11) note, "expressions of thanking are reactive speech acts". A key focus must be on the interactional aspects of pragmatics. Searle's (1969: 67) speech act rules state that the act of thanks involves a speaker expressing gratitude for a past act that benefits the speaker (and is believed by the speaker to have been beneficial). Brown and Levinson (1987: 210) have a slightly different emphasis, focusing on indebtedness of the act: "expressing thanks puts S on record in accepting a debt". In this way, the speaker's face is threatened, though there are implications for the hearer who may feel pressure to minimize the debt (hence responses such as 'it's nothing'). Jautz (2013), similarly, confirms that thanking is primarily a matter of threat to the speaker's face. In the context of a bus, presumably the notional debt is the fact that the passengers have had a service rendered, namely, they have been taken from one location to another by the bus driver. The fact that they have paid for that service might be said to cancel the debt. Indeed, that the debt is not clear-cut in the way that, say, lending someone money or helping them carry something may be behind the variability of thanking practices on buses – much depends on the assessment of the debt. Balancing the debt lies at the heart of the interaction, but interaction has not been a focal point for much research on thanking. An exception is the discussion thanking in terms of politeness reciprocity, the idea that in interactions there is pressure to maintain a balance of politeness on all sides of the interaction (Culpeper and Tantucci 2021; see also Ohashi 2008; Culpeper et al., 2022 on reciprocity and thanking). Note that passengers have available a series of options when they get off a bus, options which, other things being equal, increase politeness. These include:

Keep silent
Express leave-taking (e.g. *Bye*)
Express thanks (e.g. *Thanks*)
Express thanks and leave-taking (e.g. *Thanks, bye*)

The politeness of a thanking expression can also be boosted by the addition of intensifiers (e.g. 'very much'), prosodic devices and/or rhetorical strategies such as repetition (see Aijmer [1996]; 2014, for an overview). Finally, it is worth bearing in mind that a speech act of thanking whilst getting off the bus can simultaneously perform an access ritual, an act of leave-taking.

These two speech acts have been discussed in terms of variational pragmatics. For example, Jautz (2008) is a major book-length comparative study of gratitude expressions. It examines British and New Zealand radio programs, and found differences. British data featured significantly more expressions of gratitude compared to New Zealand data. In contrast, New Zealand expressions more frequently specified reasons for gratitude, often appearing in phatic communication; while British expressions primarily linked to services, financial support, or goods. Additionally, Jautz reports specific realizational differences: 'Thank you' prevailed in British English, while 'Thanks' was more common in New Zealand. Further, New Zealanders tended to intensify gratitude with 'very much,' whereas British usage leaned toward 'very much indeed'. These findings illustrate cultural and linguistic differences in expressing gratitude between the two nations. But note that this is an inter-nation study.

Intra-national regional variation studies are few. In German-speaking Switzerland and German-speaking Europe, which would be a key relevance to our work, we only find limited information on pragmatic variation. Studies – typically single-locality and small-sample ones – have been conducted on variation in the use of pronominal address (Elter, 2009; Manno, 2005; Rash, 2004; Schüpbach, 2014), together with a study that explored differences between German German and Swiss German politeness through a qualitative analysis of newspaper comment sections (Locher and Luginbühl, 2019). In a recent study, Dürscheid et al. (2019) explored greeting behavior in Berlin and Zurich bakeries. Among other findings, they reported composite leave-taking strategies for customers in the Zurich cohort, including 'goodbye, see you around, bye!' while in Berlin, possible responses for customers included saying nothing or simply responding with 'bye'. Most recently, Ackermann

(2021) examined requests in various regions of German-speaking Europe. She found, for instance, that the further south in German-speaking Europe, the more subjunctives ('could I') and downtoners ('perhaps') are used when making a request. The consensus of these studies is that differences in the use of strategies are due to differences in cultural norms.

Specifically relevant for our study is public transport context. Studies have indeed examined the pragmatics of interactions on public transport. Recent examples include: Gao and Liu (2023), which examines impoliteness in passenger disputes recorded in short videos posted on Douyin, one of the largest short video platforms in China, and Márquez Reiter et al., 2023, which examines the communicative practices of ambulant vendors (AVs) working on a Buenos Aires trainline. However, studies of leave-taking or thanking in public transport contexts are very rare. One such study is Al-Khawaldeh and Žegarac's (2013), which suggests a British English tendency to excessively thank the bus driver even at routine stops. This behavior, according to Al-Khawaldeh & Žegarac, stands out as an exception compared to other cultures. Jordanian participants from the study note that it is not customary to express gratitude in service encounters such as thanking grocery store workers, bus drivers, or cashiers.

Given this literature review, we identify the following research gaps:

(i) **Intra-national pragmatic variation**, and particularly in the realization of speech acts, has not received much attention, especially when compared with what we know of regional variation from studies in other linguistic domains (like phonetics, morphology etc.)
(ii) The role of a wider array of **social factors** (e.g., gender, age, attitudes towards regional origin, personality traits) and their connection to the realization of speech acts is under-researched.
(iii) The role of **interactional and situational factors** that determine the realization in these two speech acts specifically in this context are unknown (e.g., place of exit in the bus, number of people leaving bus etc.).

The aim of the present study is to fill these gaps in the context of German-speaking Switzerland.

3. Methodological rationale

Methodologically, we tackle the variables saying goodbye to and thanking the bus driver from three angles: online survey, observational data, and qualitative interview data:

(a) Online survey data: We conducted an online survey utilizing metapragmatic interviews (cf. Kasper 2008:297). We elicited two speech acts: leave-taking on the bus and thanking the bus driver. This study, Study A, consisted of 1000 participants from 125 localities in German-speaking Switzerland.

The issue with metapragmatic interviews is that this method is more likely to yield responses that reflect prescriptive pragmatic norms (see Barron 2005; Labov 1996). For this reason, we conducted a further study that collected real-life data: Study B, which we followed up with two qualitative interviews to obtain deeper insights into the results we expected to obtain:

(b) Natural data: Leave-taking and thanking behavior of 236 passengers in urban and rural settings was observed and noted down. Factors, which we assumed to affect leave-taking and thanking behavior were systematically varied (e.g. urban vs. rural line, place of exiting the bus, time of the day, type of station etc.). This study, Study B, was further rounded off methodologically with two qualitative interviews, which enabled an exploration of potential differences found in this study.
(c) Two qualitative interviews were carried out after the observational study. These would enable us to delve into potential explanatory factors pertinent to the primary findings. The interviews involved two individuals who took neither part in Study A nor Study B; rather, they were acquaintances of the final author and sat on polar opposites of the rural vs. urban, saying goodbye vs. not-saying goodbye, thanking, not thanking the bus driver poles.

Going into both studies, we predicted that we would find an urban vs. rural divide in both studies.

4. Studies A and B

4.1. Study A

4.1.1. Methods

4.1.1.1. Participants. For this first study, a total of 1000 Swiss German participants were recruited and surveyed in 2020–2021. The participants came from 125 representative localities taken from the Swiss German Dialects Across Time and Space (SDATS) Corpus (www.sdats.ch), see Fig. 1.

Fig. 1. Localities surveyed in Study A.

Eight participants were surveyed per locality, split into two cohorts containing four participants each: an older cohort (60+ years old) and a younger cohort (20–35 years old). Each cohort consisted of two males and two females, giving a balanced sample of 500 males and 500 females; and, equally, 500 younger and 500 older speakers. The following criteria were used to select speakers: ideally, the speakers had grown up in the respective localities (meaning that they spoke the local dialect), at least one parent had grown up in that specific region, and the speakers did not commute for more than two hours a day. Educational background was taken into consideration to reflect population-level distributions published by the Federal Statistics Office (BFS, 2022a): 23% had a university degree, 12.7% tertiary vocational education, 42.4% secondary vocational education, and 21.9% a (vocational) baccalaureate.

4.1.1.2. Material. Two speech acts were examined in the current study: leave-taking on the bus and thanking on the bus.

4.1.1.3. Procedures. Both speech acts were elicited in the context of a metapragmatic interview (cf. Kasper 2008:297), see Table 1.

Table 1
Questions used in the metapragmatic interview for the 1000 participants.

2.11 Wählen Sie bei den folgenden Fragen jeweils die Antwort, die am besten passt.			
Frage	JA	NEIN	Weiss nicht/keine Antwort
Wenn Sie aus dem Bus steigen, verabschieden Sie sich vom Busfahrer, den Sie nicht kennen?	☐	☐	☐
Wenn Sie aus dem Bus steigen, bedanken Sie sich beim Busfahrer, den Sie nicht kennen?	☐	☐	☐

The top question reads 'When you exit the bus, do you say goodbye to the bus driver whom you don't know?', the bottom question reads 'When you exit the bus, do you thank the bus driver whom you don't know?'. Possible answers were 'yes', 'no', 'not sure' or 'no answer'. Based on the data collected, we ran logistic regressions in JMP (John's Macintosh Project, 2023), including the following predictors:

- Age (two age cohorts, 20–35 vs. 65+)
- Gender (male and female)
- Education (university degree, tertiary vocational education, secondary vocational education, and (vocational) baccalaureate)
- Region (eight larger regions Aargau, Zürich, the Northwest, the Northeast, Grisons, Fribourg/Valais/Ticino, Central Switzerland, and Bern)
- Rural vs. urban according to the Federal Statistics Office (BFS, 2020) – localities >10 K inhabitants are classified as 'urban'; those with <10 K as rural
- Linguistic mobility (an index capturing mobility behavior based on how often and how far participants commute, how often they have moved in the past etc.)
- Dialect identity (a score that indexes the participants orientation towards their local origin; the score is composed of the (dis-)agreement to statements such as 'I am proud to be a resident of X', 'I like it when people from other regions can tell where I am from based on my dialect' etc.; the higher the score, the more they orientate towards local heritage)
- Big Five personality types (cf. Tupes and Christal, 1961: extraversion, openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, neuroticism)
- A proxy for social networks (a score that captures the dialects of the three closest friends)

Personality differences are commonly analyzed using the "Big Five" traits, which stem from Tupes & Christal's seminal 1961 work. These traits openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism—capture essential aspects of an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors and vary across individuals. Although the five-factor model is a prominent method for studying personality, other models also exist. In our research, we utilized a standardized personality questionnaire based on Tupes and Christal's 1961 article, comprising 72 items rated on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 'Agree completely' to 'Disagree completely'. Example questions include 'I feel comfortable around people' and 'I pay attention to detail.' We then calculated scores for each participant across the five traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. Personality traits were included in the analysis because the data from Study A were derived from a large-scale socio-dialectology project on Swiss German (www.sdats.ch). This project collected extensive metadata from all 1000 participants, enabling researchers to investigate how various social factors, including personality traits, influence speech patterns. Recent studies in the field of variationist sociolinguistics have also highlighted the impact of personality in variationist studies (see for example Steiner et al., 2023).

4.1.2. Results

We begin by presenting the results of the statistical modeling for leave-taking, followed by the results for thanking. We will outline the significant effects of the model with additional details. These points will be discussed in greater depth in the discussion section at the very end of the article.

4.1.2.1. Leave-taking. The logistic regression analysis, involving 14 different predictors, yielded valuable insights into patterns of leave-taking behavior (43 NAs were removed for the analysis). This analysis considered age, gender, education level (four levels), region, urban vs. rural, linguistic mobility, dialect identity, all five personality traits, the above-mentioned social network index, and an interaction term urban/rural*dialect identity (since we suspected the two variables to be connected, assuming rural places to show more orientation towards local heritage). Overall, the regression model displayed significance ($df = 21$, $X^2 = 74.6$, $p < 0.0001$), indicating a substantial relationship between these predictors and leave-taking behavior. Specifically, within the predictors studied, urban vs. rural, dialect identity, agreeableness, neuroticism, as well as the interaction between urban/rural*dialect identity stood out as statistically significant. These results underscore the significant influence of these factors on reported leave-taking behavior observed among bus passengers, detailed in Table 2's effect likelihood ratio tests.

Table 2
Effect likelihood ratio tests for leave-taking based on online response data.

Source	Nparm	DF	L-R ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
URBAN_RURAL	1	1	27.0765296	<0.0001*
AGREEABLENESS	1	1	5.32448867	0.0210*
NEURO	1	1	4.82999194	0.0280*
URBAN_RURAL*DIALECT_IDENTITY	1	1	4.73374986	0.0296*
EXTRAVERSION	1	1	3.15483827	0.0757

(*continued on next page*)

Table 2 (*continued*)

Source	Nparm	DF	L-R ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
LMI_D	1	1	2.33665916	0.1264
GENDER	1	1	2.23081481	0.1353
EDUCATION_4LEVELS	3	3	4.48836686	0.2133
DIALECT_IDENTITY	1	1	1.17538637	0.2783
REGION	7	7	8.0632305	0.3271
SNI_3_PRIVATE_CONTACTS	1	1	0.48599952	0.4857
OPENNESS	1	1	0.39059892	0.532
AGE	1	1	0.22676757	0.6339
CONSCIENTIOUSNESS	1	1	0.00135143	0.9707

To explore these individual, significant effects, we ran simple effect tests between the independent factors and the nominal variable leave-taking (yes/no):

- **Urban/rural**: 88.3% (N = 744) participants from rural localities reported to say goodbye, while only 70.2% (N = 80) of urban passengers reported to say goodbye ($X^2 = 22.6$, df = 1, $p < 0.0001$).
- **Dialect identity**: Participants who identified strongly with their regional origin reported to say goodbye much more frequently than participants who did not show such strong connection to local heritage (overall model test: $X^2 = 15.3$, df = 1, $p < 0.0001$). This effect interacted with rural vs. urban. Posthoc tests revealed that only in the rural localities we find a positive effect of dialect identity on leave-taking behavior ($X^2 = 16.6$, df = 1, $p < 0.0001$).
- **Agreeableness**: The more agreeable the participants, the more they reported to say goodbye to the bus driver ($X^2 = 14.2$, df = 1, $p = 0.0002$).
- **Neuroticism**: The less neurotic the participant, the more they reported to say goodbye to the bus driver ($X^2 = 4.2$, df = 1, $p = 0.0041$).

Fig. 2 shows the regional distribution of leave-taking on the bus, split by the two age cohorts (older cohort top, younger cohort bottom).

Urban centers, particularly in the Midlands, tend to stand out as not saying goodbye to the bus driver (purple areas in Fig. 2).

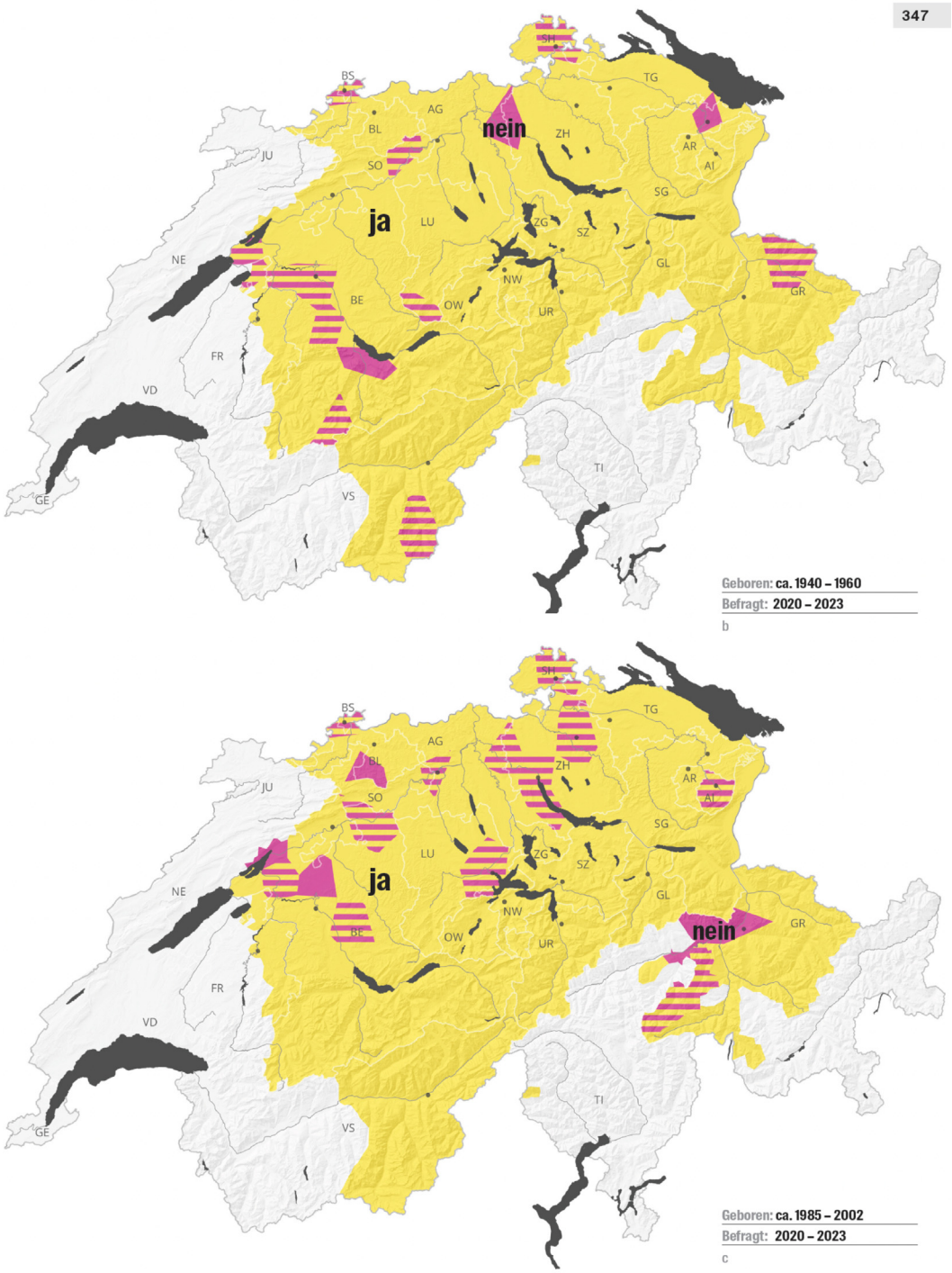

Fig. 2. Leave-taking on the bus – yellow = yes, purple = no; older cohort on top, younger cohort at the bottom (cf. Leemann et al., 2025). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article).

4.1.2.2. Thanking. The logistic regression analysis, involving 14 different predictors, yielded valuable insights into patterns of thanking behavior (53 participants did not provide an answer). This analysis again considered various factors including age, gender, education level, region, urban vs. rural, linguistic mobility, dialect identity, all five personality traits, the social network index, and an interaction term for region*dialect identity (we suspected the two factors to be linked, with Alpine regions exhibiting more pronounced orientation to local heritage). Overall, the regression model, again displayed significance ($df = 21$, $X^2 = 100$, $p < 0.0001$), indicating a substantial relationship between these predictors and thanking behavior. Specifically, within the predictors studied, region, gender, agreeableness, and dialect identity stood out as statistically significant. These results underscore the significant influence of these factors on thanking behavior observed among bus passengers, detailed in Table 3's effect likelihood ratio tests.

Table 3
Likelihood ratio tests for thanking based on online response data.

Source	Nparm	DF	L-R ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
REGION	7	7	43.34021	<0.0001*
GENDER	1	1	9.63922688	0.0019*
AGREEABLENESS	1	1	7.48435992	0.0062*
DIALECT_IDENTITY	1	1	4.82457276	0.0281*
URBAN_RURAL	1	1	1.79208116	0.1807
OPENNESS	1	1	1.5509316	0.213
EXTRAVERSION	1	1	0.84084729	0.3592
AGE	1	1	0.83044434	0.3621
REGION*DIALECT_IDENTITY	7	7	6.80307479	0.4497
NEURO	1	1	0.15596495	0.6929
CONSCIENTIOUSNESS	1	1	0.0398722	0.8417
SNI_3_PRIVATE_CONTACTS	1	1	0.02959637	0.8634
LMI_D	1	1	0.0259897	0.8719
EDUCATION_4LEVELS	3	3	0.38306016	0.9437

To explore these individual, significant effects, we ran simple effect tests between the independent factors and the nominal variable leave-taking (yes/no):

- **Region**: The South (Fribourg/Valais/Ticino) showed the most thanking behavior (77.7%, N = 108), Aargau the least (32.1%, N = 27), see Table 4 below ($X^2 = 63$, $df = 7$, $p < 0.0001$).

Table 4
Thanking behavior by region.

Count Row %	No	Yes	Total
	92	98	
Bern	48.42	51.58	190
	60	87	
Central Switzerland	40.82	59.18	147
	31	108	
Fribourg, Valais, Ticino	22.3	77.7	139
	27	43	
Grisons	38.57	61.43	70
	102	88	
Northeastern Switzerland	53.68	46.32	190
	40	37	
Northwestern Switzerland	51.95	48.05	77
	30	20	
Zurich	60	40	50
	57	27	
Aargau	67.86	32.14	84

- **Gender**: 59.9% (N = 287) of women indicated to thank the bus driver while only 47.2% (N = 221) of men did so ($X^2 = 31$, $df = 7$, $p < 0.0001$).
- **Agreeableness**: The more agreeable the participants, the more they reported to thank the bus driver ($X^2 = 20.4$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.0002$).
- **Dialect identity**: Participants who identified strongly with their regional origin reported to thank the bus driver much less frequently than participants who did not do so ($X^2 = 13.6$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.0002$).

Fig. 3 shows the regional distribution of thanking the bus driver, split by the two age cohorts (older cohort top, younger cohort bottom).

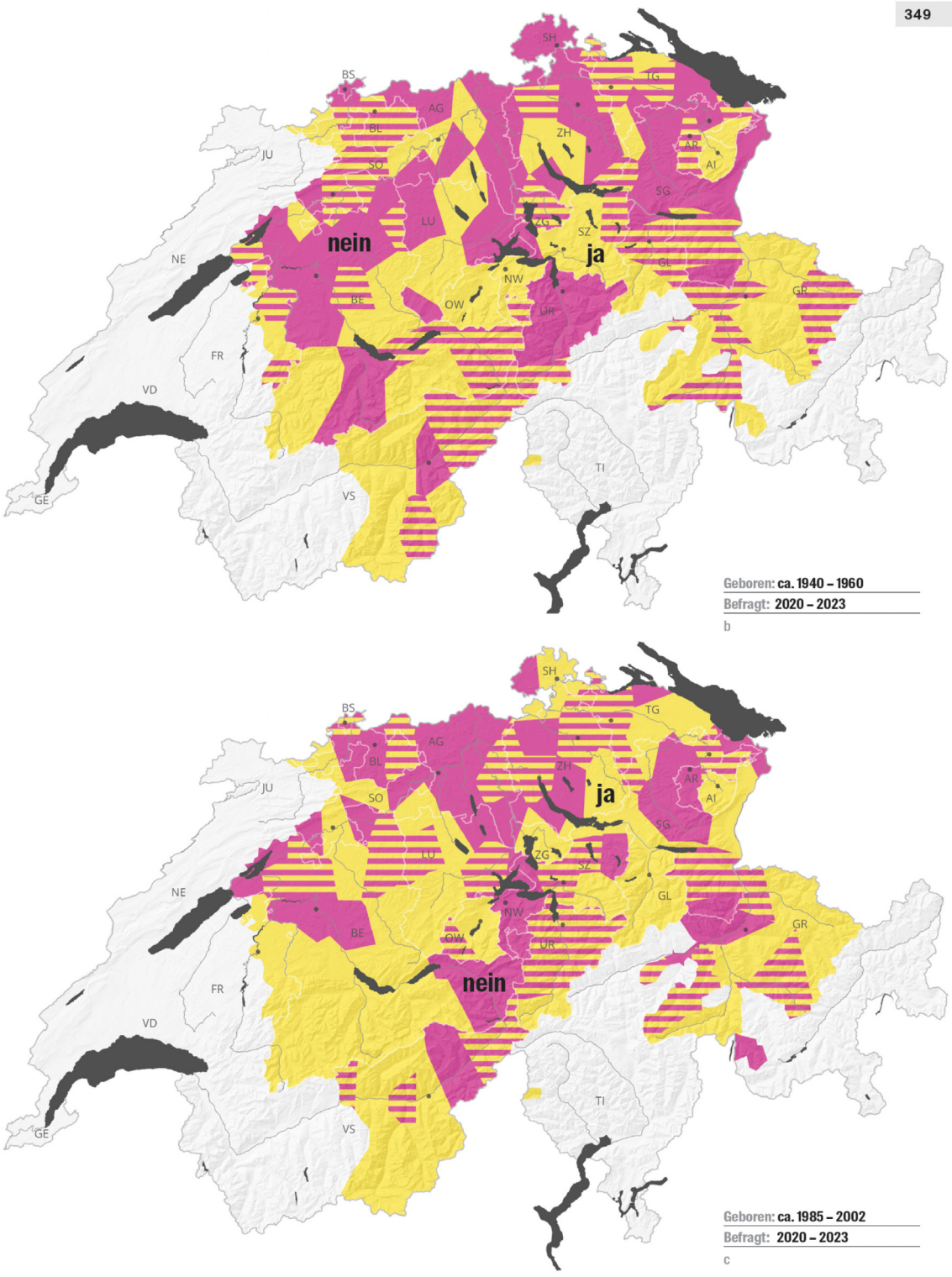

Fig. 3. Thanking the bus driver – purple = yes, yellow = no; older cohort top, younger cohort bottom (cf. Leemann et al., 2025). (For interpretation of the references to colour in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the Web version of this article).

The region Valais/Fribourg/Ticino in the Southwest sticks out in both maps in Fig. 3 as being particularly yellow, i.e. showing distinct thanking on buses.

4.2. Study B

4.2.1. Methods

4.2.1.1. Participants. Study B encompassed a total of 236 participants, comprising 116 males and 120 females. Among these individuals, 128 were observed in urban bus lines in the city of Bern, while 108 were observed in rural bus lines in the Bernese Mountains.

4.2.1.2. Procedures. During multiple weeks in July and August of 2023, data elicitation in the form of ethnographic observation occurred. The final author sat on the buses and took notes (see Fig. 4). Four bus lines were observed:

- Two lines in the city of Bern: line 12, which includes 17 stops in the city center (N = 64) and line 17, which consists of seven stops in the city center and five stops in the adjacent municipality Köniz (N = 64) (BFS, 2023).
- Two lines the Bernese Mountains: Adelboden to Frutigen (N = 56), and Brienz to Brienzwiler (N = 52), see Fig. 5 for geographical orientation.

The investigation involved a breakdown between:

- rush hour (N = 119)
- non-rush hour (N = 117)

Additionally, the distribution concerning passengers' exit positions included the

- very front (N = 51)
- the center (N = 55) (not applicable in the buses in the Bernese Mountains)
- the back (N = 130)

Observations were made regarding passengers leaving at

- the final stop (N = 120)
- intermediary stops (N = 120)

Data was further collected whether others exited the bus simultaneously

- yes (N = 145)
- no (N = 91)

The sample consisted of passengers with the following gender and (estimated) age distribution:

- Gender: 120 females, 116 males
- Age: 47 (M), 19 (SD)

For the bus drivers, the demographic breakdown is not as straightforward, as – particularly in the countryside – the same bus driver was encountered several times. If each possible instance of leave-taking or thanking towards the bus driver is counted, then passengers said goodbye to (or not) and/or thanked (or not) 32 female bus drivers and 204 male bus drivers. The age distribution of all possible bus driver encounters is 49 years old (mean; 10 standard deviation). The final author who sat on the bus also took notes about whether the bus driver initiated leave-taking and the drivers' realization of saying goodbye and thanking.

Fig. 4. Photos taken during data collection by the final author: city bus (left), countryside bus (right).

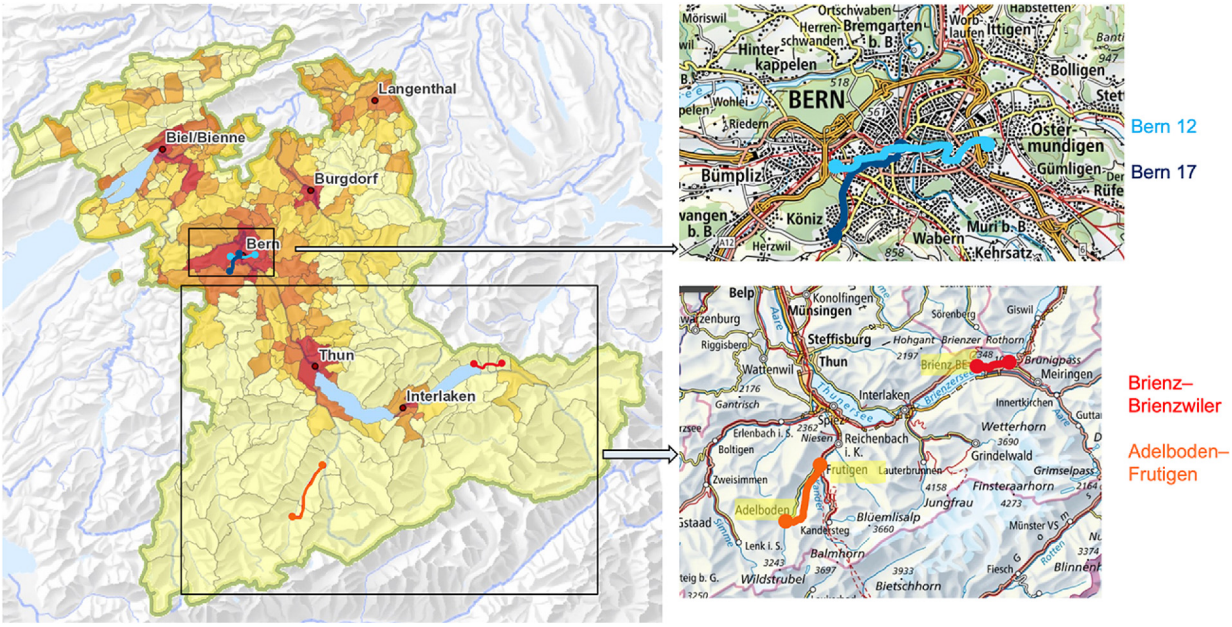

Fig. 5. Geographical orientation of the bus lines studied – city of Bern (top right) and Bernese Mountains (bottom right) (image credits: Amt für Gemeinden und Raumordnung des Kantons Bern; Amt für Geoinformation des Kantons Bern; BFS (2023); Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft; Geoportal des Bundes; Bundesamt für Landestopografie swisstopo 2024).

The two people who took part in the qualitative interviews can be described as follows: individual 1 was a rural, older 60-year-old female from the Adelboden-Frutigen region; individual 2 was a younger, 27-year-old male of the city of Bern. Neither of the two took part in Study A or Study B – both of them use buses as a mode of transportation on a regular basis. The interviews took place after the main findings of the two studies were established and the purpose was to explore how the findings could be explained. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes and covered questions such as “Why do you think there is a difference in leave-taking and thanking behavior between rural and urban regions?”, “Why do you think people said goodbye more when exiting the bus from the very front door?”, “Why do you think the older the passengers, the greater the probability they said goodbye?”.

4.2.2. Results

Here, too, we begin by presenting the results of the statistical modeling for leave-taking, followed by the results for thanking. We will detail the significant effects of the model with further information. In this experiment, we also further explore dynamics of interaction in 4.2.2.3 and will cross-compare the methods of both studies, Study A and Study B, in section 4.2.2.4. All of these aspects will be explored more thoroughly in the discussion section at the end of the article.

4.2.2.1. Leave-taking. The overall distribution of leave-taking by region showed that in the city, only 2.3% (N = 3) said goodbye, while in the countryside the proportion of passengers who actually said goodbye was at 51.9% (N = 56). For this reason, statistical modeling was only done on the subset of the 108 passengers from the countryside. The results of the logistic regression analysis, encompassing ten predictors, revealed notable insights into leave-taking behavior. The predictors considered in the regression model were gender of passenger, age of passenger, time of day, place of exit (which door), type of station, other passengers exiting, gender of bus driver, age of bus driver, initiation of leave-taking by bus driver, and bus line. Overall, the regression model demonstrated significance (df = 10, X^2 = 63, p < 0.0001), indicating a substantial association between the predictors and leave-taking behavior in the countryside. Specifically, among the predictors, the following factors emerged as statistically significant: place of exit (door), other passengers exiting, age of passenger, type of station, and gender of the bus driver. These findings highlight the influential role of these factors in shaping the patterns of leave-taking behavior among bus passengers, see Table 5 effect likelihood ratio tests.

Table 5
Likelihood ratio tests for leave-taking in rural bus lines based on natural, observed data.

Source	Nparm	DF	L-R ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
Place of exit (door)	1	1	14.827887	0.0001*
Other passengers exiting	1	1	8.70991394	0.0032*
Age of passenger	1	1	7.36278961	0.0067*
Type of station	1	1	6.7554056	0.0093*
Gender bus driver	1	1	4.83565517	0.0279*
Age bus driver	1	1	3.60965587	0.0574
Gender passenger	1	1	1.8552746	0.1732
Time of day	1	1	1.37539527	0.2409
Line	1	1	0.06924788	0.7924
Initiation of leave-taking by bus driver	1	1	0.05967172	0.807

To explore these individual effects, we ran simple effect tests between the independent factors and the nominal variable leave-taking (yes/no).

- **Place of exit (door)**: Those leaving the bus in the front door said goodbye 79.5% of the time (N = 36), those who left in the back (countryside buses only had a front and a back door) only did so at 32.8% (N = 21) (X^2 = 23.9, df = 1, p < 0.0001).
- **Other passengers exiting**: When no one else exited the bus through the same door, passengers said goodbye much more frequently at 76.7% (N = 33); if someone else exited simultaneously, they only said goodbye at 35.4% (N = 23) (X^2 = 18.5, df = 1, p < 0.0001).
- **Age of passenger**: The logistic fit between passenger age and whether they said goodbye to the bus driver showed that the older the passengers, the greater the probability they said goodbye (X^2 = 7.8, df = 1, p = 0.005).
- **Type of station**: At intermediate stops, passengers said goodbye much more frequently (67.9%, N = 38) than at final stops (34.6%, N = 34) (X^2 = 12, df = 1, p = 0.0005).
- **Gender of bus driver**: Male bus drivers received more goodbyes from passengers (57.3%, N = 47) than female bus drivers did (34.6%, N = 9).

4.2.2.2. Thanking behavior. The overall distribution of thanking the bus driver by region showed that in the city, no passenger was observed thanking the bus driver, while in the countryside the proportion of passengers thanking the driver was at 26.9% (N = 29). For this reason, statistical modeling to explore which contextual factors predicted whether a passenger thanked the driver was only done on the subset of the 108 passengers from the countryside. The results of the logistic regression analysis, encompassing ten predictors, revealed notable insights into thanking behavior. The predictors considered in the regression model were gender of passenger, age of passenger, time of day, place of exit (which door), type of station, other passengers exiting, gender of bus driver, age of bus driver, initiation of leave-taking by bus driver, and bus line. Overall, the regression model demonstrated significance (df = 10, X^2 = 22.7, p = 0.012), indicating a substantial association between the predictors and thanking behavior in the countryside. Specifically, among the predictors, the following variables emerged as statistically significant: place of exit (door) and age of passenger. These findings highlight the influential role of these factors in shaping the patterns of thanking among bus passengers, see Table 6 for effect likelihood ratio tests.

Table 6
Likelihood ratio tests for thanking the bus driver in rural lines based on natural, observed data.

Source	Nparm	DF	L-R ChiSquare	Prob>ChiSq
Place of exit (door)	1	1	5.19463446	0.0227*
Age of passenger	1	1	4.80289077	0.0284*
Gender passenger	1	1	2.43647363	0.1185
Time of day	1	1	1.68147414	0.1947
Gender bus driver	1	1	1.58759302	0.2077
Line	1	1	1.1281189	0.2882
Other passengers exiting	1	1	0.60970858	0.4349
Initiation of leave-taking by bus driver	1	1	0.18726248	0.6652
Age bus driver	1	1	0.13245162	0.7159
Type of station	1	1	0.0763194	0.7823

To explore these individual effects, we ran simple effect tests between the independent factors and the nominal variable thanking (yes/no).

- **Place of exit (door)**: Those leaving the bus in the front thanked the bus driver 43.2% of the time (N = 19), those who left in the back only did so at 15.6% (N = 10) ($X^2 = 10$, df = 1, p = 0.0016).
- **Age of passenger**: The logistic fit between passenger age and whether or not they thanked the driver showed that the older the passengers, the greater the probability of them thanking the driver ($X^2 = 6.7$, df = 1, p = 0.0094).

4.2.2.3. Dynamics of interaction. In what follows, we want to zoom in the dynamics of interaction between bus drivers and passengers in a bit more detail – we only consider leave-taking and thanking in rural bus lines. To recap: there were 108 observations of leave-taking and/or thanking in rural bus lines. Table 7 presents the actual realizations for both speech acts for the bus drivers. Table 8 shows the realizations for the passengers.

Table 7
Frequencies of actual realizations of leave-taking and/or thanking by bus drivers.

Realization bus drivers	Count
–	54
Ade ('bye')	8
Ade, merci ('bye, thanks')	8
Adieu, merci ('bye, thanks')	4
Ade, merci, hiit e schöne Taag ('bye, thanks, have a nice day')	3
Schöne Taag, ade zäme ('have a nice day, bye pl.')	3
Wiedersehe, schöne Namittag ('see you again, have a nice afternoon')	3
Ade mitenand, schööne Taag, merci ('bye pl., have a nice day thanks')	2
Ade, danke ('bye, thanks')	2
I wünsche euch e schööne Taag, adieu mitenand, merci ('I wish you a nice day, bye pl., thanks')	2
Merci ('thanks')	2
Uf Wiederluege mitenand, schööne Aabe, danke vielmal ('see you again, have a nice evening, thank you very much')	2
Uf Wiedersehe, schöne Tag ('see you again, have a nice day')	2
Wünsche euch e schöne Aabe, ade mitenand ('I wish you a nice evening, bye pl.')	2
Ade mitenand, merci ('bye pl., thanks')	1
Ade mitenand, schööne Tag ('bye pl., have a nice day')	1
Ade zäme, merci ('bye pl., thanks')	1
Adieu ('bye')	1
Adieu mitenand, schööne Aabe ('bye pl., have a nice evening')	1
Adieu mitenand, Schööne, merci ('bye pl., take care, thanks')	1
Merci viel mal, schöne Aabe no, adieu mitenand, danke ('thank you very much, have a nice evening, bye pl., thanks')	1
Merci, ade ('bye, thanks')	1
Schöne Aabe mitenand ('have a nice evening pl.')	1
Sälü ('see ya')	1
Uf Wiedersehe, schöne Aabe ('see you again, have a nice evening')	1

Table 8
Frequencies of actual realizations of leave-taking (vertical) and/or thanking (horizontal) by passengers.

Realization passengers	Count
–	45
Ade ('bye')	17
Ade, merci ('bye, thanks')	11
Adieu, merci ('bye, thanks')	4
merci ('thanks')	3
Ciao ('bye')	2
Sälü ('see ya')	2
Ade mitenand ('bye pl.')	1
Ade zäme, gueti Fahrt, merci ('bye pl. have a journey, thanks')	1
Ade, danke ('bye, thanks')	1
Ade, schöne Aabe ('bye, have a nice evening')	1
Ade, schöne Aabe, merci ('bye, nice evening, thanks')	1
Adieu ('bye')	1
Adieu mitenand ('bye pl.')	1
Adieu, danke vielmal ('bye, thanks a lot')	1
Ciao, ä Schööne ('see ya, have a good one')	1
Danke ('thanks')	1
Danke, merci ('thanks, thanks')	1
Dankeschön ('thank you')	1
Guete Abe, danke, merci ('have a nice evening, thanks, thanks')	1
I wünsche dir, he ('have a good one, eh')	1
Merci glichfalls ('thanks you too')	1
Nümm z' lang ('not too long now')	1
Schöne gäll ('have a good one, eh')	1
Schöne Taag ('have a good day')	1
Sälü, danke glichfalls ('see ya, thanks you too')	1
Sälü, merci gäll ('see ya, thanks eh')	1
Tschüss ('bye')	1
Tschüss tschüss ('bye bye')	1
Uf Wiederluege, Schööne ('see you again, take care')	1
Ä Schöne ('take care')	1

Table 7 shows the frequencies of leave-taking and thanking for the bus drivers. Most frequently, we find 'Ade' ('bye') (N = 8) and 'Ade, merci' ('bye, thanks') (N = 8). Table 8 shows the frequencies of leave-taking and thanking for the passengers. Most frequently, we find 'Ade' ('bye') (N = 17) and 'Ade, merci' ('bye, thanks') (N = 11).

When we zoom in on who initiated the interaction, we find that 54/108 times it was the bus driver and 36 times it was the passenger who did the initiation. 18 times neither the driver nor the passenger said goodbye and/or thanked. Fig. 6 shows a Sankey plot which shows the interactions between drivers and passengers, see Fig. 6.

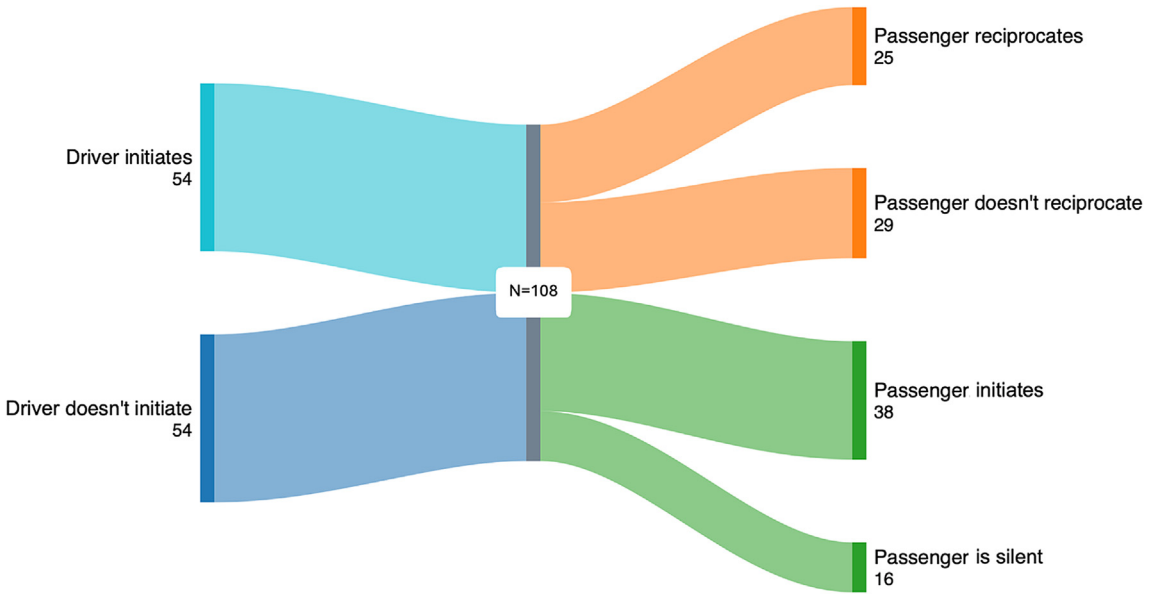

Fig. 6. Sankey plot for the interaction between bus drivers and passengers – split up into drivers' behaviors (left-hand side) and passengers' behaviors (right-hand side).

Fig. 6 can be read as follows: on the left-hand side we see the drivers' behaviors, split up into whether they initiated (top left, bright blue, N = 54) or not (i.e., the driver was silent, bottom left, dark blue, N = 54). On the top right in orange are all the instances where passengers either reciprocated (N = 25) or did not reciprocate (i.e., were silent, N = 29). In the bottom right-hand corner, we see instances where the passengers either initiated (N = 38) or whether passengers were as silent as the bus driver (N = 16). It is important to note that this plot does not specify what exactly the drivers or the passengers had said. On both sides, it can include just a leave-taking (e.g. Ade 'bye') or a thanking (merci 'thanks'), or a combination of both (*Ade, merci* 'bye, thanks'), or silence.

4.2.2.4. Comparison of Study A vs. Study B. Both studies, A & B, sampled people in Bern, Frutigen, and Adelboden. To explore if the two methods yielded similar results, we subset the dataset of Study A into city (only city of Bern participants) and rural (only Adelboden and Frutigen respondents; Brienz and Brienzwyler were not sampled in Study A) cohorts. We then tallied the responses from both studies for a cross-comparison, see Table 9 below.

Table 9
Summary of respondents saying goodbye and thanking the bus driver in Study A (top) – elicited via metapragmatic interviews – and the same breakdown for Study B (bottom), elicited via natural data collection.

Study A (metapragmatic interviews)		
Region	Leave-taking yes	Thanking yes
Rural old	25% (N = 2)	25% (N = 2)
Rural young	12.5% (N = 1)	87.5% (N = 7)
City old	50% (N = 2)	25% (N = 1)
City young	25% (N = 1)	25% (N = 1)
Study B (natural data)		
Region	**Leave-taking yes**	**Thanking yes**
Rural old	63.2% (N = 36)	35.1% (N = 20)
Rural young	39.2% (N = 20)	17.6% (N = 9)
City old	4.6% (N = 3)	0% (N = 65)
City young	0 (N = 63)	0% (N = 63)

Table 9 shows substantial overlap in leave-taking and thanking behavior between the two studies (typically, rural respondents and passengers said more goodbye and thanked more) – but there is also some overshoot and undershoot in Study A when compared to natural data, which will be discussed in the following section.

5. Discussion

We first discuss results of Study A, followed by those of Study B, and a synthesis of the two. We end with a general discussion.

5.1. Study A

The first study – using online survey data – showed strong urban vs. rural and regional effects for leave-taking and thanking, which highlights the importance of studying sub-national variation for the manifestation of speech acts. If we first focus on leave-taking, to recap, results revealed that almost 90% from rural localities said they would say goodbye to the bus driver (compared to 70% in urban areas). The reason for the higher proportions of leave-taking in rural areas are manifold. One could argue that the countryside is less hectic, leaving more room and time to chat (thus having time to say goodbye to the bus driver) and that the countryside is more community oriented and less anonymous (the passenger might actually know the bus driver and thus say goodbye to them). Further, there are differences in the frequency of buses in the city (high frequency, typically every 10 min) and the countryside (typically 1–2 buses every hour), which may also contribute to familiarity in the countryside: when 'the bus' arrives, passengers may already have chit-chatted at the bus stop before embarking, thus making transportation in the countryside more personal.

Studies have further shown tighter social networks in rural areas (Milroy and Llamas 2013). The linguistic consequences of this are tighter social control, i.e. if in the countryside you do not say goodbye to the bus driver, you may stand out – and others might observe that behavior. In other words, the leave-taking becomes a 'social ought', social oughts being norms that relate "to authoritative standards of behaviour, and entail positive or negative evaluations of behaviour as being consistent or otherwise with those standards" (Culpeper 2011: 36). Over time, this becomes a process of its own and people may tend to pick up the behavior of other passengers (on language socialization and (im)politeness, see Cook and Burdelski 2017). This line of reasoning for the role of social networks is not supported in our data, however. The social network index we devised

did not show up as a significant predictor. This may have to do with the fact that the index used in the current study was very limited since it captures only the three closest private contacts in a network and does not account for multiplex relationships (see e.g. Sharma 2017 for a critical discussion).

Further, we found that – for the rural participants – those who identified strongly with their regional origin said goodbye much more frequently than participants who did not do so. Why could this be? The index, dialect identity, is a composite score of a number of statements participants were asked to indicate dis-(agreement) (see section 4.1.1.3). The more they orient towards the local dialect, the more they said goodbye to the bus driver. We can only conjecture here; perhaps these participants wanted to come across as particularly respectful towards the bus driver, as they believe 'saying goodbye' is part of their dialectal heritage of which they are particularly proud.

Findings further revealed that the higher the agreeableness of a speaker, the more they reported saying goodbye to the bus driver; and the less neurotic their personality, the more likely they were to say goodbye to the bus driver. Agreeableness, one of the 'Big Five' personality dimensions, is the dimension that encompasses traits most obviously associated with politeness, including being 'courteous', 'cooperative', and 'tolerant' (Barrick and Mount 1991: 3–5). To our knowledge, this is the first study to show the effects of personality traits on the realization of this particular speech act; the topic of the relationship between personality and politeness or impoliteness remains under-researched (the effects of personality traits on linguistic behavior, in general, is understudied, see e.g. Steiner et al., 2023).

Moving on to whether the 1000 participants indicated to thank the bus driver, statistical tests showed region, gender, agreeableness, and dialect identity to play the most important role. To recap, results revealed that the South (Fribourg/Valais/Ticino) showed the most thanking behavior (almost 80% of respondents said they would thank the bus driver). We argue that there are a number of reasons why the Southwest, in particular, showed these results. These can be largely subsumed as factors revolving around dialect and identity, as well as potentially religious denomination. The fact that people in these areas stand out may be driven by the identity they are constructing (cf. Locher, 2008). Over time, speakers of a variety follow these behavioral patterns in the form of a 'cultural scripts' – such as thanking the bus driver – which are stored in the long-term memory (cf. Goddard and Wierzbicka, 2007). This means that this way of speaking becomes 'enregistered' for this region, the same way that phonetic, lexical, or morphosyntactic phenomena are typical of these regions (cf. Agha, 2003; Trümpy, 1963). Further, religious denomination is likely to play a role: both cantons – Valais and Fribourg – are Catholic (70% of the population in VS and 60% in FR 60% identify themselves as Catholic, cf. BFS, 2022b). Catholicism favors rituals and conventions. According to Kogan et al. (2013), such regions have been shown to have a high Uncertainty Avoidance Index (cf. Hofstede, 2009); this means that people from these regions try to avoid ambiguous situations as they want to 'play it safe'. One way to do this linguistically is to, for example, show gratitude as a means of avoiding conflict.

Further, we found an effect of gender insofar that almost 60% of women indicated to thank the bus driver, while only 47% of men did so. The finding that women exhibited more gratitude and thus may seem to use more positive politeness strategies is not new (cf. Brown and Levinson, 1987; Herring, 1994). Putting the terms of Herring more simply, it has been argued that these differences between genders relate to different understandings of communication between men and women: according to Herring, 1994, women use communication primarily to uphold social bonds and relationships, while men view communication more as a device for exchanging information. This social understanding of communication entails an increased use of linguistic devices that help maintain a positive relationship between communication partners, which can be achieved by using such positively polite strategies (cf. Herring, 1994; Holmes, 2013). This explanation is somewhat outdated, however; nowadays, there is a movement away from the essentialist, dichotomized notion of gender difference, and it is frequently argued that differences are due more to differences in socialization between genders or in the construction of identities rather than any apparently simple notion of biological difference.

Further, findings revealed the more agreeable the participants, the more they reported to thank the bus driver. Results also revealed an effect of dialect identity – albeit somewhat in an unexpected direction: participants who identified strongly with regional origin reported to thank bus drivers much less frequently than participants who had a lower orientation index. This result has not previously been described and at this stage remains unresolved.

5.2. Study B

In line with Study A, the second study – using natural real-life data – showed a major main effect for urban vs. rural for both speech acts under scrutiny: rural passengers said goodbye more than 50% of the time (compared to roughly 2% for the passengers in the city). For thanking the bus driver, the effects were even more pronounced: more than a quarter of passengers in the countryside thanked the bus driver upon leaving the bus while no one in the city did so.

If we zoom in on leave-taking behavior in Study B, we found that the place of exit, i.e. which door they leave the bus from, was one of the main effects in our study (here and in what follows, we only focus on rural bus lines). Those leaving the bus in the front said goodbye almost 80% of the time (only 35% of the time when exiting in the back). The reason for this is probably quite straightforward: the bus driver sits in the front – passengers pass by the driver when exiting. This physical proximity is very likely to trigger much higher rates of leave-taking. Anecdotally, though, cultural social norms may override this factor: in Brisbane in Australia, for example, many passengers shout thanks from the back of the bus. Further, we found that when other passengers exit, the proportion of saying goodbye is lower than if passengers exit alone. This probably has to do with diffusion of responsibility: 'Why should I say goodbye when someone else, who is leaving with me, is already saying goodbye?'. Here,

too, anecdotally, in the North of England this appears to work differently: it has been observed that one passenger starts thanking them when disembarking and the others behind start copying that person.

There was further an effect of age: the older the passenger the more likely it was they would say goodbye to the bus driver. There appear to be two principal factors at play here: communicative efficiency and factors associated with identity. Not saying goodbye contributes to a more efficient use of language (cf. Healey and Grossman, 2016) and younger speakers want to mark their identity as young also via language; this choice then, indexes youthfulness and a cosmopolitan attitude, both of which may contribute to a modern persona (cf. Eckert, 2012). Finally, passengers said goodbye more frequently at intermediate stops and when the bus driver was male. The first finding here may be connected with the numbers of people exiting the bus and type of bus stop: on the Frutigen – Adelboden line in the Bernese Mountains, for example, most people disembarked at the final stop – while for intermediate stops, people often exited alone, thus saying goodbye more frequently.

Moving on to whether the passengers thanked the bus driver or not, statistical modeling revealed main effects of the place of exit (which door they exited the bus from) and the age of the passenger (again, here and in what follows we consider rural bus lines only). These main effects were also shown earlier for saying goodbye to the bus driver. The findings presented for Study B further revealed some discrepancies between bus drivers' and passengers' behavior on the politeness scale we introduced earlier: half the bus drivers realized either a form of leave-taking, thanking, or both; for passengers, the distribution was somewhat different: 52% of the rural bus line passengers realized a form of leave-taking while only 27% of them realize a form of thanking. It is surprising to see how often bus drivers initiated leave-taking and thanking. One could explain this in terms of different versions of the debt incurred: the driver is thanking the passengers for having purchased the service; the passengers are thanking the driver for having provided the service. Both, of course, involve politeness reciprocity. Anecdotally, in the North of England, the vast majority of leave-taking and thanking is initiated by the passengers. A reason for this may also be because drivers in some regions of the UK are in an enclosed booth.

In even further detail, we zoomed in on the dynamics of interaction with the Sankey plot shown in section 4.2.2.3. We found that half the time drivers did the initiation, whereas a third of the time it was the passengers who initiated. The fact that drivers initiate so much – which is not what we had expected – may have to do with how drivers are trained in the Bernese mountains: bus lines may train their drivers to be polite, so passengers might expect initiation from drivers and drivers to use polite leave-taking and thanking formula. What is further surprising is that passengers reciprocated towards the driver only about half the time, which is not what the principle of politeness reciprocity (Culpeper and Tantucci 2021) would predict, assuming that the service rendered (driving the bus and taking the passenger to their destination) is the most salient debt. When looking into the data further, we found that in about 80% of the cases with no reciprocation, passengers left the bus in larger groups and they primarily exited at the final stop. This is relevant because bus drivers at final stops most often use very generic leave-taking formula, such as *Wiedersehe, schööne Taag* 'See you again soon, have a nice day'. These formulas are often in plural forms which can lead to passengers perhaps feeling less addressed personally and they did not feel obliged to reciprocate.

5.3. General discussion

Study A was based on metapragmatic interviews and administered via online questionnaire. Online collection of response data is very useful to cross-compare standardized items over a very large participant sample; still, it has received substantial criticism in the past decades. It is frequently moaned that this type of task elicits inauthentic data, the argument being that metapragmatic interviews or discourse completion tasks do not elicit the way people really speak, but the way they think they should speak according to the rules of their speech community (for a discussion of the limitations of discourse completion tasks, see Barron, 2005). This criticism is not new and has been around in sociolinguistics since the mid-1990s (cf. Labov's seminal 'When intuitions fail' paper from 1996). In addition, the metapragmatic interview contexts in the current study were very minimal (i.e., only minimalist contexts were given) and participants were asked about highly routinized contexts (e.g., leave-taking and thanking), which may in fact increase responses that may trigger how participants think they should react in their respective speech communities. In the future, much more nuanced contexts should be presented, where participants are also given space in open-ended follow-up questions, where the 'why' and 'when' of a specific response can be probed. The upside of this approach, though, is that variables can be strictly controlled and participants can be surveyed in a very practical and time-efficient manner – as shown in Study A. Quite generally, our results corroborate the ecological validity of metapragmatic interviews: overall, both methodological approaches – the online survey and the naturalistic data – revealed main effects for both speech acts on the levels of urban vs. rural or variation between regions.

When we zoom in further, though, we do find that when looking at leave-taking only, online survey respondents (Study A) from Frutigen and Adelboden (countryside) undershoot their estimate of whether or not they would say goodbye to the bus driver when compared to natural data from Frutigen and Adelboden (Study B). That is, very few respondents from the countryside claim to say goodbye online, when in reality, the vast majority of them do actually say goodbye. The city of Bern online respondents, though, overshoot their estimate: i.e., they think they say goodbye to the bus driver, when in reality, almost no one does that. When looking at thanking behavior, the Adelboden and Frutigen participants overshoot their responses compared to natural data, i.e., the majority of them think they thank the bus driver, when in reality many of them do thank, but not to the degree reported in the online survey. The city group, again, overshoots online, i.e., some of them report to thank the bus driver, when in reality, no one did. Note though that these findings are based on very small counts per cell.

The main finding of both studies was the rural versus urban and regional effects found in the speech acts examined. The main reason for the rural urban divide was explored further in the qualitative interviews subsequent to the conduction of Study B: two participants took part. An elderly female from the Adelboden-Frutigen region who regularly rides the bus lines in the mountains and a younger male from the city of Bern who also rides the bus lines in the city of Bern. The participants were particularly asked about why they think the rural vs. urban divide exists. The reasons they mentioned for this divide were manifold: in the rural countryside, particularly in the Bernese Mountains (where Adelboden and Frutigen are located), bus lines tend to be much more exposed, geographically. Roads can be dangerous, winding and sliding, particularly in wintertime. This, according to the participant from the Adelboden–Frutigen region, could increase the probability of wanting to bid farewell to the bus driver and to express gratitude for bringing them home 'safely'. Further, there is more time in between stops and people stay on the bus for longer in rural regions – which again increases interaction. Riding the bus in the city is basically a means to an end. Another factor that was mentioned in the interviews was anonymity: in the countryside, bus passengers and sometimes even bus drivers and passengers know each other, which fosters chit chat amongst the people on board. In the city, it very rarely happens to bump into people you may know.

6. Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence on the dynamics of leave-taking and thanking in public transportation contexts – behaviours referred to by Ogiermann and Bella, 2021 as 'reactive speech acts'. These reactive, or expressive, speech acts play a significant role in the interactional pragmatics of disembarking from public transport, as they illustrate the collaborative activity of farewell rituals: both parties participate in balancing the social debt to maintain politeness during the interaction – which highlights that these pragmatic acts of leave-taking and thanking involve not only the intentions of the speaker but also the responses of the participants. This aligns with the observations of Culpeper and Haugh (2014), emphasizing that these speech acts are dynamic and involve a mutual exchange to uphold (perceived) social norms. More specifically, this study uncovered a distinct urban-rural divide, revealing more frequent expressions of gratitude and farewells in rural areas. Door location, passenger demographics, and bus driver-initiated interactions were identified as significant influencers – qualitative interviews revealed that geographic exposure, perceived road dangers, and longer interaction times in rural regions contribute to more pronounced use of bidding farewell and thanking.

In the future, the study could involve several aspects to enhance its depth and breadth: on the one hand, conducting more in-depth qualitative interviews with larger and more diverse participant groups, including individuals from different rural and urban settings, would provide a more nuanced understanding of leave-taking and thanking behaviors. These interviews could explore personal motivations, cultural norms, and contextual factors influencing these behaviors. Further comparative analyses between online survey data and naturalistic data could refine the understanding of discrepancies between self-reported behaviors and actual practices. Exploring why certain groups overstate or understate their behaviors in online surveys compared to naturalistic observations would provide further insights into the general validity of different methodological approaches.

Credit authorship contribution statement

Adrian Leemann: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Carina Steiner:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Software, Resources, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Péter Jeszenszky:** Writing – review & editing, Investigation. **Jonathan Culpeper:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Lea Josi:** Writing – review & editing, Visualization, Validation, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

Data has been provided

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