Graduates’ gratitude: the generic structure of dissertation acknowledgements

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Abstract

The neglect of acknowledgements in the EAP literature is perhaps surprising given their importance in the scholarly communication process. While unrelated to the important academic goals of establishing claims and reputations, the significance of this optional genre is confirmed by its widespread use and the role it plays in the academic practice of reciprocal gift giving. Acknowledgements are almost universal in dissertation writing where they provide writers with a unique rhetorical opportunity not only to convey their genuine gratitude for the intellectual and personal assistance they have received in completing their research, but also to promote a competent scholarly identity by displaying their immersion in scholarly networks, their active disciplinary membership, and their observance of the valued academic ideals of modesty, gratitude and appropriate self-effacement. This paper discusses the importance of this genre and examines the generic structure of the acknowledgements accompanying 240 PhD and MA dissertations written by non-native speakers of English in a variety of disciplines at five Hong Kong universities.

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The past decade or so has seen increasing attention given to the notion of genre and its application in language teaching and learning. This interest has particularly assisted ESP teachers because it has helped to show how language is used in various contexts and how we can apply this knowledge in our classrooms. Among the most important insights revealed by the detailed study of texts is that academic and occupational genres are not purely informational but often rely on accomplishing an audience-sensitive interpersonal tone for their success. In particular, studies have
suggested some of the features academic writers use to promote a competent, discipline-situated, scholarly identity and to negotiate a relationship with their readers (e.g. Hyland, 2000, 2001; Thompson, 2001). Much of this work however has tended to focus on expert texts and on the role interpersonal features play in explicitly argumentative and persuasive genres. What is perhaps the most personal communicative event of all, that of acknowledgements, has been relatively neglected.

The importance of acknowledgements is highlighted by the results of surveys and the frequency with which they occur in scholarly texts. They are part of the academic practice of reciprocal gift giving in the same way as citations often are, and for this reason are particularly important to research students. Acknowledgements in theses and dissertations allow students to demonstrate their awareness of some central academic values such as modesty and gratitude, establish their credibility, recognise debts, and achieve a sense of closure at the end of what is often a long and demanding research process. In this paper I discuss the importance of this genre and offer a move structure analysis of the acknowledgements accompanying 240 PhD and MA dissertations written by non-native speakers of English. I decided to look at non-native speaker texts partly because of the growing numbers of L2 students undertaking higher degrees for whom this is becoming an important genre, but mainly because of what they reveal about students’ perceptions of writing and of the research process.

I begin with a brief discussion of acknowledgements as a scholarly genre and then look more closely at the student texts.

1. Acknowledgements in academic texts

Although student acknowledgements have received little research attention, slightly more is known about the genre in published texts. Published acknowledgements seem to have originated from the thanks expressed to patrons and powerful benefactors in the covering letters accompanying scientific articles (Atkinson, 1999). Developing rather spasmodically, they only became widespread during the 1960s (Bazerman, 1988) but since then have established their presence as an important feature of the scholarly communication process. While acknowledgements are still to be found in book prefaces or article footnotes, the compulsion to recognise colleagues and funding bodies is now more likely to receive editorial endorsement and prominence in a separate textual space. In fact, acknowledgements have become both longer (Caesar, 1992; Cronin, 1995) and more common, included in over half of all published research articles (Cronin, McKenzie, & Stiffler, 1992) and virtually all those in the sciences (McCain, 1991).

1 The terms ‘thesis’ and ‘dissertation’ are used differently in different countries and sometimes even in different universities in the same countries. In most Hong Kong, Australian and UK universities a ‘thesis’ is written for a PhD and a shorter ‘dissertation’ as a requirement for a Master’s degree. In many US universities the terms are reversed. I recognize the potential for confusion in my title and elsewhere, but have opted for snappiness over accuracy.
This ubiquity, however, has attracted both censure and controversy to the acknowledgement genre. Book acknowledgements, in particular, have been criticised for the “twin vices of fawning and vanity” (Economist, 1996) as authors seek to flatter the powerful and present a self-portrait of an admirable social person, while the inclusion of long tributes to individuals only marginal to the research has been attacked by journal editors (Kassirer & Angell, 1991). As we might expect in a competitive domain such as academic discourse, acknowledgements in research articles have also been at the heart of bitter disputes concerning the blurred relationship between authorship and collaboration (Heffner, 1979; Rennie, Yank, & Emanuel, 1997). While such controversies have not yet extended to dissertation acknowledgements, textbook advice to students is often less than encouraging. Day (1994), for instance, cautions novice researchers that acknowledgements may suggest an over-reliance on external help and Lester (1993) advises against them altogether.

Yet the very persistence of this genre confirms its usefulness to disciplinary communities, a value further attested by questionnaire research. Cronin and Overfelt (1994), for example, found that over 50% of their survey of 280 academics generally read acknowledgements when scanning a new paper, often to make a preliminary relevance assessment of the article. Over 90% of respondents were aware of having been acknowledged themselves, a few even keeping a formal record for institutional evaluation. The centrality of acknowledgements to academics has meant that they have been of great interest to bibliometricians seeking to trace the lines of research networks and scientific genealogies which help to shape academic texts. Here they have been compared with citations as measures of “trusted assessorship” (Chubin, 1975), as instruments of credit and reward (McCain, 1991), and as revealing hidden influences behind papers (Cronin, 1995).

More widely, however, it would be a mistake to see acknowledgements as a simple catalogue of idiosyncratic gratitude. They possess a rhetorical sophistication and reveal academic preferences which make them of considerable interest to discourse analysts and ESP teachers. In particular, acknowledgements contribute to a writer’s efforts to create both a professional and personal identity, representing strategic choices which show the writer in a positive light and manage his or her relations to the disciplinary community. In a study of anthropological ethnographies, Ben-Ari (1987, p. 65) observes that acknowledgements are:

formulations that take on an intermediate position between the internal contents of the ethnography and the people and relationships outside it: they are both an introduction to an intellectual product and a reconstruction of the external contributions that have gone towards its realization.

While physically set apart from the main text, acknowledgements metadiscursively point to the processes of its creation. They look inwards to the text and its author and outwards to the factors which help construct them both, and it is this which distinguishes acknowledgements as a genre. Only here do we find reference to personal as well as professional conditions, encoding both a representation of the self and of the patterns of influential engagement which the author wishes to publicly recognise.
In sum, there are good reasons to see acknowledgements as a significant genre in their own right, although their importance to research students has been overlooked in the literature. For 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 provide insights into the contingencies of research and into the sources of contributing influences and students’ understandings of author agency and responsibility. For teachers, the fact that acknowledgements assist learners to both formally record gratitude and construct a credible and sympathetic identity located in networks of association, suggests it is worth paying attention to them in class. Beyond Giannoni’s (2002) recent useful analysis of acknowledgements in research articles, however, we have no systematic understanding of their features and structure. In the remainder of this paper I address this gap.

2. Corpus and procedures

The acknowledgement data were collected as part of a larger study of postgraduate research writing in Hong Kong comprising 240 dissertations and interviews with supervisors and students. The text corpus consists of the acknowledgement sections in 20 MA and 20 PhD dissertations from each of six academic disciplines written by students at five Hong Kong universities totalling 35,000 words. The disciplines represent a broad cross-section of practice, namely: Electronic Engineering (EE), Computer Science (CS), Business Studies (Bus), Biology (Bio), Applied Linguistics (AL), and Public Administration (PA).

The acknowledgements were analysed for their move structure to determine how these student writers accomplished their thanks. This involved scanning the texts to identify text units which expressed a particular function, developing categories inductively through recursive passes through the texts, checking all cases, and entering them into WinMax Pro for cross-referencing. Eventually it was decided to sort the texts according to Cronin, McKenzie, and Rubio’s (1993) scheme of what credit was allocated for, adding categories to include all utterances in the corpus. A sample of texts was coded independently by a second rater to test for inter-coder reliability. Generally, however, these writers tended to make explicit the kind of help they received, with only 1.5% of the thanking acts unclassifiable from the context. In addition, two MA students and two PhD students from each discipline were interviewed in their Cantonese L1 by the research assistant on the project as a way of gaining insights to the text data and of discovering something of their own preferences and thoughts on acknowledging practices.

3. The importance of dissertation acknowledgements

The dissertation is often a high stakes genre: at the top of the “academic genre ladder” (Swales & Feak, 2000) and perhaps the most significant piece of writing that
most students will ever do. Completing a dissertation is often a formidable task of intimidating length and exacting expectations, and the results of this study show that many students regard an acknowledgement as an important way of publicly recognising the role of mentors and the sacrifices of loved ones. These sample interview comments illustrate their significance:

While the acknowledgement does not have an important role in the whole thesis, I think it is a good way to thank my friends and share the happiness of completing a thesis with them. (CS PhD student)

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

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 student)

The quantitative data supports the views of these students (Table 1). Despite its optional status, around 90% of the texts, and almost all the PhDs, contained an acknowledgement with the length of the texts ranging from a terse 38 words to a three page opus of 1085 words. The average being 160 words. The Doctoral acknowledgements were on average almost twice as long as those in the Master’s theses, with those in Applied linguistics averaging almost 400 words. Together, 1176 different individuals and 138 institutions were acknowledged, with supervisors appearing in all acknowledgements and friends and teachers being mentioned most often. The PhD students were more scrupulous in acknowledging assistance, perhaps because Doctoral dissertations are typically written by students more immersed in a longer process of research and possibly more familiar with scholarly practices. They are often already part of an academic community or apprenticed to one, while Master’s students generally study part-time and return to their professional workplaces. Their theses tend to be much shorter, are constructed fairly quickly, and are completed in addition to substantial coursework. As a result, many Master’s students attached little significance to them. MBA students, who often represent the most self-reliant and career-focused of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Master’s</th>
<th></th>
<th>Doctoral</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Texts</td>
<td>Words</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td>Texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Linguistics</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>2402</td>
<td>133.4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1825</td>
<td>121.7</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Studies</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>810</td>
<td>135.0</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer Science</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1483</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic Engineering</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1427</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3289</td>
<td>173.1</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>11,236</td>
<td>117.0</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
these students, were particularly reluctant to recognise others, with only 30% including an acknowledgement section. These comments from Master’s students show how some saw little to commend acknowledgements:

I think acknowledgement is not an important section, but rather a formality. I’ve discussed with my classmates on whether to include one or not, and we agreed at the end that it seems to be a must to write one.

(AL MA interview)

There is no need to write an acknowledgement. I don’t think it is an important section at all.

(Bus MA interview)

I once considered omitting this part, but I feel pressured to include one as almost everyone did so. Personally, I think this section is not important, but just a convention.

(EE MSc interview)

Despite these reservations, 9 out of 10 students saw this as a section worth writing and there were 1300 separate acts of acknowledgement in the corpus, although 70% of these were in the PhD texts. In the following sections I describe how these acknowledgements were rhetorically realised.

4. Generic structure of acknowledgements

The purpose of acknowledgements is to allocate credit to institutions and individuals who have contributed to the dissertation in some way. To achieve this purpose, student acknowledgements have a three tier structure consisting of a main thanking move framed by optional Reflecting and Announcing moves. Each of these moves can be divided into sub-units or steps as shown in Fig. 1. All acknowledge-

1 Reflecting Move
   Introspective comment on the writer’s research experience

2 Thanking Move
   Mapping credit to individuals and institutions
   1 Presenting participants
      Introducing those to be thanked
   2 Thanking for academic assistance
      Thanks for intellectual support, ideas, analyses feedback, etc.
   3 Thanking for resources
      Thanks for data access & clerical, technical & financial support
   4 Thanking for Moral support
      Thanks for encouragement, friendship, sympathy, patience, etc.

3 Announcing Move
   Public statement of responsibility and inspiration
   1 Accepting responsibility
      An assertion of authorial responsibility for flaws or errors
   2 Dedicating the thesis
      A formal dedication of the thesis to an individual(s)

Fig. 1. Move structure of Dissertation acknowledgements.
ments had sequences of text identifiable as the structure presented in Fig. 1, although only 12 contained all three moves, most omitting a Announcing Move. Steps within the thanking move comprised 90% of all the acts in the corpus and generally followed the sequence given in Fig. 1, although there is considerable recursion of steps, particularly of those acknowledging academic and moral support. A simple, non-recursive structure can be seen in (1):

\[(1) \text{ Move 1} \quad \text{The writing of an MA thesis is not an easy task.}\]

\[\text{Move 2:1} \quad \text{During the time of writing I received support and help from many people.}\]

\[\text{Move 2:2} \quad \text{In particular, I am profoundly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. James Fung, who was very generous with his time and knowledge and assisted me in each step to complete the thesis.}\]

\[\text{Move 2:3} \quad \text{I am grateful to The School of Humanities and Social Science of HKUST whose research travel grant made the field work possible. Many thanks also go to those who helped arrange the field work for me.}\]

\[\text{Move 2:4} \quad \text{And finally, but not least, thanks goes to my whole family who have been an important and indispensable source of spiritual support.}\]

\[\text{Move 3:1} \quad \text{However, I am the only person responsible for errors in the thesis.}\]

Only the central Thanking move is obligatory and only Thanking for academic assistance occurred in every text, underlining what many of these writers considered to be the central function of the genre: to display gratitude to one’s supervisor and other advisors:

I acknowledged the whole teaching team of the MA course, because I think when you write a thesis, you are not only getting help from your supervisor, but drawing on knowledge learnt from all the other subjects.

(AL MA interview)

I’ll include my supervisor and assessor in my Acknowledgement.

(Bio MSc interview)

I’ll include my supervisor and others whose ideas have contributed a lot to my project

(AL PhD interview)

It is interesting to note here that the acts were relatively easy to identify as most individuals were acknowledged with both a name and the kind of assistance they provided. This kind of open disclosure points to the public nature of these texts and suggests that writers were not only addressing those they were acknowledging, who
are presumably aware of their contributions, but that they were also conscious of a readership of examiners and a possibly wider group of academics. This sense of audience was confirmed in some of the interviews:

I expect my main audience would be my two supervisors, examiners, perhaps some future students and scientists who are interested in my area as well, but mainly people in the same field. (Bio PhD interview)

I expect the panel committee will read my thesis, but also scholars and academic researchers would also be interested. (AL PhD interview)

As I don’t know who exactly would be my examiners, so I’ve to take all possibilities into account, and this definitely affects my writing. I’d give up using some theories because I’m not sure if my examiners would have the same orientations as mine. Unless I’ve a strong rationale, I’d avoid potential conflicts and arguments. (PA PhD interview)

5. Distribution patterns

The results show broad disciplinary and degree variations. Table 2 shows the presence of moves in each discipline and reveals that writers in the more discursive soft fields of the humanities and social sciences tended to construct more complex acknowledgements than the hard knowledge sciences and engineering disciplines. Writers in the soft fields were far more likely to offer a reflection on their experience of research, an introductory step in Move 2, and to accept responsibility for the work. In fact, two thirds of all reflections and closing moves occurred in the acknowledgements from the soft fields. These differences were more clearly marked in the Master’s texts, where only 4% of the hard science acknowledgements contained a Reflecting Move and less than half offered any

Table 2
Percentage of acknowledgements with each step by discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>AL</th>
<th>Bus</th>
<th>PA</th>
<th>All Soft</th>
<th>Bio</th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>EE</th>
<th>All Hard</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Reflecting Move</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Thanking Move</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2.1</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 2.3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2.4</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Announcing Move</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3.1</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3.2</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
thanks beyond academic support. Recursion of steps within the Thanking Move was a common feature of the corpus. Table 3 shows that the students used an average of 4.6 steps in each acknowledgement with the PhD texts averaging 5.5 steps compared with 3.5 in the Master’s acknowledgements. The most structurally elaborate texts were written by the PhD students in applied linguistics, who averaged 8.5 steps, while Master’s students in electronic engineering produced the most simple, with 2.3.

Table 4 shows the average frequency which steps occurred in each discipline. The most common steps were Thanking for academic assistance, which accounted for 38% of all steps, and Thanking for moral support, which comprised 25%. Together, then, expressing gratitude to those who had a decisive intellectual and emotional influence on the completion of the students’ research made up almost two thirds of all the steps in the corpus and three quarters of all acts of thanks, suggesting that these were the most valued by writers. The soft papers contained 15% more steps than those written by scientists and engineers and displayed greater variation in patterning. Overall, the results tend to support Giannoni’s (2002) observations concerning research article acknowledgements that scientists and engineers construct less complex acknowledgements. In my corpus these texts were generally composed of fewer moves with less recursion and showed greater relative concentration on academic thanks. In the following section I will describe the move and steps and discuss these differences in more detail.

5.1. Reflecting move

This move is peripheral to the main purpose of the genre and does not occur in journal acknowledgements. It is, however, often a feature of book acknowledgements and occurred in 20% of the student corpus, although overwhelmingly in the PhD texts. This move allows students to publicly contemplate the understandings they have gained as a result of the research experience and often recalls the struggles involved or the sense of accomplishment achieved. Here is the academic writer at his or most unguarded and able to express what could not be expressed in the thesis proper. This is one place where the writer can present a self relatively

| Table 3 |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Text complexity: average number of steps per text by discipline and degree |
|              | Master’s Texts | PhD Texts | Overall |
| Applied Linguistics | 3.9            | 8.5        | 6.3     |
| Biology          | 3.9            | 5.8        | 4.9     |
| Business Studies | 3.5            | 3.7        | 3.6     |
| Computer Science | 2.8            | 5.3        | 4.1     |
| Electronic Engineering | 2.3        | 4.6        | 3.4     |
| Public Administration | 4.7        | 4.8        | 4.8     |
| Overall          | 3.5            | 5.5        | 4.6     |
disentangled from the complex conventions of powerful academic discourse types and reveal a real individual coping with, and triumphing over, the exacting demands of research:

(2) The most rewarding achievement in my life, as I approach middle age, is the completion of my doctoral dissertation. (AL PhD)

When I naively stepped onto this path of self-discovery, I hardly understood the academic, emotional and physical difficulties in doing a qualitative research and writing an academic paper. (SA PhD)

I feel I have learnt a lot from writing this thesis searching for the truth of science and life. This is the great treasure I will cherish not only in my future academic career but in my whole life. (Bio PhD)

To be honest, I cannot describe myself as a good researcher. Throughout the process of conceiving this thesis, I have committed terribly lots of mistakes. I often underestimated the complexity of the problems and could not express my ideas in a clear and concise way. (CS PhD)

Despite the disarming naivety and openness of many of these personal reflections however, there is also the intimation that this tremendous effort and sacrifice is deserving of success. With many examples, one suspects that this step is not entirely innocent of rhetorical intent, and the fact that reflections were twice as frequent in the soft fields also suggests that it perhaps also serves as a warrant, should one be needed, that the writer is worthy of the degree:

(3) This dissertation took almost three years from conception to completion. It involved countless cycles of exploration, inquiry, meditation, enlightenment, doubt, confusion, uncertainty, and perseverance. (AL PhD)
The work on which this thesis is based was the estuarine programme of the Fisheries Research Unit carried out since 1955. The data collected were voluminous and the area under survey was broad... (Bio MA)

The results presented in several chapters of this thesis, namely, Chapters 2, 4, 5 and 6 are jointly produced with Dr. Lam and have been published as... (CS PhD)

By focusing the reader on the challenges that have been overcome, the rich experiences gained, and the academic credentials obtained, the writer is able to make salient what might not be obvious in the main text and support his or her claim for a favourable decision by examiners and assessors.

5.2. Thanking move

As noted above, this is the core of the acknowledgement genre and the only move which occurs in all the texts, containing 90% of all steps in the corpus. This is potentially a move of four steps which enables the writer to introduce and thank individuals and institutions for various kinds of support, but only 20% of acknowledgements included all four steps although over half contained the three main thanking steps for academic, moral and resource support.

5.2.1. Step 2.1 Presenting participants

This step occurred in 28% of the papers and was largely a feature of the soft disciplines, which contained two thirds of all cases. The purpose of the step is principally textual, to introduce the people to be thanked who are then often named in the following steps. In almost all cases it occurred in the initial position of a thanking move, functioning as a bridge between the moves and as a prologue to signal the purpose of the move which is to acknowledge all those involved in the thesis. In two texts however it was positioned later in the move to set up a particular class of thanks. The step is typically short and rarely more than a sentence in length:

(4) This dissertation would never have come to fruition without the support of many individuals, and it is with pleasure and gratitude that I acknowledge their efforts. (CS PhD)

I would like to take this opportunity to express my immense gratitude to all those persons who have given their invaluable support and assistance. (Bus PhD)

Many people whom I work with at HKUST need to be acknowledged. (EE PhD)

Generally this step occurred in more lengthy acknowledgements which contained several thanking steps, often recycling academic and moral thanks. While this step
provides the writer with a means of offering an inclusive thanks to those who may not be subsequently mentioned by name, it largely serves to signal that a list will follow, therefore containing none of the effusiveness or the personal flourishes sometimes seen in other steps in this move.

5.2.2. Step 2.2 Thanking for academic assistance

As noted above, this is the core step in the genre and the only one found in all acknowledgements. It comprises thanks for a range of support, from providing feedback and critical comments, discussing approaches, assisting with analyses, and inspiring ideas, to granting approval for study, inviting conference papers, and so on. Generally such acknowledgements are offered to senior academics, people who had mentored or believed in the writer, taught him or her, provided intellectual guidance, or contributed in other ways, although some writers recognised the help of fellow students, colleagues and peers.

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 group and helpful colleagues.

(CS PhD interview)

I acknowledged the whole teaching team of the MA course, because I think when you write a thesis, you are not only getting help from your supervisor, but drawing on knowledge learnt from all the other subjects.

(AL MA interview)

Academics received the most mentions in all disciplines, and supervisors were always mentioned, almost always before anyone else, giving them a pre-eminence which reveals the intellectual, and often emotional, obligation writers often feel towards them:

My supervisors really helped a lot in my project, I think it’s not just a formality or politeness. It is like we went through all the difficulties together in these so many years and it is not an easy task.

(PA PhD interview)

I will include my supervisor whose ideas have contributed a lot to my project.

(AL PhD interview)

I’d include my supervisor to thank him for his ideas on the project, because in our department, it is the professor who proposed some topics and let us choose which one we are interested in, so my project actually come from my supervisor’s ideas.

(EE MSc interview)

While the form of these acknowledgements ranged from the blandly formal to the near reverent, the thanks offered to supervisors is important beyond simple gratitude: here is both recognition of the supervisors’ contribution and perhaps the germ
of a career strategy. For Ben-Ari (1987) acknowledgements contribute to a dynamic of reciprocal debts and obligations which is central to the continuity and cohesion of professional communities, and in thanks to dissertation supervisors we see what is perhaps an intimation, or a hope, of a relationship which can bind author and acknowledge in a mechanism of mutual indebtedness for years to come. This is more likely to be the case for PhD graduates who, unlike master’s students, are usually anticipating a scholarly career and engaged in full-time study or employed as university teachers. For graduates, such a relationship offers the guidance, benevolence and professional contacts of an established academic, and for the supervisor the esteem and loyalty of a grateful mentee. This, then, may not be the end of a relationship but the beginnings of an even more fruitful one.

(5) The author would like to express his thanks to his supervisor Dr. Wing Suen of School of Economic and Finance, the University of Hong Kong for his continuous guidance and giving the author a long lasting supervision, support and advice to do this research. (Bus PhD)

I would like to express my utmost gratitude to my research supervisor, Dr. Sze-Fong Mark Yau, for his sincere and selfless support, prompt and useful advice during my research. He gives me a lifetime unforgettable memory of his benevolence, patience, intelligence, diligence and erudition. (EE PhD)

This strategic dimension of Thanking for academic assistance is also noticeable in the recognition given to other academics who played a teaching or advisory role. These are typically teachers, members of the student’s dissertation committee, occasional advisers, and sometimes even examiners. By mentioning these figures the writer foregrounds the activities which structure his or her intellectual experiences during the research, but such mentions also represent rhetorical choices related to getting the thesis accepted, a strategy which becomes more apparent when it is extended to examiners:

(6) I would also like to acknowledge all the professors of the Department of English who had taught me during the exciting past two years. Their successful teaching has made the dissertation possible. (AL MA)

I also wish to thank the professors, lectures and academic staff of Department of Biology and Chemistry, City University of HK, for their on-going advice and support during the course my PhD study over the last two and a half years. (Bio PhD)

I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Pei- Yuan Qian as a supervisory committee member, Dr. Hwey-Lian Hsieh as an examination committee member and Dr. Wendy W.L. Hsiao as chairman of the examination committee. (EE PhD)
My special thank goes to my external examiner, Dr. R. Dorfman for her kindness and patience in going through my manuscript. (PA PhD)

There also appeared to be widespread name-dropping of individuals who could only have been marginal to the development of the thesis such as department heads, professors in neighbouring universities, and academics well-published in the area who may have responded to e-mail enquiries. The acknowledgment of senior professionals was far more prevalent in the PhD texts in the sciences and engineering where, because of increasing specialisation of both research and funding, the mentoring tradition seems stronger. Here, winning the protection and goodwill of established figures is often vital for gaining post-doctoral grants, a lab to work in, or a teaching position. Mentioning key figures can therefore contribute to gaining the writer credit and ease the examination process for the student:

The acknowledgement is an important section for creating good impression. (EE PhD interview)

I’d acknowledge people who can influence the grade of my report, these people include my supervisor and assessor who will do the marking. (Bio MSc interview)

Though the panel did not really give any help in doing the paper, there are political reasons in thanking them. Therefore, I just make up something to thank them, like thanking them for reading my paper. (EE PhD interview)

Related to this complex interplay of the interpersonal and the strategic is the way that writers seek to simultaneously align themselves with influential academics and to display their respect for them. Crucial here are the naming practices employed as these help to link the author’s private sphere of mentors, friendships, and social affiliations to the recognition of the individual as a public figure. Interestingly, 96% of all academics in the corpus were referred to using their full name with an honorific, even if this was a simple Mr or Ms, and only 2% were mentioned without a title of any kind. None at all were mentioned by first name only, and several were cited with their full position and range of professional memberships and accomplishments:

(7) The author wishes to express his gratitude to Professor S.Y. King, B.Sc.(ENG.), Ph.D., C.ENG., F.I.E.E., Sen. Member I.E.E.E., head of Electrical Engineering Department, University of Hong Kong. (EE MSc)

Special thanks to Dr. Law Chi Kwong, the head of Department of Social Work and Social Administration of the University of Hong Kong, as one of my thesis committee members, who gave important comments on my thesis. (PA PhD)
Equally, I would also like to thank Dr. Nelson Ming-sun Wat, senior lecturer, Department of Medicine, Queen Mary Hospital.

This provides the acknowledgee with due recognition by underlining his or her status to the reader while also signalling deference to the academic community by recognising its norms and hierarchies (Giannoni, 2002, p. 21). In dissertation acknowledgements, moreover, this explicit marking of respect also performs the additional function of allowing the writer to appropriate some of the importance of influential figures by associating the text, and its writer, with them. In Hong Kong acknowledgements are written before the examination and defence, so, in thanking individuals for academic support, writers are also using this step to appeal to those with the power to influence the reception of the dissertation and perhaps the future of its writer.

5.2.3. Step 2.3 Thanking for providing resources

This step addresses the dependence of dissertation writers on the cooperation or direct assistance of those they study or who provide material support. It includes acknowledgement for a range of resources which underlie every research project but are infrequently mentioned within the dissertation itself, such as access to data and information that might have otherwise been difficult for the writer to obtain, clerical assistance, technical help and financial support. This step occurred in two thirds of the acknowledgements and generally followed step 2.2, but there were degree and discipline variations in its frequency. The step was underrepresented in the business studies and computer science acknowledgements, which together made up only a fifth of all cases, and it was twice as frequent in the PhD texts, where such assistance is often considerable. Table 5 summarises the distribution of this step.

We can see that thanks for access to data comprised over half of all cases and that the clerical help offered by general office staff, spousal proofreaders, and family typists did not figure prominently in the corpus. The other resources however displayed clear disciplinary preferences with two thirds of all acknowledgements for financial and technical assistance occurring in the hard fields. Here technicians, lab assistants, computer wizards and funding agencies were frequently mentioned:

<table>
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<th>Table 5</th>
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<td>Focus of Thanking for resource moves by discipline (%)</td>
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<td>AL</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to data</td>
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<td>Clerical support</td>
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<td>Financial support</td>
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<td>Technical support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
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</table>
(8) Technicians in the Department of Biology and Chemistry are sincerely thanked for their support in instrument maintenance. (Bio MA)

The research for this thesis was financially supported by a postgraduate studentship from the University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong and China Gas Company Postgraduate Scholarship, Epson Foundation Scholarship, two University of Hong Kong CRCG grants and an RCG grant. (CS PhD)

I thank the City University of Hong Kong for awarding me a Conference Grant in attending the International Conference on Environmental Contamination, Toxicology and Health during 23–26th September, 1998, where I presented a poster on “Elimination of phytotoxicity in mixture of chicken and green manure by windrow composting”, and the International Composting Symposium, 1999 in Halifax, Canada, during 20–23rd September, 1999, where I presented on “Co-composting of chicken litter and yard trimmings: effects of aeration frequency and spatial variation”. (Bio PhD)

While no doubt sincerely offered, it is not difficult to see the textual construction of an academic self in these apparently innocent appreciations from a grateful graduate. The detailing of prizes, prestigious scholarships, company sponsorships or travel grants marks the writer out as an individual whose academic talents have already been recognised and who may be deserving of further honours.

The most acknowledged resource was the provision of access to data, which was almost twice as frequent in the soft disciplines. Patterns here tend to represent disciplinary working practices and the ways knowledge is constructed in different fields. In the hard knowledge texts credit for ‘access’ tends to be granted for furnishing unpublished results, supplying article pre-prints, making data collection instruments available, and so on. This trade in intellectual and research material characterises scientific work at ‘expert’ levels of engagement (Cronin et al., 1993), but appears to be no less important in post-graduate research. Those who work in the human sciences, on the other hand, tend to be less reliant on such highly developed peer networks and depend more on the cooperation of those they study.

The most important source of data for the soft disciplines was therefore provided by the participating subjects themselves. But while subjects are unlikely to read the text, quite subtle rhetorical intimations of professional commitment and academic competence can be communicated by these acknowledgements to professional readers, hinting at the networks established, the authority and involvement of the writer, and of trials overcome, which might not be possible to include so explicitly in the main text.

(9) Last but not least, I would like to acknowledge the invaluable help rendered by my subjects, the elderly diabetic patients follow-up at the Alp Lei Chau and Tang Chi Ngong out-patient clinic, who spent time to participate in this study without immediate benefit to themselves. (SA PhD)
Many colleagues of the English Department in GDUFS have helped me as my co-researchers in the study, being always generous with their time to respond to me whenever I approached them for data, for triangulation, and for discussion throughout the three years of struggle and difficulty on this research.

(AL PhD)

I would like to acknowledge the invaluable contributions of the hundreds of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong who unselfishly shared their lives and whose life’s narratives essentially formed the basis of this dissertation... For reasons that they would understand, they would remain anonymous in this work. However, if someday they get the chance to read this work, I have no doubt that they will readily recognise their voices that have enlivened the many Sunday afternoons shared together in the parks, under the bridges and under the trees; in the sun and rain; enduring the heat and cold of the changing seasons.

(AL PhD)

Doubtless these expressions of gratitude are sincerely meant and help the writer repay some of the assistance which has been crucial to completing the degree, but acknowledgements are not simply random checklists of useful people or institutions. They also allow writers to portray some of the procedures and practices which have gone into the dissertation and so present a competent professional identity. Here is an academic immersed in a network of research paraphernalia armed with the ability to manage the substantial resources often necessary for academic study. Thanks to participants and experts helps to communicate the authenticity and plausibility of the research and the skill of the writer. This is a site where writers can textualise themselves as autonomous intellectuals worthy of respect and deserving of the qualification sought.

5.2.4. Step 2.4 Thanking for moral support

The final step in the Thanking Move offers gratitude for encouragement, friendship, sympathy, patience, and care and the fact that two thirds of all papers contained this step suggests that acknowledgements were more than simply an opportunity for political strategising. They also provided students with the chance to extend thanks beyond the public worlds of the academy to the private forces which shaped their research experience:

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)
Such expressions are generally offered to family and friends, but also include colleagues and supervisors, and are found largely in the PhD acknowledgements, particularly those in the liberal social sciences of applied linguistics and public administration. These are dissertations which tend to be considerably longer than those in other disciplines and which may therefore depend far more on personal support and the sacrifices of family and friends for sustaining extended hours of study. Interestingly, however, thanks for moral support tended to be far more succinct than those offered for academic assistance and there was a surprising use of full names when thanking both friends and family members. Over 90% of friends were identified by full name, occasionally with an honorific, and this pattern accounted for three quarters of all acknowledgements to family in the PhD dissertations:

(10) Lastly and most importantly, I would like to thank my fiancee, Ms. Kennis Tai, for her love, care and encouragement which give me the incentive to finish this work. (CS PhD)

Gratitude expressed to all my research teammates including Miss Irene Kung, Miss Charlotte Yim and Mr. Z. Q. Fang. Their humour and spiritual support smoothened my research progress. (Bio PhD)

My heartfelt gratitude especially to my two mentors, my mother, Mrs. Gita Vyas and my father, Late, Dr. V. K. Vyas who said that I could do whatever I set my mind to. (AL PhD)

Referring to family and friends by full names lends almost ceremonial connotations to these acknowledgements and may suggest that writers’ have rather formal perceptions of the genre. But more importantly, it once again reflects the public nature of this discourse and underlines the writers’ intention that the recipients are clearly identifiable to readers. It indicates a clear awareness of audience and perhaps an opportunity for the writer to represent him or herself as a social person which is not available in the dissertation proper. The writer is here able to provide a picture of an individual with a life beyond the page, alluding to an ultimate triumph over the difficulties of graduate study and displaying the core academic values of modesty, generosity and gratitude which help define the public face of their discipline:

(11) Last but not the least, I would like to acknowledge the endless support, encouragement, patience and understanding of my partner-in-life, John Tsui, and our children, Jackie and Gani, for putting up unquestioningly, with the increasingly different and difficult person that I had become in the last few critical months of finalising this dissertation. (AL PhD)

Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents and my dearest wife, Rowena Chui. Without their support and great encouragement, I cannot concentrate on my work and overcome the difficulties. (CS PhD)
Last, but definitely not the least, I am greatly indebted to my family. It was my parents’ unconditional love, care, and tolerance which made the hardship of writing the thesis worthwhile. . . Without their support, I do not think that I could overcome the difficulties during these years. (PA PhD)

. . . and to God who gave me the strength and perseverance to continue when I wanted to give up. (AL MA)

Again, there is an obvious earnestness and honesty in these statements, but there is also an awareness of the genre and of the readership which is assessing both the writer and the dissertation, and which is able to influence the future of them both. References to God, Church fellowships, friendships, and social associations occur frequently, and one reviewer of this paper observed that it is not unusual for students in the US to acknowledge their pets. So genuine gratitude for the sacrifices and support of loved ones, human or otherwise, is perhaps a gratitude tinged with impression management as the writer represents him or herself as not only a plausible researcher, but also as a sympathetic human being.

5.3. Announcing Move

This move was present in only 11% of texts in the corpus, was largely a feature of the soft knowledge fields, did not occur in any of the business or electronic engineering texts, and always followed the Thanking move when it did occur. For the writers who employed it, this move provided a means of publicly making a declaration of their authorial accountability for the dissertation’s contents or dedicating the work to an esteemed individual, although the two steps never occurred together.

5.3.1. Step 3.1 Accepting responsibility

By clearly stating their responsibility for possible shortcomings in the data, results, and ideas in a dissertation, writers not only seek to absolve their advisors and collaborators of blame for any deficiencies, they also assert their ownership of the product. This alludes to the often fine line between the contributions of co-authors and those of acknowledgees which has been raised in relation to published acknowledgements (Cronin & Overfelt, 1994; Heffner, 1979) and to Jenkins, Jordan, and Weiland’s (1993) study in which engineering faculty admitted to writing over 25% of their L2 students’ dissertations. There is a suggestion here, then, that the extensive expressions of gratitude articulated in the prior move has undermined the student’s claim to have independently created an original contribution. This implication is clear in the juxtaposition of assistance and independence often seen in this step:

(12) I have received much useful advice throughout the writing of my thesis, but all the faults that remain are obstinately my own. (AL PhD)
Notwithstanding all of the above support for this project, any errors and/or omissions are solely my own. (CS PhD)

However, while grateful to them, I bear the sole responsibilities for all the mistakes made in the thesis. (SA PhD)

Although many people have helped me with their insightful ideas and critique, I am fully responsible for any mistakes, problems, and flaws that this piece of work may contain. (AL PhD)

Accepting responsibility therefore clearly redresses the impression of dispersed responsibility or uncertain authorship which may have been given in the Thanking move and functions to re-establish the student’s rights to be regarded as an independent researcher.

5.3.2. Step 3.2 Dedicating the thesis

Only a handful of texts included this step, and perhaps for this reason it stands out as a particularly warm and heartfelt act of thanks unrelated to any rhetorical intent. Here writers borrow a device they have seen in books, although virtually unknown in academic papers, to offer a tribute to people who have made a special contribution to their lives beyond the confines of the research context:

(13) I love my family. This thesis is dedicated to them. (SA PhD)

I would like to dedicate this dissertation especially to my late grandpa and auntie Lo for both of them have taught me the meaning of life and its significance. (AL PhD)

Finally, I wish to dedicate this project to my son Larry and daughter Angela. Without them and their love, the melon of life would never have tasted as pleasant – a taste to which the completion of a humble thesis such as this one cannot compare. (AL PhD)

Here the formal conventions of academic writing and the rhetorical strategies of self-promotion are laid briefly aside and the writer is able to present him or herself in a way which corresponds more closely to a more familiar social identity. In this step we find an attempt to both break free of the restrictions of dissertation discourses and to put the completed research experience into a wider perspective.

6. Implications and conclusions

While sometimes considered one of the few genres to remain unconventionnalised, and for this reason more effective in conveying sincere appreciation, dissertation acknowledgements are, like other academic texts, staged genres with a coherent
structure. It is this structure which enables writers to both express gratitude and to display an appropriate scholarly competence. The analysis presented in this paper has shown that acknowledgements are sophisticated and complex textual constructs which bridge the personal and the public, the social and the professional, and the academic and the moral. Through this generic framework writers are able to balance debts and responsibilities and to represent themselves in terms of valued disciplinary practices and norms while allowing readers a glimpse of a writer enmeshed in a network of personal and academic relationships. The widespread use of this genre in postgraduate dissertations reflects their importance to students across a range of fields and underlines their considerable significance in scholarly collaboration.

But while the acknowledgement section is perhaps the most explicitly interpersonal genre of the academy, one whose communicative purpose expressly encourages frankness and honesty, the constraints of academic discourses still operate. Acknowledgements are very much part of the rhetorical package of the dissertation and as a result position the writer in relation to his or her statements. As in the thesis proper, the problem for students is to demonstrate an appropriate degree of competence and intellectual autonomy while recognising their readers’ greater experiences, knowledge of the field, and influence over the fate of the text. Yet despite this importance, the students in this study reported that they received little instruction in this genre, affirming that they generally looked at other dissertations to get ideas for structure, expression and content. Similarly, Cronin and Overfelt’s (1994) survey discovered that while novices in the humanities are far more likely to be sensitised to the etiquette and conventions of acknowledgements than other writers, advice was largely informal.

Swales and Feak (2001; p. 198), in a widely used EAP text, warn that the unexamined nature of acknowledgements can hold perils for the non-native writer and provide advice which offer ways of “being positive rather than continually ecstatic”. Clearly there are opportunities here for graduate writers to make a very positive first impression on the reader and EAP teachers can greatly assist their students by raising their awareness of the rhetorical importance of this genre and the ways they can structure their acknowledgements to promote a competent scholarly identity. Effective instruction can assist learners not only to convey their genuine gratitude for assistance, but also their immersion in scholarly networks, their active disciplinary membership, and their observance of the valued academic ideals of modesty, gratitude and appropriate self-effacement.

Much work remains to be done before we can provide this assistance with complete confidence. My emphasis in this paper has been on the generic structure of acknowledgements by Cantonese and Mandarin speakers writing in English, but the research needs to extended to other first language students, to English L1 writers, and to more disciplines. Does, for example, the intensity and expressive tenor of acknowledgements vary between disciplines? Do acknowledgements have different symbolic and substantive significance in different fields leading them to be differently valued and received by readers? Do situational factors such as the author’s age, gender, seniority, and publishing experience have an impact on genre patterns? Clearly, we need to examine writers, readers and texts in greater detail to tease out the limits of personal choice and
the kinds of effects they can have. I would argue, however, that the effort is worthwhile if it helps to ensure that students understand the options available to them and the effects of manipulating these options for interactional purposes.

References


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