Dissertation Acknowledgments: Generic Structure and Linguistic Features

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Abstract

Acknowledgements as a genre is widely used in academic discourse to express gratitude toward help from and contribution of an individual or an institution, thus establishing a favorable academic and social reputation. With reference to the pioneering studies of Hyland’s (2004) and Hyland & Tse (2004) on dissertation acknowledgements, this paper investigates the English-language acknowledgements accompanying 20 MA and PhD dissertations composed by student writers in Chinese mainland, with the aim to reveal their generic structure and lexico-grammatical patterns used to realize the moves and steps. The results show that the Chinese writers largely follow the “three tier structure” and their sub-divided steps, as discovered by Hyland and his colleague. However, divergences have also been found and might be explained by the difference in the academic practice between mainland and Hong Kong researchers.

Key words: English acknowledgements; dissertation; generic structure

1. Introduction

The years since 1980s have seen increasing scholastic interest in texts in academic and research setting. While insights gained from studies of language used in disciplines such as anthropology (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) and economics (Dudley-Evans & Henderson, 1990) have made the respective fields to think the relationship between text and knowledge and to reconsider their conventional research methodologies, different academic genres
ranging from research theses (Thompson, 2001; Bunton, 2002) to research articles (Swales, 1990; Posteguillo, 1999), from textbooks (Hyland, 2000) to book reviews (Nicolaisen, 2002), and from conference papers (Rowley-Jolivet, 2002) to grant proposals (Halleck & Connor, 2006) have been the subjects of detailed analysis. Various approaches have been employed to unveil general characteristics of academic discourse as well as features of particular genres. These include, among others, the corpus-based “multi-dimensional analysis” (Biber, 1995) and the anthropological approach (Bazerman, 1988), the Systemic Functional Linguistics approach (Nwogu, 1990) and the move-based model (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993).

In terms of the aim of investigation, while one line of research has focused on the grammatical and stylistic aspects of particular genres, such as the use of tenses and aspects (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003), modalities (Vassileva, 2001), adjectives (Soler, 2002), nouns (Flowerdew, 2003), reporting verbs (Thompson & Ye, 1991), another line of research has centered around the macro-organization of academic texts, including abstracts (Hyland, 2000; Samraj, 2005; Martin, 2003; Lores, 2004), introductions (Swales, 1981, 1990; Dudley-Evans & Henderson, 1980; Holmes, 1995), results (Brett, 1994; Williams, 1999), discussions (Hopkins & Dudley-Evans, 1988; Holmes, 1997), conclusions (Yang & Allison, 2003; Bunton, 2002), and research paper titles (Haggan, 2004). The latter has been conducted mainly with reference to Swales’ (1990) CARS (creating a research space) model, which “has had a tremendous influence on genre analysis in ESP and on the teaching of academic writing, both to international or L1 students, or to professional writers wishing to publish in international journals” (Dudley-Evans, 2000: 6).

As research in the field of genre analysis progressed, academic acknowledgements, part of the academic landscape in monographs, theses and dissertations and, even, journal articles, since 1990s, began to interest genre researchers. Giannoni (2002), for example, analyzed acknowledgements in English and Italian research articles for their socio-pragmatic construction and textualization in terms of move structural pattern to unveil ways by which research article writers organize and express their gratitude for assistance. Hyland’s (2003) analysis of the generic structure of acknowledgements accompanying 240 MA and PhD dissertations from six academic fields written by non-native English students at five Hong Kong universities demonstrated how these texts offer student writers a unique rhetorical space to promote academic identity while conveying their debt for the intellectual and personal assistance they received. In a following-up work, Hyland (2004) analyzed the same data for their move structure and the results revealed a “three tier structure” consisting of a main thanking move framed by optional reflecting and announcing moves. Hyland has also found that the structure of his samples “differs considerably from Giannoni’s (2002) description of research article acknowledgements” (ibid.: 264). Hyland and Tse (2004) further investigated the same acknowledgments texts for the lexico-grammatical patterns used to realize the three moves identified in Hyland (2004), which were sub-divided into a number of steps. In a recent article, Al-Ali (2006) examined the generic structure of English dissertation acknowledgments written by Arab non-native speakers of English in humanities and social sciences and, while his results confirmed Hyland’s “three tier structure”, significant differences were found in the type
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of constituent steps used to realize the thanking move and the lexico-grammatical options used by the writers to realize these strategic steps.

While Hyland and his colleague’s pioneering work has unveiled the common generic structure of the academic acknowledgments as a genre, the significance of Al-Ali (2006) lies in its findings of cross-cultural similarities and differences in such texts. For example, “Thanking Allah (God)” has been identified as a peculiar feature of the Arab writers, who were also found to “tend to use a more friendly and emotional tone to foreground their commitment to their kinships and the members of their extended family” (Al-Ali, 2006: 40), a value also highly appreciated in China and other Chinese communities in the world. Therefore, it would be interesting to examine academic acknowledgments written by native Chinese writers to reveal the generic structure of these texts and the lexico-grammatical patterns they use to realize the moves and steps.

The primary purpose of this study is to examine, with reference to pioneering studies of Hyland (2004) and Hyland & Tse (2004), the generic feature of the English-language acknowledgements accompanying dissertations written by Chinese master’s and doctoral candidates, with the aim of specifying the rhetorical preferences of these Chinese student writers in terms of moves and steps as well as the use of sentence patterns, modifiers and hedges employed in thanking acts and the choice of sentence subjects. While attempting to demonstrate that scientific discourse is culture-specific, rather than universal, and that socio-cultural factors may condition the preference for certain rhetorical strategies by the members of different scientific communities, this research has an underlying pedagogical motivation as it also attempts to help Chinese EAP academics write effective English acknowledgements in a way that meets the international scientific community’s expectations.

2. Three Tier Structure of Acknowledgments

Hyland (2004) and Hyland & Tse (2004) examined a set of sample acknowledgements composed by Hong Kong student writers (hereafter Hong Kong acknowledgements or HKAs) in six disciplines—electronic engineering, computer science, business studies, biology, applied linguistics, and public administration. While their analysis shows that PhD students, particularly those in the “soft” sciences, tend to construct generically more complex acknowledgements with a greater variety of patterns, their results of the genre patterns reveal a three-move structure sub-divided into a number of steps, as is shown below.

1. Reflecting Move introspective comment on the writer’s research experience
2. Thanking Move mapping credit to individuals and institutions
   2.1 presenting participants introducing those to be thanked
   2.2 thanking for academic assistance thanks for intellectual support, ideas, analyses, feedback, etc.
   2.3 thanking for resources thanks for data access and clerical, technical or financial support
2.4 thanking for moral support  
thanks for encouragement, friendship, sympathy, patience, etc.

3. Announcing Move  
statements delineating responsibility and inspiration

3.1 accepting responsibility  
an assertion of authorial responsibility for flaws or errors

3.2 dedicating the thesis  
a formal dedication of the thesis to an individual(s)

According to Hyland (2004), the Thanking Move in his sample acknowledgements is found to be central and obligatory, while the reflecting and announcing moves are optional. Only 12 of his 240 samples comprise all three moves, most omitting an Announcing Move. Hyland also points out that moves and steps generally followed the above sequence, although there might be considerable recursion of steps, particularly of those acknowledging academic and moral support.

3. Corpus and Procedures

This study is based on a corpus of acknowledgements contained in 20 MA and 20 PhD dissertations collected from WAN FANG Academic Dissertations Corpus and Chinese Excellent MA and PhD Dissertations Corpus. Since acknowledgments written in English are required only of those candidates who apply for degrees in the fields of English Language and Literature as well as Linguistics and Applied Linguistics. The dissertations were written in English by Chinese students majoring in those fields all with an integral part of acknowledgements. Although the sample was not large enough, 29 different mainland universities, including, among others, foreign languages universities (Shanghai International Studies University and Beijing Foreign Studies University), comprehensive universities (Chongqing University and Shanxi University), normal universities (East China Normal University and North-West Normal University), universities of science and technology (East China Scientific and Technical University and Donghua University) were sampled, thus representing a wide range of advanced English learners in the country.

Ten MA students currently working at Donghua University and ten PhD students at Shanghai International Studies University were interviewed in order to get some insight and thoughts on the acknowledging practices.

As what is shown in the table below, the text corpus consists of the acknowledgements sections in the sample dissertations (hereafter mainland Chinese acknowledgements or MCAs), totaling 11,666 words. The average length of the acknowledgements in the sample MA dissertations is 145.45 words, with the longest one containing 243 words and the shortest only 81 words. The acknowledgements in the PhD dissertations are comparatively longer, with 437.85 words on average and the longest containing 847 words and the shortest 117 words. Compared with Hyland’s data, the PhD acknowledgements in our corpus are about 50 words longer, while the MA texts are about the same length. Nevertheless, in both corpora, the acknowledgements written by doctoral candidates are about three times the length of those composed by master candidates.
The samples were first examined for the generic structure of the English-language acknowledgements written by Chinese mainland master’s and doctoral candidates, and the use of sentence patterns, modifiers and hedges employed in thanking acts and the choice of sentence subjects were also analyzed with the help of a concordance software. Comparisons were made with the findings about the discipline of applied linguistics (AL) in Hyland (2004) and Hyland & Tse (2004) to show the similarities and differences between the two groups of writers.

### 4. Results and Discussions

#### 4.1 Generic structure

When the corpus data is being processed, it is found that in a single thanking act of the English acknowledgements written by Chinese mainland students, it is usually the case that more than one acknowledgee may be involved, and that the steps may not have distinct boundaries and often overlap. Unlike the clear demarcation in Hyland and Tse’s (2004) research on generic structures of dissertation acknowledgements, the structures of different moves and steps in our corpus seem to be vague and indefinite, with one sentence usually containing more than one step. The following sentence, for instance, covers Steps 2.3 and 2.4 of the thanking move, including gratitude toward data collection, academic assistance and moral support from research participants, friends and family members.

\[\text{e.g. (1)}\]

My special thanks go to X and all the students from CDUT who have participated in my research for their invaluable contribution to my data collection, and X for providing me with the result of statistical analyses of the data, and above all to my family for their support and encouragement during the course of the accomplishment of this thesis.

An analysis of the generic structure of the MCAs revealed that all the moves and steps identified in Hyland (2004) were found in our corpus and their occurrences are surprisingly similar except Step 3.2 (dedicating the thesis).
Table 2. Frequencies of moves and steps with reference to Hyland’s results (2004)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hyland’s</th>
<th>Present corpus</th>
<th>MA</th>
<th>PhD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Reflecting move</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Thanking move</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>57.5</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.4</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>97.5</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Announcing move</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3.1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As is shown above, the Reflecting Move and Announcing Move account for 22.5% and 25% of all move types in the present corpus respectively, compared with 24% for both in Hyland’s study. However, in our corpus, Step 3.2 in the Announcing Move occurs in an apparently lower frequency, indicating that Chinese mainland students feel far less easy to dedicate their work. When interviewed, some current candidates’ answer might be representative:

Our work is definitely no great accomplishment in any sense, thus not worth dedicating it to others. (MA student)

It seems that Chinese mainland students are putting more stress on the modesty maxim of Politeness Principle (Leech, 1983; Gu, 1990).

Steps 2.1 (presenting participants) and 2.4 (thanking for moral support) in Chinese acknowledgements enjoy higher frequency than their counterparts in Hyland’s study; whereas the incidence of Step 2.3 (thanking for resources) is lower (75% vs. 100%) in the current corpus.

Chinese students seem to prefer to enumerate first all the acknowledgees (Step 2.1), and then get down to details, which fairly conforms to the traditional English writing style—moving from general to specific, a pattern highlighted in guides of essay writing they learned in their undergraduate programme (Jiang, 2008).

e.g. (2)

Many professors, friends and colleagues have contributed to my thesis more or less directly…

In the present corpus, the occurrence of Step 2.4 accounts for 97.5%, indicating that nearly every acknowledgement includes the author’s gratitude extended for moral support. This is much greater than Hyland’s (2004: 319) observation that “two thirds of all papers contained this step”. In addition, the fact that almost all texts contain a Step 2.4 implies that no clear difference exists between MA and PhD acknowledgements, while Hyland discovered that such expressions “are found largely in the PhD acknowledgements”, particularly those in the sciences of applied linguistics and public administration (ibid.: 320).
In some extreme cases like the following example taken out of a PhD dissertation, each sentence acknowledges moral support from a different acknowledgee. It reveals the attention of Chinese students paid to others’ encouragement, friendship, sympathy and patience.

e. g. (3)

... I also want to thank my colleagues, their help and friendship were and will remain a great encouragement to me. I also want to thank my daughter, her confidence in me is always an impetus in my academic life. Finally, I owe to my wife more than to anyone. It is she who has bravely and silently supported the whole family when I went away doing my PhD study. Her support and encouragement are the bases on which each of my words is built. Without these, nothing would have been possible.

The results (see below) also reveal an evident discrepancy in the present corpus in terms of generic structure between acknowledgements written by MA and PhD candidates. Move 1 and Steps 2.1 and 2.3 in the PhD acknowledgements occur much more frequently than those within MA acknowledgements. The generic structure of the PhD texts is generally more complex than that of MA theses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Frequencies of moves and steps without reference to Hyland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Present corpus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Reflecting move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Thanking move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Announcing move</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2 Acknowledgees
Supervisors, whether in MA or PhD dissertations, are the single one category of acknowledgees that are mentioned in all acknowledgements in the corpus (see Table 4). Similar to Hyland’s research, “with supervisors appearing in all acknowledgements” (2004: 307), they usually enjoy the first place in this genre; their academic as well as moral support is often highly valued. It would be considered vitally face-threatening if a student did not express his or her gratitude first and foremost to his or her supervisor for instructions, let alone totally neglect such help in dissertation acknowledgments. There is only one exception in the present corpus, in which the writer expresses his gratitude firstly to the National Library.
Most students also give credit to other teachers who taught them during their postgraduate study, fellow students and/or colleagues, spouse, parents and other family members. There are doctoral candidates who are even grateful to the hospitality of their supervisors’ spouse.

While they are fairly grateful to their supervisors and other teachers for their academic assistance, Chinese mainland students often thank the latter for their great patience and encouragement during the completion of the theses.

*e.g. (4)*
I wish to thank my profound and respectable academic advisor, Professor X, for his valuable instruction in the field of Applied Linguistics and *his great patience in the past three years*. I’m also grateful to him for his suggestions and *encouragement* and all the efforts he has made to help me complete the paper.

The Chinese cultural tradition has all along attached equal importance to one’s teachers as that to one’s parents, i.e., students should respect their teachers just as they do their parents. This is seen in the Chinese government’s guiding educational policy of *jiaoshu yuren*, imparting knowledge as well as improving students’ moral standard. The relationship between a student, a doctoral candidate in particular, and his supervisor is not as simple as that of the supervisor and the supervised, but as dear as members of the same family. It is, therefore, not at all surprising that two writers in our corpus expressed their thanks to their supervisors’ spouses.

*e.g. (5)*
First, I would like to express my gratitude to my doctoral supervisor Professor X of X University, for his expert advice and criticism, and to his wife X, who has given her help so unstintingly that it is not possible to detail it here.

*e.g. (6)*
After prolonged discussions [on our dissertations], he [my supervisor] would invite us to his house, where we can enjoy the delicious food and gracious hospitality of his wife, Mrs. X.

In the present corpus, a doctoral candidate even recorded his profound gratitude to the fatherly love from his supervisor in the form of a poem, which is cited below:

*e.g. (7)*
**Thanksgiving**
My well-beloved Professor
As a wise mentor, Ou Mr.
Here I present sincere thanks
For my being filled blanks
Three years, changed much
Like a fish in water rich
Me, a newborn baby, daily a look
Seeming a girl curious by brook
Picking casually her favorite petal
To nose the sweet in the drizzle
A short-term, but a new fellow
With full wings someday, I hope so
Beg to furl my thanks, Mr. Ou
In the rain of you, will still grow

For the same reason, students are also grateful to the other teachers who have taught them or given them academic instructions during their postgraduate study as well as the completion of the dissertation.

Nevertheless, gratitude toward institutions is comparatively scarce in the MCAs, especially in MA dissertations (10%). The reason lies probably in the scarcity of the opportunity for Chinese mainland graduate students, especially those majoring in social sciences and humanities, to acquire grants from institutions, either financially or academically.

4.3 Gratitude expressions
Just as Hyland & Tse (2004: 265) stated, “acts of gratitude […] were expressed in a surprisingly limited number of ways”, the present corpus shows a similar tendency. Linguistic realization in the thanking acts (Steps 2.2 to 2.4) in this corpus mainly involves performative verbs (e.g. thank and appreciate), nouns (e.g. thanks and gratitude), adjectives (e.g. grateful and thankful) and passives (e.g. thanks should be given). More often than not, the dissertation writers simply present an acknowledged fact without explicit thanking expressions (e.g. my dear parents have always been my support). Table 5 shows the occurrence frequency of each of the patterns in the target corpus with reference to that in Hyland & Tse (2004: 266).

Table 5. Occurrence frequency of each sentence patterns with reference to Hyland & Tse

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Patterns</th>
<th>MA</th>
<th>PhD</th>
<th>average</th>
<th>Hyland &amp; Tse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bare mention</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performative verb</td>
<td>26.9</td>
<td>26.3</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>33.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjective</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>17.65</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominalization</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>16.45</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passive</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>11.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In Hyland & Tse’s (2004) research, gratitude is expressed mainly by means of nominalizations and performatives, each accounting for about one-third of all the pattern types, which are followed by adjectives and passives, accounting for 15.4% and 11% respectively, while bare mention is the least used one (6.8%). The Chinese mainland students’ preference for bare mention is more than evident, while, rather surprisingly, much fewer passives (4.6% vs. 11%) and nominalizations (16.45% vs. 33.6%) are employed. The occurrence frequencies of adjectives (26.6% vs. 33.2%) and performatives (17.65% vs. 15.4%) are fairly similar across the two corpora.

Hyland & Tse also dwelt on the distribution of these patterns and found out “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” (2004: 266). The authors admitted “there were degree and discipline variations” (ibid.: 267), but no particulars were included.

### Table 6. Distribution of thanking expressions across genre steps in HKAs (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Mention</th>
<th>Performative</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>35.6</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>11.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Hyland & Tse, 2004: 267)

Despite the restrictiveness of the present corpus (only involving those majoring in linguistics and applied linguistics), similar findings are achieved: sentence patterns used to express gratitude in MCAs are hardly well-distributed. There also exists an apparent difference in the occurrence frequency of various sentence patterns between acknowledgements written by MA and PhD candidates (cf. Table 7 and 8).

### Table 7. Distribution of gratitude expressions in MA acknowledgements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Mention</th>
<th>Performative</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>30.4</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>22.3</td>
<td>18.5</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preference can be seen over different sentence patterns from that of Hyland & Tse (2004). When it comes to provide thanks for academic assistance (Step 2.2), sentence patterns involving bare mentions (30.4%) and performatives (29.1%) are preferred in the present MA texts. In Step 2.4 (offering gratitude for moral support), the five patterns are allocated rather evenly (performatives (22.3%), simple mentions (18.5%), adjectives (18.5%), with nominalizations (33.3%) used a little more frequently, and passive forms the least employed (7.4%). When the authors acknowledge assistance in resources (Step
2.3), nominalizations (37.5%), performatives (25%) and passives (25%) are frequently employed, with bare mentions simply not used at all.

An across-step comparison in the MA acknowledgements corpus shows that bare mention is used more often in Steps 2.2 and 2.4; while nominalization is preferred in Steps 2.3 and 2.4. Performatives and adjectives enjoy a somewhat equal status across the three steps. Passives are rarely used except in Step 2.3.

Table 8. Distribution of gratitude expressions in PhD acknowledgements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Mention</th>
<th>Performative</th>
<th>Adjective</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Passive</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.2</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.4</td>
<td>47.1</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.3</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Nonetheless, the above table illustrates that Chinese mainland doctoral candidates tend to use more simple mentions in all the three steps, comprising over 40% of all thanking acts. Together with bare mention form, adjectives and nominalizations are distributed quite evenly. Performative verbs are more frequently seen in Steps 2.2 (32%) and 2.4 (25.7%). Passives are rarely used in PhD acknowledgements across this corpus and the few occurrences are found mainly in Step 2.3 (3.1%) to extend thanks for resources offered.

It seems that the mainland MA students have step-specific preference for certain sentence patterns, while, PhD students use more bare mention forms regardless of whom and what they show gratitude towards. One thing that is particularly common across the two sub-corpora is that the passive form, if used at all, tends to exist in Step 2.3.

Of the five gratitude expression forms, the MCA writers seem to have an ardent preference for the bare mention form, whose frequency in MA dissertations ranks 20% higher than its counterpart in Hyland & Tse’s (2004) study. The same form accounts for as much as 44.4% in PhD dissertation acknowledgements. The average frequency in the current corpus is strikingly about five times as much as that in HKAs (34.7% vs. 6.8%).

Compared with Hong Kong students who are more exposed to the Western culture and academic practices, Chinese mainland students tend to be more reserved when it comes to expressing their feelings and emotions. During an interview with a current PhD candidate, she told the researcher:

The reason could be that in this way [using bare mention form], acknowledgements are offered in so objective a way that no one would feel exaggerated and imprudent. It’s just like you’re telling people how he or she has helped. (PhD)

In the following 150-word excerpt from PhD dissertation acknowledgements, where the enormous influence the supervisor has on the author has been enumerated, the writer uses exclusively the bare mention type.

e.g. (8)
His [My supervisor’s] influence on me and study is enormous. I have benefited a lot not only from the numerous discussions I had with him, but also from his enlightening lectures on
SLA Researches and ELT in China and Sociolinguistics, two courses which paved the way for the selection and determination of the present topic. It is his confidence and trustworthiness on me that encouraged me to take the teacher’s perspective at a time when much of the field considered it a peripheral area. I have always been grateful for that confidence and trustworthiness. He also found time, out of his heavy academic and administrative schedule, to read and reread the entire manuscript through carefully and critically. His remarkable insights and valuable suggestions have contributed greatly to the completion of the thesis. In a word, without his critical comments and patient instructions the completion of the present paper would have been impossible.

Though as the second least used form, the passive form still accounts for 11% in HKAs, i.e., at least one in ten gratitude expressions. The counterpart in the present corpus, however, is much less employed, with an average of 4.6% (7.7% in PhD acknowledgements and only 1.5% in MA theses). According to traditional linguists, Chinese is a language without voice category since its passive voice is mainly expressed in a covert way rather than a marked way. Although “Bei”-structure and its variant forms is the only structure in Chinese of marked passivity, its use is rather limited (Liu, 1991). That may cause the students to feel uneasy in employing the passive form in English acknowledgements. The use of this form in MCAs, as shown in Table 7 and 8, is often restricted to Step 2.3, when writers offered their thanks for resources. The lower occurrence frequency of the step in question (see 4.1 above), combined with the writers’ uneasiness of using this form, has contributed to the scarcity of the passive forms in MCAs.

The nominalization form, which enjoys a frequent occurrence (33.6%) in Hyland & Tse’s corpus, accounts for, however, only 16.45% in dissertation acknowledgements in our corpus. It might be that nominalization form, rather similar to the passive form in which the subject who extends acknowledgements is omitted, mirrors a crude style. Therefore, together with the passive form, this form is mainly seen in Steps 2.3 and 2.4, if they are used at all.

e.g. (9)
Thanks also go to the PLA Foreign Language University whose financial assistance enabled me to further my doctoral research in Beijing University and in the Department of Comparative Literature in the State University of New York at Buffalo.

4.4 Modifiers in thanking acts
Modifiers in thanking acts include adjectives (e.g. sincere, special, heartfelt, and hearty) and adverbs (e.g. sincerely, especially and particularly) which are often found attached to the thanking acts in MA and PhD theses. Our analysis shows that 38.5% of the thanking acts are modified in various ways, which is consistent with Hyland & Tse (2004: 267), who discovered in their corpus that “35% of the acts [are] amplified by a range of 43 different items”.

Most modifiers are found to be confined to steps 2.2 to 2.4 in our corpus. Among them, 56.8% are appended to thanks for academic assistance; 15.9% for access to data and technical aid; and 21.5% for moral supports from fellow students, friends and family members.

Adjectives and adverbs indicating strong emotions are used for intensifying the
gratitude felt by dissertation writers towards specific acknowledgees. With regard to the distribution of modified thanking acts, supervisors come first, with a percentage as high as 34.2%. Some writers are found using multiple modifiers to intensify the extent of their acknowledgements for supervisors, as is shown in the example below.

*e.g. (10)*

My *heartfelt* thanks go to my tutor, Professor X, who has helped me in the completion of this thesis in immeasurable ways. He read my drafts with incredible strictness and carefulness, and his suggestions and comments have been encouraging, rigorous, critical and discerning. Without his enlightening suggestions and great encouragement, it would not be possible for this thesis to achieve its present end. I am *especially* grateful to him for his gracious and earnest assistance and guidance throughout my three-year studies.

In addition to supervisors, 25.2% of the modifiers are generously applied to thanks for academic assistance from other teachers. This is followed by modifiers in gratitude extended to friends and family members, accounting for 21.3% and 14.4% respectively. Only 1.7% of thanking acts contain modifiers when thanking for institutional assistance and financial aid.

While the extent of acknowledgements is often strengthened by using adjectives and adverbs, it needs to be noted that hedging is also frequently employed. Perfomative verbs are often preceded by *hedging* modals and mental state verbs (*e.g.* *I would like to* and *I wish to*), acting to present either the writer’s inclination or obligation. It is found that 69.7% of the thanking acts using performative sentences in the present corpus are hedged, which is relatively higher than Hyland & Tse’s (2004) (52%). Their frequency is even higher (92.9%) in MA acknowledgments in our corpus, with modal verbs and modal phrases the handiest candidates.

*e.g. (11)*

First of all, *I would like to* acknowledge my supervisor, Professor Zhang Yang, who offered insightful and powerful suggestions on improving my thesis, and whose lectures were of great help and value in my thesis writing.

The high occurrence frequency of modal verbs or phrases (*e.g.* *would like to*, *want to*, and *wish to*) indicates that the authors have recognized the demarcation in social status drawn between the acknowledger and acknowledgees. In order not to impose on the acknowledgees or impinge on their negative face, they tend to use more indirect expressions when offering thanks. The relatively higher frequency of such hedges indicates that the Chinese mainland student writers are more sensitive to the social differences expressed in academic texts.

Yet modifiers are also used to convey strong emotions of the author. For example, certain modal verbs or phrases (*e.g.* *must*, *should*, and *need to*) are used to show obligation and responsibility, as in the example below

*e.g. (12)*

*I must* extend my thanks to X, my beloved wife, for her endless support and encouragement;
to my parents-in-law for their baby-sitting my lovely daughter, which saves me a lot of time and energy for the thesis.

Such expressions are used to show the sincere and profound gratitude the acknowledger harbors towards the acknowledgees. It is, in such cases, the innate emotion, rather than outward responsibility felt by the student writers to express their gratefulness. Nonetheless, hedges of this kind are rarely seen in the target corpus, which indicates that the Chinese culture might have an effect on the authors so much so that they tend to express their gratitude in a more reserved way.

4.5 Choice of authorial subjects
It is interesting to spot that, contrary to the advice to underuse personal references as subjects in academic discourse, authorial nouns and pronouns are often seen serving as subjects in dissertation acknowledgements. As can be seen in Table 9, the writers of the MCAs do not mind using first person pronouns *I* or *my*.

| Table 9. Occurrence of each authorial subject in Hyland’s and present corpus |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| | Masters Dissertations | Doctoral Dissertations |
| | l/my | non-author | third person | the author | l/my | non-author | third person | the author |
| Hyland’s | 97.5 | 7.3 | 2.1 | 3.1 | 74.7 | 11.9 | 13.3 | 0.0 |
| Present corpus | 76.6 | 9.3 | 14 | 0.0 | 56.6 | 16.6 | 26.8 | 0.0 |

Our results in this regard are generally in accordance with those of Hyland’s. First person pronouns serving as subjects enjoys a lion’s share of 76.6% of all thanking acts in the MA acknowledgements and 56.6% in the PhD theses. Preference is also apparent for non-authorial subject sentences, in which a material noun or abstract noun acts as the subject (e.g., Finally, *gratitude goes to my dear parents, sisters and my dear friend Miss X, for their understanding and generous support*).

None of the acknowledgements in the current corpus have been found using noun forms like *the author* or *the writer* to refer to dissertation writers themselves, and their occurrences reported only in Hyland’s (2004) master’s corpus formed the least used authorial subject category (3.1%).

Nonetheless, significant differences are revealed in the use of the third-person forms. Third person nouns and pronouns such as *he*, *she*, *they*, *the thesis*, or their corresponding possessive adjectives are also found in the subject position. This category comprises 14% of thanking acts in MA texts and 26.8% in PhD theses, a fairly high frequency compared with Hyland’s data. The reason lies mainly in that third person noun forms or pronouns are likely to be used in the *bare mention* form (e.g. *This thesis would not have been possible without the support of these people hereafter mentioned with gratitude*), which occurs much more frequently in our corpus than Hyland and Tse’s (2004).
5. Conclusion

With reference to Hyland’s pioneering study on English dissertation acknowledgements, the present study has set up an English dissertation acknowledgements corpus written by Chinese students who specialize in English Language and Literature as well as Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, and tried to make a tentative linguistic analysis, exploring similarities and differences in the generic features, the use of gratitude expressions, modifiers, authorial subjects and others. Though further research is absolutely needed due to the limited sample and scope of the study, differences manifested themselves, including the absence of the reflecting move and announcing move, esp. step 3.2 of the latter, the extensive use of bare mention form and modifiers in thanking acts, etc. Master’s and doctoral candidates majoring in the above-mentioned fields are no doubt advanced English learners in China. The reason why the generic as well as linguistic features of their English dissertation acknowledgements are different from those written by other English-speaking students cannot simply be a matter of language aptitude. The real reasons might lie in the deep-rooted cultural, mental and academic environment where they were brought up. Acknowledgements are only a minute manifestation of such influences during the completion of academic theses. Yet they are by no means insignificant.

Note

1. The number of dissertations collected was in accordance with that in Hyland’s study.

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