

“I would like to thank my supervisor”. Acknowledgements in graduate dissertations

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While acknowledgements have been largely neglected in the EAP literature, they are almost universal in dissertation writing, where they offer students a unique rhetorical space to convey their genuine gratitude for assistance and to promote a favourable social and scholarly character. This article explores the importance of this genre and examines the generic structure and linguistic patterns used to express thanks. The study is based on analyses of the acknowledgements accompanying 240 Masters and PhD dissertations in six academic disciplines written by students at five Hong Kong universities, and on interviews with postgraduate writers. The results confirm the importance of this genre, with around 90% of the texts containing this section and some 1400 separate acts of acknowledgement. Genre patterns reveal a three-move structure sub-divided into a number of steps realised by a relatively restricted range of lexico-grammatical patterns. The analysis also shows that PhD students, particularly those in the “soft” sciences, tended to construct generically more complex acknowledgements with a greater variety of patterns. It is argued that the unexamined nature of acknowledgements may disadvantage non-native writers, and the authors suggest that EAP teachers assist their students by raising their awareness of the ways they can structure their acknowledgements to promote a competent academic identity.

Introduction

Acknowledging the assistance and contributions of others is now a well-established feature of the scholarly communication process. Although apparently unrelated to the important academic goals of establishing claims and reputations, the significance of this optional genre is confirmed by its positional prominence, by survey data, and by its widespread use in a range of forums. Acknowledgement sections are now commonplace in academic books and research articles and appear to be almost universal in dissertations, where they offer students a unique rhetorical space to both convey their genuine gratitude for assistance and to promote a capable academic and social identity. Yet despite their importance in the academic practice of reciprocal

gift-giving, acknowledgements have been largely neglected in applied linguistic studies, which have tended to focus on explicitly argumentative and persuasive genres. As a result, little is known of their structure and expression, and students are often left to their own devices when writing them.

This article offers a description of this genre based on an analysis of a corpus of acknowledgments accompanying 240 PhD and Masters dissertations written in English by Hong Kong graduates, together with semi-structured student interviews. We begin with a brief discussion of acknowledgements as a scholarly genre and then look more closely at the student texts.

Academic acknowledgements

We would like to start by claiming that acknowledgements are a distinct genre with a clear purpose and physical location. It is, of course, possible to see acknowledgements as a discourse-type occurring in a number of genres, such as a step in the Chairman's statement in company annual reports (Skulstad 1996) or as a 'part-genre' of the texts they accompany (Gionnoni 2002). But to do this may obscure important resemblances and connections between similar texts and perhaps prevent us from seeing how writers structure their worlds. We prefer to see acknowledgements as a *typified form of rhetorical action* (Miller 1984: 151) which draw on distinct combinations of formal resources, occur in identifiable social contexts, and use distinct organising devices. The genre has the identifiable purpose of giving credit to institutions and individuals for some service to the writer, involves participants who have similar relationships to each other, and occupies its own labelled space adjacent to a text which the service relates to.

In this sense, acknowledgements have been common in published academic texts since the 1960s (Bazerman 1988), gradually becoming both longer (Caesar 1992; Cronin 1995) and more common, so that they are now included in perhaps half of all published research articles (Cronin, McKenzie and Stiffler 1992) and virtually all those in the sciences (McCain 1991). Questionnaire research suggests that most academics generally read acknowledgements when scanning a new paper, often to make a preliminary assessment of the relevance of the article, and that some academics even keep a formal record of acknowledgements to themselves for institutional evaluation (Cronin and Overfelt 1994).

As objects of study, acknowledgements have attracted the attention of bibliometricians seeking to trace genealogies of interaction, where they have been compared with citations as measures of "trusted assessorship" (Chubin 1975), as ritual appendages (Cronin 1991), as instruments of credit and reward (McCain 1991), and as revealing hidden influences behind papers (Cronin 1995). Studies have also found that acknowledgements reflect disciplinary practices, with the higher rates of acknowledgement in the hard disciplines reflecting scientists' greater dependence on institutional and financial support

and immersion in the mutual exchange of materials and pre-prints (Cronin, McKenzie, and Rubio 1993).

Acknowledgements have also attracted criticism and controversy. The fact that they not only point outwards to the factors which help construct the text but also inwards to its author means that acknowledgements play an important role in a writer's efforts to create both a professional and personal identity. They can therefore represent strategic choices in 'careering' by showing the writer in a positive light and managing his or her relations to the disciplinary community (Ben-Ari 1987). Book acknowledgments, in particular, have been condemned for the "twin vices of fawning and vanity" (*The Economist* 1996) as writers seek to flatter the powerful and praise themselves, while the inclusion of tributes to those only marginal to the research has drawn fire from journal editors (Kassirer and Angell 1991). More seriously, acknowledgements have also been at the heart of bitter disputes where co-authorship is recognised merely as collaboration (Heffner 1979; Rennie, Yank and Emanuel 1997).

For these reasons, acknowledgements cannot be seen as merely a naïve listing of gratitude. In fact, this rhetorical and contextual sophistication makes them of considerable interest to discourse analysts and teachers of English for Academic Purposes. For research students, the genre has a potentially important role in reconciling their individual achievement with the interpersonal debts incurred in completing the study. For analysts, the writer's metatextual reflections can offer insights into the contingencies of research, the sources of contributing influences and students' views of author agency and responsibility. For teachers, the fact that acknowledgements allow learners to both formally record gratitude and construct a credible and sympathetic identity located in networks of association suggests that this is a genre deserving of pedagogic attention. But while Giannoni's (2002) recent analysis has offered a systematic description of the features of acknowledgements in research articles, we know little of how these texts are structured by students. In the remainder of this article we address this gap.

Corpus and procedures

The study is based on a corpus of acknowledgements in 240 dissertations written by students at five Hong Kong universities and on interviews with student writers. The text corpus consists of the acknowledgement sections in 20 MA and 20 PhD dissertations from each of six academic fields, totalling 35,000 words. The disciplines were chosen to represent a broad cross-section of academic practice, namely: applied linguistics (AL), biology (Bio), business studies (BS), computer science (CS), electrical engineering (EE), and public administration (PA).

The acknowledgements were analysed for their move structure and patterns of expression to determine how these student writers expressed thanks.

Coding categories were developed inductively through recursive passes through the texts using MonoConc Pro, a text analysis and concordance programme, and then entered into the relational database Microsoft Access to determine frequencies and relationships between categories. In addition, two Masters students and two PhD students from each discipline were interviewed by the second author, sometimes in their Cantonese L1, in order to gain insights into the text data and to discover something of their thoughts on acknowledgement practices.

Overall results

Both the qualitative and quantitative data confirm the importance of acknowledgements to these students despite its optional status. Table 1 shows that 96 of the Masters theses (80%) and 117 of the PhD dissertations (98%) contained an acknowledgement, for an overall rate of 90%.

It can be seen that the doctoral students were more scrupulous in recognising assistance. This is at least partly because PhD dissertations tend to be written by full-time students anticipating a scholarly career, with most already involved in an academic community and familiar with its norms and practices. Masters students, on the other hand, typically study part-time, for a shorter period, and complete a dissertation in addition to substantial coursework. They are looking forward to returning to their professional workplaces and often have less interest in academic customs. The MBA students, for instance, who perhaps comprise the most highly self-reliant and career-focused of the students, reported that they believed acknowledgements to be simply a formal convention of little significance, and only 30% included this section. Most students, however, regarded acknowledgements as an important courtesy, and as a means of publicly recognising the role of mentors and the sacrifices of loved ones in what is often an exacting and lengthy task. These interview comments illustrate this importance:

Table 1. Acknowledgement corpus (20 dissertations in each discipline)

Discipline	Masters dissertations			Doctoral dissertations		
	texts	words	average	texts	words	average
Applied Linguistics	18	2,402	133.4	20	7,718	385.9
Biology	15	1,825	121.7	19	3,864	203.4
Business Studies	6	810	135.0	19	2,512	132.2
Computer Science	18	1,483	82.4	20	3,470	173.5
Electronic Engineering	20	1,427	71.4	19	2,771	145.8
Public Administration	19	3,289	173.1	20	3,594	179.7
Totals	96	11,236	117.0	117	23,929	204.5

It is an important section for the completeness of the thesis. (CS PhD interview)

It is a very important section as it gives me an opportunity to express my gratitude. It is a very personal thing. (PA PhD interview)

It's an important section to include, but I've seen some people who didn't write one. This may be because they think they did the dissertations all by themselves, but I think we owe many debts to people. (AL PhD interview)

It is a must to write an acknowledgement as it is an important channel to express our gratitude to those who helped in our project. (CS MSc interview)

Altogether, there were 1400 separate acts of acknowledgement in the corpus, with 1276 different individuals and 138 institutions acknowledged. Supervisors appeared in all acknowledgements, and friends and teachers were mentioned most often. In the following sections we describe how these acknowledgements were rhetorically realised.

Generic structure of student acknowledgments

The purpose of acknowledgements is to give credit to institutions and individuals who have contributed to the dissertation in some way, while seeking to make a favourable impression on readers. To achieve these purposes, student acknowledgements have a structure consisting of a main thanking move framed by optional reflecting and announcing moves (Hyland forthcoming). Each of these moves can be divided into recurring sub-units or steps, as shown in Table 2.

Only the central thanking move is obligatory, and steps within this move comprised 90% of all the acts in the corpus. Most texts omitted an announcing move, and only thanking for academic assistance occurred in every text, underlining the importance of displaying gratitude to supervisors and other advisors. A simple, non-recursive structure can be seen in (1):

- 1) Move 1: The writing of an MA thesis is not an easy task.
 - Move 2a: During the time of writing I received support and help from many people.
 - Move 2b: In particular, I am profoundly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. James Lo, who was very generous with his time and knowledge and assisted me in each step to complete the thesis.
 - Move 2c: I am grateful to The School of Humanities and Social Science of HKUST whose re-search travel grant made the field work

possible. Many thanks also go to those who helped arrange the field work for me.

Move 2d: And finally, but not least, thanks goes to my whole family, who have been an important and indispensable source of spiritual support.

Move 3a: However, I am the only person responsible for errors in the thesis.

The structure of these acknowledgements differs considerably from Giannoni's (2002) description of research article acknowledgements. Giannoni portrays these professional texts as having two moves, with the main 'credit mapping' move comprising three possible steps: allocating credit to institutions, to individuals, and claiming responsibility. The clear separation of contributing individuals and institutions in his acknowledgement corpus, with the latter being far more frequent, is not observed in these dissertation acknowledgements, where institutional thanks are relatively rare. Nor is his preceding optional 'introductory move', which provides information about the article's origins in earlier texts or events such as seminars, conferences and working papers, found in the student texts.

The results also showed broad discipline and degree variations in the frequency of acknowledgements, in the reasons for expressing thanks, in the structural complexity of the genre, and in the preferred syntactic patterns used to express gratitude. Writers in the discursive soft sciences tended to construct more and generically more complex acknowledgements, and used a greater variety of patterns, than the science and engineering students.

Table 2. Move structure of dissertation acknowledgements

1. Reflecting Move	introspective comment on the writer's research experience
2. Thanking Move	mapping credit to individuals and institutions
a. presenting participants	introducing those to be thanked
b. thanking for academic assistance	thanks for intellectual support, ideas, analyses feedback, etc.
c. thanking for resources	thanks for data access and clerical, technical or financial support
d. thanking for moral support	thanks for encouragement, friendship, sympathy, patience, etc.
3. Announcing Move	statements delineating responsibility and inspiration
a. accepting responsibility	an assertion of authorial responsibility for flaws or errors
b. dedicating the thesis	a formal dedication of the thesis to an individual(s)

Two-thirds of all reflections and closing moves occurred in the humanities and social sciences, and these differences were more clearly marked in the Masters texts: only 4% of the acknowledgements in the hard sciences contained a reflecting move, and less than half offered any thanks beyond academic support.

Clearly, the steps offering thanks are the core of the genre, with thanking for academic assistance accounting for 38% of all steps and thanking for moral support comprising 25%. Together these expressions of gratitude made up almost two-thirds of all the steps in the corpus and three-quarters of all acts of thanks. The following interview quotes confirm the value of this support to student writers:

I'd include those people who have helped in my project in my acknowledgement, including my supervisor, co-supervisor and English tutor, as well as some informal sources, such as online discussion groups and helpful colleagues. (CS PhD interview)

I think we should not only be thankful for intellectual help, but also for spiritual support. Therefore, I'd include whoever helped in my project, including those who helped in collecting data, librarians, as well as family members. (AL PhD interview)

I'd include those who helped, including my supervisor, friends, and colleagues. It is also appropriate to thank for spiritual support, so I'd also include my friends in church and family members. (Bio PhD interview)

In the next sections, we focus on the ways these thanks were expressed.

Patterns of gratitude expressions

While there is a popular belief that there is great diversity in the style and form of acknowledgements (Cronin et al. 1993), the 1414 acts of gratitude used to realise steps 2b to 2d in this corpus were expressed in a surprisingly limited number of ways. All thanking steps contained either an overt expression of gratitude, expressed through a nominalization, a performative, an adjective, or a passive, or they simply mentioned the name of the recipient without explicit thanks. While this latter category contains a variety of formal realisations, they are similar pragmatically in not offering an overt expression of thanks. The frequencies with which all these forms occurred are shown in Table 3.

As can be seen, verbs and nouns were the main ways of expressing gratitude, each comprising about one-third of all the pattern types. The distributions were fairly similar across the Masters and PhD corpora, although the Masters students used a more restricted range of expressions and relied particularly on nominalised forms, which were about 50% more frequent

Table 3. Patterns expressing gratitude

Form	Example	Occurrences
nominalization	"My sincere thanks to . . .", "The author's gratitude goes to . . ."	476
performative verb	"I thank . . ." "The author appreciates . . ."	469
adjective	"I am grateful to . . ." "The author is thankful for . . ."	218
passive	"Y is thanked for . . ." "Appreciation is given to . . ."	155
bare mention	"I cannot go without mentioning . . ." "X has been helpful in . . ."	96
Total		1414

than in the PhD acknowledgements. Writers in all the PhD disciplines used more performatives in expressing gratitude, and this was particularly marked in the science and engineering texts. Overall, there was a strong preference for the performatives *thank* and *acknowledge*, often with an introductory preface, which accounted for 28% of all forms (example 2), and for the nouns *thanks* and *gratitude* at 25% (example 3):

2) Above all, I wholeheartedly thank my mighty God for giving me the vision, power, spirit and endurance to complete this interesting research. (AL PhD)

I also gratefully acknowledge the staff of the Department of Economics for giving me all necessary assistance during my studies. (BS PhD)

3) Special thanks must be made to the interviewees who rendered their valuable time and effort to answer my questions. (PA PhD)

I would like to express my gratitude to the industrial adviser in Kowloon-Canton Railway Corporation, Dr. Wong, for sharing his valuable suggestion and experience with me. (EE MSc)

Returning to the three main thanking steps in the structure of the genre, Table 4 shows that while writers generally expressed thanks using nouns and performatives, these forms were more dominant when expressing gratitude for academic and moral support.

Adjectivals, passives and simple mentions were particularly frequent when writers offered their thanks for resources. This step addresses the dependence of dissertation writers on the cooperation or direct help of those they study or who provide material support. It acknowledges access to data and information that might have otherwise been difficult for the writer to obtain, or for clerical assistance, technical help and financial support. This

Table 4. Distribution of thanking expressions across genre steps (%)

Step	Noun	Verb	Adjective	Passive	Mention	Total
Academic	33.5	33.3	14.4	11.4	7.4	100
Moral	40.8	35.6	11.6	9.4	2.6	100
Resources	25.3	29.9	21.9	12.1	10.8	100
Total	33.7	33.0	15.5	11.0	6.8	100

step occurred in two-thirds of the acknowledgements and generally followed step 2b, but there were degree and discipline variations in its frequency. The step was underrepresented in the business studies and computer science acknowledgements and was twice as frequent in the PhD texts, where such assistance is often considerable.

While this kind of support is crucial to the reported research, it is infrequently mentioned within the dissertation itself and is often only ritually recognized in acknowledgements. Thanks expressed through adjectives, passives and simple mentions seems less fulsome than when a noun or performative verb is used, partly perhaps because of the formality of such uses. The adjectives used to express thanks in the corpus were mainly derived from noun and verb base-forms and typically ended in *-ful*, a relatively uncommon form in everyday uses, which may account for the rather formal connotations of these items:

- 4) Winnie Chan provided me with technical support, for which I am very grateful. (CS PhD)

I am thankful to the staff, officers and volunteer workers of the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers for giving me unlimited access to their library resources. (AL PhD)

Similarly, passives, by removing the actor who offers the thanks, and bare mentions, by removing the thanks itself, provide writers with low-key ways of expressing gratitude, and as a result, these occurred relatively rarely in the personal acts of acknowledging friends and family and were over-represented in offering thanks for resource support. We will return to these choices below when discussing subject patterns.

Modifying thanking acts

A number of the examples above show that the act of thanking was also often accompanied by an adjective or adverb to intensify the extent of the writer's gratitude, with 35% of the acts amplified by a range of 43 different items. Such qualifiers testify to the subjective, interpersonal relevance of the assistance

received, with numerous cases of *hearty*, *warm*, and *heartfelt*, although these principally occurred in the soft sciences, and once again there was a marked preference for only a few items, with *special*, *sincere(ly)*, and *deeply* (*deepest*) comprising two-thirds of all cases. Most instances were confined to steps 2b and 2c, with *special* and *sincere* tending to be appended to thanks to supervisors and more intense forms reserved for family members and friends:

- 5) In particular, *special* thanks go to my project supervisor, Dr. Anson Liu for providing many papers to enrich my understanding of this topic. (BS MA)

Dr. K.F. Cheung is *sincerely* thanked for his helpful suggestions and discussions during the study. (Bio MSc)

I am *deeply* indebted to my family, especially my kids and my wife Lily. Their love and support provided me the energy to attain my study. (CS PhD)

My *heartfelt* gratitude especially to my two mentors, my mother, Mrs. Jenny Chan and my father, Late, Dr. Derek Chan who said that I could do whatever I set my mind to. (AL PhD)

While the thanks were often intensified in this way, in many cases the full illocutionary force of the statements were also weakened by an introductory phrase before the main verb. While these sentences are no less 'performative' in the sense of effecting the act they describe, the force of the act is nevertheless diminished by the occurrence of the introductory phrase. Just over half (52%) of all acts of thanks in the corpus were preceded by a preface which, through extensive use of modals and mental state verbs, acted to pre-modify the thanks by foregrounding either the writer's inclination (6) or obligation (7) to perform the act:

- 6) I *would like to* express my gratitude to the City University of Hong Kong for offering financial assistance and first-class facilities during my study. (BS PhD)

I also *wish to* express my gratitude to my parents, brother and sister who always supported me during this period. (AL MA)

Also I *want to* thank Dr. Peter Tam and Dr. Teresa Leung, members of my advisory committee, for giving me helpful suggestions on this project. (Bio PhD)

- 7) Moreover, I *have to* thank to my boss, Mr. Wong Ka Sing, the deputy managing director as well as my colleagues of T&T Engineering Company and T&T Fuel Station. (BS MA)

Special thanks *need to* be directed to those who devoted their time for interviews and also to friends who did the transcriptions for me. (PA MA)

Here I *should* express my gratitude to Mr. Jerry Lam. (EE MSc)

The Masters acknowledgements were more likely to contain a preface, and these were almost twice as likely to signal the writer's inclination, typically through the pattern "I would like to thank/acknowledge . . .". Yet while these fixed phrases perhaps tended to be used rather formulaically to add an element of formality to the expression of thanks, they also seem to mitigate the full force of the gratitude by thematising the writer's motivation for offering thanks and thus relegating the importance of the thanks itself. The desire to hedge gratitude may be related to the relative power imbalance between acknowledger and addressee in these cases and to the desire of students to avoid imposing a debt on those they thank. Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest that the expression of unhedged gratitude can constitute a threat to the face of the addressee by encroaching on his or her independence and desire to be unimpeded. Constructing their thanks with a preface in this way may therefore reflect a recognition of these socially delicate interactions. They perhaps represent a means by which writers seek to mitigate the inherent imposition of gratitude and the debts of reciprocation it may imply.

When a thanking act was preceded by a preface in this way, it generally referred to the writer's inclination or intention to perform the act of thanking, with only 20% expressed as obligation. Framing gratitude in this way may seem somewhat grudging, suggesting that the writer is somehow *required* to offer thanks. However, in this context almost all the obligation modals used signalled the writer's personal stance and what he or she considered necessary or desirable. In other words, these prefaces typically marked the accompanying statement as an intrinsic obligation, rather than an externally imposed necessity, and implied that the writer was unable to resist the strong need to thank those who have offered support. This is most evident when thanks are given to friends and family:

8) I *must* show my gratitude to my colleagues Ms. Joey Wo, Ms. Jessica Lau, Susie Lui and my English panel Ms. Vivian Tam, who gave me encouragement and kind assistance in collecting the questionnaire for me. (AL MA)

I *need to* also thank my wife, Mai Yin, who spent days and nights alone with our daughter taking care of all the tasks that should have been shared by me as a father and a husband. (Bio PhD)

Finally I *should* thank my two best friends, Penny and Kelly, for their endless encouragement and support throughout the whole period. (PA PhD)

While this may be an L2 feature of the corpus, we have no evidence that native English-speaking students do not use the same forms.

Choice of authorial subjects

Another interesting feature of the expression of thanks in the data was the significant use of authorial pronouns in subject position. This represents an interesting rhetorical contrast to the sporadic use of first person in the dissertations themselves, where students often tend to underuse authorial pronouns and determiners, downplay their role in the research, and adopt a less clearly independent stance compared with expert writers (Hyland 2002). For these students, impersonality is a defining feature of expository writing, largely because it is seen to embody the positivist assumption that academic research is purely empirical and objective:

I don't think the use of 'I' is appropriate as it entails personal opinions. I've seen some people using 'I' in the objective and conclusion sections, so I think it may be acceptable in these sections but never in core content, except when I'm talking about something that is invented by myself. (CS interview)

Though I'm not sure if the use of 'I' is acceptable, I'd avoid using it because it denotes some kind of self opinion while most of the content in a thesis needs to be objective. I think my supervisor would also cross out instances of 'I'. (EE interview)

As I observe from reading other scholarly papers, it is not acceptable to use 'I' in academic papers, so I very rarely use 'I' in my dissertation, except maybe in the analysis part but still it is not very often. This is also because my thesis is on political issues and objectivity is important. (PA interview)

Table 5, however, highlights a preference for author subjects in acknowledgements. *I* comprised the subject of 66% of all thanking acts and *my* 6%, 16% contained no subject at all, 8% were non-authorial subjects, and 4%

Table 5. Subject types in postgraduate dissertation acknowledgements (%)

	Masters Dissertations				Doctoral Dissertations			
	<i>I/my</i>	none	non-author	<i>the author</i>	<i>I/my</i>	none	non-author	<i>the author</i>
AL	97.5	7.3	2.1	3.1	74.7	11.9	13.3	0.0
Bio	60.0	12.0	12.0	16.0	73.9	13.4	12.8	0.0
BS	93.8	6.3	0.0	0.0	48.5	25.7	9.9	15.8
CS	75.5	17.0	3.8	3.8	74.4	19.7	5.8	0.0
EE	56.3	10.4	2.1	31.3	75.0	14.8	7.4	2.8
PA	81.6	14.9	3.4	0.0	67.8	28.2	1.6	2.4
Total	76.3	11.7	4.0	8.0	70.5	17.8	9.2	2.6

involved writers referring to themselves as *the author*. This preference for personal subjects not only contrasts with uses in the dissertations proper but also with Giannoni's (2002) findings of a preference for *I*-avoidance in research article acknowledgements, where writers made extensive use of *the author*, a more impersonal form which serves to distance writers from their thanks.

These postgraduate students, however, were not afraid to use the first person in acknowledgements, as they sought to foreground their commitment to their words, set up a relationship with their readers, and establish their personal sincerity in thanking various people:

9) I would like to thank my parents and sister for their love and support.
(EE PhD)

My sincere gratitude goes to Dr. Timothy Cho for his kind encouragement and patient supervision. (AL MA)

Acknowledgements are obviously one of the most explicitly interactional of academic genres, one whose communicative purpose virtually obliges writers to represent themselves and their views unreservedly. The authorial role of the first person still clearly positions the writer in relation to his or her statements, but this is a less threatening prospect in the acknowledgements where writers feel able to express themselves more freely, unencumbered by the conventions of powerful academic discourse types. Here the authorial roles, individual purposes, and writer–reader relationship are very different from the choices available in research genres, as our informants recognised:

I'd not use 'I' except in writing the acknowledgement because I think it is not appropriate. (Bio interview)

It is allowed to use 'I' in the acknowledgement and conclusion, and it is a convention to use passive voice in other chapters to be more objective. (CS interview)

I'd only use 'I' in the introduction and acknowledgement because I feel that I've more freedom in those sections and can use a more friendly tone. The use of 'I' is not appropriate in other chapters which need to be more serious. (PA interview)

But while the demands of the dissertation proper are relaxed here, not all acts of thanks involved explicit authorial involvement, and Table 5 shows that almost a third of acts were not author-fronted. In fact, the second most frequently found pattern in the corpus (16%) contained no subject at all, with the subject removed by either agentless passive forms or ellipsis:

- 10) Thanks also go to my colleagues who have given their valuable time to provide me with the information requested. (CS MSc)

Special recognition must be given to Dr. Philip Chung for his great help in my statistics. (BS MA)

The choices adopted here not only create a more formal, almost ritualistic, impression of recognition, but also remove the writer from the acknowledging process, disguising his or her responsibility and reducing accountability. While such examples are rare with thanks for moral support, they tend to be closely associated with resource assistance, particularly with access to data or materials.

Perhaps more interesting is the third most frequent category, in which the subject was someone other than the writer (labelled 'non-author' in Table 5). A number of these instances were passive forms which cast the acknowledgee as subject:

- 11) Y.E. Yu provided me with technical support, for which I am very grateful. (CS PhD)

Mr. M.K. Man is sincerely thanked for his guidance and technical support. (Bio MSc)

More often, though, these cases were realised by writers simply mentioning the assistance of the addressee without expressing thanks. As we noted earlier, this pattern suggests a possible reluctance by the writer to give overt credit for the help they have received from a source while nonetheless following the conventions of including it in their acknowledgements. Resource assistance, especially from institutions, and particularly for funding, was often mentioned in this way, cursorily identifying the acknowledgee and recognising the assistance, but failing to thank these rather abstract, non-human addressees:

- 12) The University of Hong Kong Committee on Research gave me financial support for attending various overseas conferences in which I presented my papers and received comments from the participants. (EE PhD)

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Finally, representing just 4% of the subject patterns in the thanking acts, writers referred to themselves as 'the author':

- 13) The author wishes to acknowledge the co-operation and service provided by the Labour Department in endorsing this study. (CS MSc)

This author would like to express her heartfelt gratitude to Dr. Kevin Chan for his insightful advice and towering support throughout the current study. (AL PhD)

Once again, this option distances the writer from the act of thanking, attributing the thanks to an impersonal agent and thereby weakening the writer's responsibility for any imposition on the addressee or potential face violation.

In sum, most writers were comfortable with the use of first person subjects in acknowledgements and displayed a remarkable sophistication in their grasp of the shift in context from the dissertation proper that this involved. But while these writers may have a relatively sophisticated grasp of the interpersonal nature of the genre, they appear to lack control of the varied ways that thanks can be expressed in English, such as the forms illustrated in Swales and Feak (2000: 204–6). For some writers, principally those in the hard science disciplines, and in some contexts, mainly in offering thanks for resources, there is some reluctance to firmly commit themselves to their acknowledgements.

Conclusions

Dissertation acknowledgements are sometimes considered an unconventionalised genre which allows writers to express themselves unreservedly and sincerely. However, like other academic texts, acknowledgements are staged genres with a coherent structure and routinely employed patterns of expression. While allowing variation, it is essentially this structure which enables writers to both convey their gratitude and to display an appropriate scholarly competence. It is a framework through which writers are able to balance debts and responsibilities as well as to display their immersion in scholarly networks, their active disciplinary membership, and their observance of the valued academic norms of modesty, gratitude and appropriate self-effacement. In other words, the acknowledgement section is not an opportunity for students to lay aside their academic persona and freely express themselves in inconsequential flourishes. Rather, it clearly positions writers in relation to their statements and can reveal a professional and personal identity which may influence assessors and readers at the outset.

But while the widespread use of this genre in postgraduate dissertations reflects their importance to students, the writers in this study reported that they received little instruction in the genre. Textbooks and style guides often have little to say about the topic and, like the novice academics in Cronin and Overfelt's (1994) survey, they garnered advice on the etiquette and conventions of acknowledgements informally and examined other dissertations to get ideas for structure, expression and style. We believe that the unexamined nature of acknowledgements can handicap writers in their attempts to demonstrate their capabilities and intellectual autonomy while

recognising the assistance they have been given. The acknowledgment section offers graduate students the opportunity to make a positive first impression on assessors, and EAP teachers can greatly assist them in this by raising awareness of the ways thanks can be structured to promote a competent scholarly identity.

Much work remains to be done, and we have only scratched the surface here in examining the ways gratitude is expressed by Cantonese and Mandarin speakers writing in English. Little is known of the ways other language groups or English L1 writers express thanks, the boundaries of personal choice, or of the influence of situational and personal factors. But while more research is needed, a necessary first step is to recognise that these rhetorical choices can be important and to ensure that students understand both the options available to them and the effects they can have on readers.

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