Dissertation acknowledgements: The anatomy of a Cinderella genre

Abstract
Although sometimes considered to be only marginally related to the key academic goals of establishing claims and reputations, acknowledgements are commonplace in scholarly communication and virtually obligatory in dissertation writing. The significance of this disregarded “Cinderella genre” lies partly in the opportunities it offers students to present a social and scholarly self disentangled from academic discourse conventions and personally thank those who have shaped the accompanying text. Beyond the role it plays in academic gift giving and self-presentation, however, the textualization of gratitude reveals social and cultural characteristics, an intimation of disciplinary specialisation within a broad generic structure. This analysis of the acknowledgments accompanying 240 PhD and MA dissertations written by Non-Native speakers of English suggests that personal gratitude is mediated by disciplinary preferences and strategic career choices, reflecting one way in which way postgraduate writing represents a situated activity.

In recent years a burgeoning literature has illuminated our understanding of the written discourses of the academy as well as consolidating the importance of genre as a means of investigating the situational and cultural influences which operate within academic communities. This work has led to an increased appreciation of the interpersonal role of writing and an understanding of the fact that academic writers do not simply produce texts that plausibly represent an external reality, but use language to situate themselves in a discipline and to construct and negotiate social relations. Yet while research has explored the varied ways that writers offer a credible representation of themselves and their work in a range of genres, interest in the interpersonal has tended to focus on its role in argument. What is perhaps the most personal genre of all, that of acknowledgements, has been relatively neglected.
Swales’ (1996) categorisation, for instance, divides the academic genre system into three groups according to the kind of audience addressed: primary or research-process genres for peer communication; secondary or pedagogic genres; and relatively private or occluded genres dealing with the exchange of material and information between academics which support the research process. Acknowledgements seem to fall through the cracks here and represent something of a ‘Cinderella’ genre. Like the heroine in the children’s’ fairy tale, acknowledgements are a-taken-for-granted part of the background, a practice of unrecognized and disregarded value deserving of greater attention. Neither strictly academic nor entirely personal, acknowledgements stand outside the research record but have a considerable socio-pragmatic relevance which makes them integral to it. They are central to the academic practice of reciprocal gift giving and for this reason are particularly important to students. Acknowledgements can act as a means of demonstrating academic credibility, recognising debts, and achieving a sense of closure at the end of a long and demanding research process. In this paper I explore these issues by examining the acknowledgements accompanying 240 PhD and MA dissertations written by Non-Native speakers of English.

**Acknowledgements in published scholarly texts**

While student acknowledgements have received little research attention, slightly more is known about the genre in published texts. Acknowledgements in books date back to a time when public gratitude for the generosity of the powerful was almost a precondition for publication, yet the relative political and economic autonomy of modern times does not appear to have dented their popularity. Academic tomes have always contained expressions of gratitude, and in journal publishing early scientific articles often featured acknowledgements in an introductory cover letter (Atkinson, 1999). Their emergence as a textual feature was uneven until the 1940s, only becoming common during the 1960s (Bazerman, 1988), and while they 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 institutional endorsement and editorial prominence in a separate textual space.
Although sometimes considered to be a minor feature of research reporting, and therefore unrelated to the substantive issues of establishing claims and reputations, the persistence of this optional genre confirms its usefulness to disciplinary communities. Acknowledgements are commonplace in the scholarly communication process today and have, in fact, become both longer (Caesar, 1992; Cronin, 1995) and more common, with perhaps over half of all published papers including this section (Cronin, McKenzie & Stiffler, 1992). Their value is also attested by survey data. 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, and 90% were aware of having been acknowledged themselves, a few even keeping a formal record for institutional evaluation.

Yet acknowledgements are much more than a simple catalogue of indebtedness. They offer insights into the persona of the writer, the patterns of engagement that define collaboration and interdependence among scholars, and the practices of expectation and etiquette that are involved. In a study of anthropological ethnographies, Ben-Ari (1987: 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.

Acknowledgements often play a metadiscursive role in being physically set apart from the main social and textual product yet functioning to both facilitate the construction of this product and to comment on it. They point inwards to the text and its author and outwards to the factors which help construct them both. Acknowledgements thus provide a valuable space for writers to encode both a representation of themselves and of those they wish to publicly recognise as influencing the project.

It would, however, be wrong to see acknowledgements as entirely idiosyncratic and personal. Studies have found that they reflect both disciplinary proclivities and the dialogic processes of academic research. Cronin, McKenzie, & Rubio (1993) discovered disciplinary variations in the frequency of acknowledgements, suggesting a continuum across the soft-hard spectrum, with virtually all articles in the hard sciences carrying one (McCain, 1991). These patterns tend to mirror recognised disciplinary work-
ing practices and the ways knowledge is constructed in different fields. Philosophers, for instance, are more likely to inhabit dispersed communities with little reliance on close interaction with others and so have low acknowledgement rates. Hard scientists, in contrast, recognise financial support and their engagement in highly developed webs of mutual transmission and exchange, trading the materials and preprints upon which their research depends. The structural properties of acknowledgements also exhibit disciplinary variations, with writers in the humanities and social sciences writing more elaborate texts (Giannoni, 2002; Hyland, Forthcoming).

**Acknowledgements, self representation and gift-giving.**

The fact that acknowledgements are one of the few available gestures for conveying appreciation increases their interest to discourse analysts and to bibliometricians seeking to trace complex genealogies of interaction. Through them we learn something of the forces shaping the accompanying text. But although academics appear to subscribe to a governing etiquette of acknowledging practices (Cronin & Overfelt, 1994), expressing thanks to others is not an entirely altruistic practice, and it is this potential for flattery and self-promotion which has attracted criticism to acknowledgements.

Book acknowledgements, in particular have been criticised for the “twin vices of fawning and vanity” with a suggestion that this genre provides authors with

> an excuse for long, rambling essays, in which they flatter the powerful, gurgle over their families, and otherwise boast to the world what happily married, highly-educated, well-connected and generally right-on people they have the good fortune to be.

(Economist, 1996)

This judgement perhaps seems rather harsh on those who have been recognised for support provided at some social, emotional or financial cost. The role of acknowledgements in providing a representation of the writer as a social person, however, is common, particularly in book acknowledgements, and reflects the emerging importance of the writer in society. It reveals the writer as someone with a life beyond the page in whom readers may be interested.
Ben-Ari (1987) also comments on the role of acknowledgements in creating a professional as well as personal identity: showing how the formulation of acknowledgements act as strategic choices in ‘career-ing’, achieved through the author’s management of his or her relations in the disciplinary community and the creation of authorial credibility. The inclusion of references to those only marginal to the research is common and, in some cases, has drawn fire from journal editors for its excessiveness. After receiving a manuscript with a five page acknowledgement section listing 63 institutions, 155 physicians, and 51 members of seven different committees, the editors of the New England Journal of Medicine were moved to officially limit their space for acknowledgements (Kassirer & Angell, 1991).

This kind of gift-giving is a core feature of academic communities but has mainly been studied in its manifestation as citation (Gilbert, 1977; Hyland, 2000). Latour and Woolgar (1979), for instance see citation as central to the cycle in which academics engage to maximise their credibility, accumulating recognition which they can convert into research grants, further data, and fresh publications. Bibliometric research also shows that the number of citations an individual receives correlates strongly with other forms of career recognition (Garfield, 1998). While not tabulated by bibliometricians or promotion boards, the gift bestowed by acknowledgement may be no less influential. Yet this is clearly a more personally marked form of credit through which the author both indicates an individual tribute for some service and directly indicates an affiliation. In short, acknowledgements are “not trivial, meta-textual flourishes, rather they are formal records of often significant intellectual influence” (Cronin & Overfelt, 1994: 183) which point to strong networks of association between researchers.

It is this direct and personal aspect of acknowledgements moreover which make them important to research students. The dissertation is a high stakes genre; a formidable task of intimidating length and exacting expectations, demanding heavy investments in time, money, and labour. Acknowledgements can therefore provide a means of reconciling the student’s individual achievement with the interpersonal debts incurred in completing the study. Yet despite this importance, published advice to students about acknowledgements is sketchy and, at best, lukewarm. Lester (1993), for example, tells novice researchers that acknowledgements are an unnecessary encumbrance while Day (1994) cautions that they may
suggest shaky authorship. Only Swales and Feak’s (2000) academic writing guide appears to recognise the significance of the genre and provides anything like a serious pedagogic treatment of the topic.

For analysts, postgraduate acknowledgements are of interest for the insights they offer into disciplinary environments for research and patterns of academic exchange and patronage. In writers’ metatextual reflections we can discover personal histories of collaboration, patterns of affiliation, demonstrations of academic credibility, and a glimpse of a more contingent world. The remainder of this paper explores the ways these issues are played out across disciplines and degrees through analysis of who is acknowledged, what they are acknowledged for, and the ways this is realised.

**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 fields written by non-native English speaking students at five Hong Kong universities totalling 35,000 words. The disciplines were chosen to represent a broad cross-section of academic practice, namely: Electronic Engineering (EE), Computer Science (CS), Business Studies (Bus), Biology (Bio), Applied Linguistics (AL), and Public Administration (PA).

The two corpora were initially coded inductively, developing categories from recursive passes through the texts looking for classes of people to whom debts might be owed and terms designating behaviour that might attract credit. The corpora were then searched more systematically using MonoConc Pro, a concordance programme, which yielded further search items and enabled a detailed study of the co-texts to discover who was acknowledged, what they were acknowledged for, and the naming practices employed. All acknowledgements were coded for these features and studied for frequencies of occurrence. WinMax Pro was also used to code all cases to ensure that unpredictable individuals (such as “my twins”), which would be missed by machine searches alone, were recovered. A sample of 60 texts was coded independently by a second rater for reliability with 90% agreement.
In addition, two MA students and two PhD students from each discipline were interviewed by the project research assistant, herself a recent linguistics graduate. We were interested in participants’ understandings of the meanings of acknowledgements and their thoughts on disciplinary practices as a way of gaining insights to the text data. The interviews followed a semi-structured format (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000: 270) which allowed peripheral topics to be followed-up if important.

Post graduate acknowledgements: differences of degree

Both the qualitative and quantitative data confirm the importance of acknowledgements to these students despite its optional, non-examinable status, with around 90% of the texts, and almost all the PhDs, containing one (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Masters</th>
<th></th>
<th>Doctoral</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</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>2,402</td>
<td>133.4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biology</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1,825</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>1,483</td>
<td>82.4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic engineering</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>1,427</td>
<td>71.4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3,289</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>

The length of the texts ranged enormously. This almost cursory 38 words was the briefest:

(1) I would especially like to thank Dr. Douglas Vogel\(^1\), my dissertation supervisor, who gave me his advice and guidance throughout the preparation of the dissertation. Also my colleagues and friends are thanked for sharing their experience in outsourcing. (CS MSc)

But most were much longer, up to an applied linguistics opus of 1,085 words. The average however was 160 words, about three times the average of 55 words that Giannoni (2002) found in his sample of research article acknowledgements.

The PhD students were more conscientious in acknowledging assistance. Twenty two percent more doctoral theses contained acknowledgements and these were on average about twice as long as those by
Master’s students. This is perhaps because doctoral students are generally anticipating an academic career and are often already apprenticed to a scholarly community. It is during doctoral research that individuals take on the cultural frame that will define a greater part of their academic lives, and these novitiates are immersed in the practices of their chosen discipline as much as their research field. For these students, an acknowledgements section is an important courtesy guided by scholarly norms, a means of publicly recognising the role of mentors, the sacrifices of loved ones, and sharing the relief of completing the process:

*It is a must to write an acknowledgement as it is an important channel to express our thanks to those who helped in our project. It is an important section for the completeness of the thesis.*

(CS PhD student)

*This section is meaningful for myself to show my gratitude, but I don’t think people who read my thesis would care much.*

(Bio 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)

Masters students, on the other hand, typically study on a part-time basis and are looking forward to returning to their professional workplaces. Their theses tend to be much shorter (averaging only a third of the length of PhDs), constructed fairly quickly, and completed in addition to substantial coursework. Not surprisingly therefore, acknowledgements were afforded less significance by these masters students and some saw acknowledgements as merely a convention:

*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, I think my supervisor would appreciate it more if I ask for his opinions and discuss more with him than thanking him in an acknowledgement.*

(BS 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)
Allocating credit: some disciplinary patterns

The main purpose of acknowledgements is to allocate credit to institutions and individuals who have contributed to the dissertation in some way. There were 1400 separate acts of acknowledgement in the corpus, 70% of which were in the PhD texts. 1276 different individuals and 138 institutions were acknowledged, with supervisors appearing in all acknowledgements, in fact, almost half of these acknowledging acts were to academics, a quarter to friends, and 14% to family members. These figures were remarkably consistent across the PhD and MA corpora, although there were considerable disciplinary variations. Table 2 shows the distributions as a percentage by discipline and degree.

*Table 2: Participants acknowledged in Dissertations (%)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MA Dissertations</th>
<th>PhD Dissertations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acad</td>
<td>Friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>17.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIO</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>30.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUS</td>
<td>43.8</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>39.6</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE</td>
<td>60.4</td>
<td>16.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Bibliometric studies of acknowledgement patterns have classified some of the functions which are credited by writers, showing that they are not simply a miscellany of thanks (Cronin, McKenzie & Rubio, 1993; McCain, 1991). The student dissertations contained five main reasons for giving credit: academic support, access to data, moral support, clerical services, financial resources, and technical help, with three quarters being for academic and moral assistance. Academic assistance attracted the most thanks, representing 45% of each corpora, with moral support comprising 30%. Table 3 summarises the results.
Table 3: Activities acknowledged in Dissertations (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>MA Dissertations</th>
<th>PhD Dissertations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acad  Access  Moral Other  ?  total</td>
<td>Acad  Access  Moral Other  ?  total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AL</td>
<td>35.5  24.5  31.9  3.6  4.5  100</td>
<td>40.3  18.0  31.4  6.1  4.2  100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIO</td>
<td>52.5  23.7  18.7  5.1  0.0  100</td>
<td>48.2  7.6  25.9  11.7  6.6  100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BUS</td>
<td>47.1  11.8  17.6  11.8  11.7  100</td>
<td>54.0  8.7  25.4  5.6  6.3  100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS</td>
<td>50.0  23.2  21.4  0.0  5.4  100</td>
<td>42.9  1.3  42.2  8.4  5.2  100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EE</td>
<td>60.7  3.3  21.3  4.9  9.8  100</td>
<td>48.0  6.4  28.8  9.6  7.2  100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA</td>
<td>40.5  11.1  42.4  3.0  3.0  100</td>
<td>43.1  13.8  29.2  8.3  5.6  100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>total</strong></td>
<td>45.5  17.2  28.9  3.7  4.7  100</td>
<td>45.3  10.2  30.6  8.2  5.7  100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Other = clerical, technical and financial support. The symbol ? = unclassifiable.

It is interesting that these writers tended to make explicit the kind of help they received, with only 5% of the thanking acts unclassifiable from the context. This open disclosure points to the public nature of these texts and suggests that writers are not just addressing those they are acknowledging, who are presumably aware of their contributions. Instead they are conscious of a wider professional audience of academics and examiners with the power to influence the reception of the dissertation and perhaps the future of its writer. Here, then we see genuine gratitude tinged with impression management as the writer represents him or herself as both a plausible researcher and a sympathetic individual.

**Acknowledging scholarly support: the construction of a professional identity**

In all disciplines academics received the most mentions while academic assistance and access to data were the most mentioned forms of assistance. Overwhelmingly such acknowledgements are offered to senior academics, not only dissertation supervisors, but others within students’ professional communities who had mentored or believed in them, taught them, provided intellectual guidance, assisted with conference papers, or contributed in other ways. They were teachers, members of the student’s dissertation committee, and occasionally even examiners. Mentioning these people clearly foregrounds the activities which structure the student’s intellectual and academic experiences in undertaking the research, but they also represent strategic choices related to ‘getting done’ with the thesis by crediting influential academics and favourably representing the writer.
Supervisors

Supervisors play a major role in graduate research at both masters and doctoral levels and are always mentioned, and almost always before others, giving them a primacy which reveals the intellectual, and often emotional, obligation writers often feel to their supervisors:

*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’d definitely include my supervisor. His ideas has contributed a lot to my project.*  
(AL MA interview)

Occasionally these acknowledgements appear rather double-edged (2), but they are generally sincere, ranging from the succinct (3), through the blandly formal (4), to the eulogistic (5):

(2) I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Mohammed Khalifa for his relentless supervision and guidance.  
(CS MSc)

(3) I am profoundly indebted to my supervisor, Dr. James Kaising Kung, who was very generous with his time and knowledge and assisted me in each step towards the completion of the thesis.  
(PA PhD)

(4) I, Chui Mei Ling, would like to express my sincere thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Richard Y. H. Cheung, for his continuous guidance and support.  
(Bio PhD)

(5) It is with great pleasure that I offer the most heartfelt thanks to my supervisor, Prof. Fu-Shiang Chia, for his unconditional and infinite support throughout my PhD. study. Prof. Chia always demonstrate a positive attitude towards my research and career goal. He trusts me, believes my abilities and gives me all the autonomies. I deeply apologize to him for all the stupid things I did and all the troubles I caused in the past three years. Thank for his forgiveness and understanding. Thank you very much, Prof. Chia, for sharing with me your wisdom and experiences in science and daily life. It certainly benefits me in the rest of my life. You are my teacher, my friend, my example and my idol.  
(Bio PhD)

Academics received the highest proportion of thanks from students working in biology and engineering, and this was particularly marked in the masters’ texts. The doctoral acknowledgements revealed a considerable skew to supervisors. Over 70% of all mentions to them were in the Ph.D. texts in the hard
knowledge disciplines as writers often thanked them for several kinds of support. The predominance of supervisors in these acknowledgements is perhaps due to their greater involvement in the students’ experience of graduate research in the sciences. In hard knowledge fields, for instance, it is not unusual for a graduate student to be taken on as a member of the supervisor’s research team and to carry out tasks allocated and watched over by the supervisor which leads to a PhD.

The professor’s role in selecting the research topic, determining the methodology, providing resources, and overseeing the direction of the research is crucial. Even where the student has more independence, supervisors have the breadth of knowledge of fast moving fields to guide novice researchers to do-able problems related to current developments (Belcher, 1994; Prior, 1998). Lab-based research groups tend to be more closely-knit and supervisors have more regular contact with their students and so have greater involvement in guiding and overseeing the doctoral student’s work. In softer domains, on the other hand, such contextual imperatives tend to be more relaxed, so the choice of topic is both more open and, once chosen, more amenable to a range of different approaches. Research for students may be a lonely and autonomous endeavour which is frequently conducted at a distance or in circumstances where the supervisor’s assistance is mainly restricted to bursts of involvement at the beginning and end of the process (Becher, 1987). In between, students are often left more to their own devices with solitary reading and infrequent meetings with supervisors. These different working practices were reflected in the some of the interview responses:

_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)

_In my research I work closely with my supervisor. He has funding for what I do and he is responsible for the lab. The research cannot be done without the professor._

(Bio PhD interview)

_I think most of the help is at the beginning. Now I get feedback on drafts from my supervisor who would comment on language and ideas. I doubt, however, if we should entirely depend on our supervisors at this level of study, supervisors are busy after all. As there are not many people who would like to read the thesis draft, so I think we should be mature enough and to be considerate._

(AL PhD interview)
Other academics

In addition to supervisors, recognition to other academics is common in these acknowledgements. Once again, these largely tended to be senior scholars who may have played a teaching or advisory role, but they also included help provided by fellow students, colleagues and other peers who provided feedback and critical comments, discussed ideas, or assisted with analyses:

(6) My colleagues, Ms HO Sze-man, Ms Yu Wing-kam, and my classmate, Mr. Wai Kam-hung, are also very kind indeed for forming the odour panel in assessing the selected refuse collection points.  

(Bio MSc)

I would like to thank K. K. Choi, statistics consultant in the Statistical Consulting Unit of the Management Department at this university, for suggestions on part of the statistical analyses involved.  

(AL PhD)

Special thanks must also be given to Dr. Edwin L. C. Lai. He showed great interest in my topic and concern about the progress of the dissertation. The books or articles he recommended me to read are very conducive to modifying the model.  

(Bus PhD)

Significantly however, those mentioned are more often individuals in whose patronage may lie the seeds of a career strategy. This acknowledgment of senior professionals is more prevalent in the PhD texts and in the hard disciplines, where the mentoring of junior researchers has a stronger tradition and career paths more directly emerge from the visibility of a research group, the prestige of a supervisory panel, and the patronage of key figures in close-knit professional networks. Acknowledgements can be a coin in the reciprocal dynamic of debts and obligations which Ben-Ari (1987) suggests is central to the continuity and cohesion of the professional community. Acknowledgements potentially announce a relationship binding author and acknowledgee in a mechanism of mutual indebtedness which can benefit both parties over a longer term: the supervisor offering the guidance and benevolence of an established academic and the writer the esteem and loyalty of a grateful mentee. So while Masters students may see an acknowledgement to their supervisor and committee as a closure, a ritual signing-off on a relationship; for the PhD graduate this relationship may be just beginning.

Because of the increasing specialisation of both research and funding, an engineer or scientist anticipating an academic career depends heavily on the protection and goodwill of established figures for gain-
ing post-doctoral grants, a lab to work in, or an initial teaching position. Mentioning key figures can therefore gain the writer important credit:

*The acknowledgement is an important section for creating good impression.*

(EE PhD 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)

*Some of the comparative results are from other labs and I will put these people in the acknowledgements. Some of these are from important people in the field and it is a good idea to include them.*

(Bio PhD interview)

Who the writer studied with, however, also remains an important status marker for those in the soft fields, where it may be immediately useful to appropriate some of the status of influential figures by associating the text, and its writer, with them. These examples of apparent ‘name-dropping’ in applied linguistics of individuals only marginal to the research help to illustrate the point:

(7) I would like to thank Prof. Chris Candlin for his support and time. I would like to thank Prof. Vijay Bhatia for his kind help as my reliable consultant.

(AL MA)

Thanks to Professor Jack Richards for admitting me into the Department, as it has been a most vibrant and healthy environment for doing academic work.

(AL PhD)

This strategic manoeuvring becomes more obvious, of course, when extended to those who have a direct influence on how the thesis itself might be received, such as examiners:

(8) I would like to thank Dr. K.P. Chui, my internal examiner, and Dr. D.Y. Lai, my external examiner, who toiled through my thesis.

(CS MSc)

My special thank goes to my external examiner, Dr. R. Dorfman for her kindness and patience in going through my manuscript.

(PA PhD)

I also wish to express my gratitude to Professor Nelson Fok, Professor Ping Shui and Dr. Ho C. Law for their kind acceptance to sit on the examination committee.
Symptomatic of this complex interplay of the interpersonal and the strategic are naming practices as writers seek to simultaneously align themselves with well-known or influential academics and to display their respect for them. The form a name takes in acknowledgements, like those named, helps link the author’s private sphere of mentors and social affiliations to the recognition of the individual as a public figure. 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 occasionally this explicit marking of respect leant to the excessively formal:

(9) The author wishes to thank the dissertation supervisor, Dr. Chen Sze Hui, Associate Professor and Acting Head of Department of Biology, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) for the latter’s considerable assistance and insightful comments.

(Bio PhD)

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

(EE MSc)

As Giannini (2002: 21) points out, this helps to appease what Brown and Levinson (1987) call the contributor’s ‘positive face’, or desire for recognition and approval, by reminding readers of the acknowledgee’s status, while also signalling deference to the academic community by recognising its norms and hierarchies.

*Participants and providers*

Beyond immediate academic support, dissertation writers are dependent on the cooperation or direct assistance of those they study or who provide clerical, technical and financial help. Once again there are disciplinary and degree differences regarding who is acknowledged, with a higher proportion of thanks for access to data in the Masters texts, perhaps because these tend to contain a more restricted range of categories. The social sciences are relatively dependent on instrumental support and access to documents and subjects, while in the science and engineering acknowledgements greater mention is made of technical and financial support and of those who provided materials and unpublished data.
Researchers in the sciences and engineering fields, and some students in business studies, are particularly reliant on expert backup and as a result technicians, lab assistants, computer wizards, funding agencies, and employers are frequently mentioned, usually as individuals but often as groups or institutions. Around 11% of all acknowledgements referred to these kinds of background support which underlie every research project but are infrequently mentioned within the dissertation itself. Unlike the Masters students, the PhD acknowledgements rarely addressed clerical assistance, but often mentioned technical and, more frequently, funding support. Once more, we can see the textual construction of an academic self in these apparently innocent appreciations from a grateful graduate. The detailing of thanks for 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 therefore be a deserving candidate for further honours.

While the writer may feel obliged to refer to his or her funding agency, an examiner is unlikely to remain unimpressed by the writer’s obvious confidence and undoubted worth:

(10) This project was generously supported by funding from Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s Staff Development Committee. Support has been forthcoming, too, from Cathay Pacific Airways in the form of complimentary air travel, which has allowed me to attend a number of overseas conferences and thereby bring the research to the attention of a wider audience.

(AL 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 had an oral presentation on ”Co-composting of chicken litter and yard trimmings: effects of aeration frequency and spatial variation”

(Bio PhD)

Similar rhetorical intentions perhaps lie behind acknowledging individuals for organising conferences, reviewing articles, and collaborating on publishing projects. Particularly prevalent in the sciences, where work practices are more likely to transcend the immediate research site and offer greater oppor-
tunities for collaboration in research papers and conference presentations, such gratitude clearly serves
to enhance the writer’s professional credentials:

(11) A special acknowledgment is extended to Y.K. Leung at Stanford University for providing spreading resistance analysis and to Prof. Simon Wong for reviewing my IEDM paper.

(EE PhD)


The assistance provided in granting access to the data required for successful research displays far more disciplinary variations. The creation of hard knowledge is heavily dependent on the collaborative exchange of materials, information, and unpublished results which enmeshes the researcher into networks of reciprocal obligations. Here, then, credit for ‘access’ tends to be granted to other academics for furnishing preliminary findings, supplying article pre-prints, making data collection instruments available, and so on. In the human sciences, on the other hand, the most important source of access is that provided by the participating subjects themselves, often acknowledged, usually in final place:

(12) 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. (PA PhD)

Finally, I am most indebted to the 517 companies that were willing to return my questionnaire with their responses. (Bus PhD)

While subjects themselves are unlikely to read the text, quite subtle rhetorical intimations of professional commitment and academic competence can be communicated to professional readers, hinting at the authority and involvement of the writer and of trials overcome. This example from a qualitative applied linguistics thesis into the discourse of the underclass of Filipina maids in Hong Kong is perhaps more effusive than most, but underlines the point well:

(13) I hope this work has given justice to the voices from the margins. 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. I also include those whose search for life's better promises have led them to the classrooms of the YMCA where I have had the opportunities to share moments, outside and inside classroom sessions, that have been made unforgettable by their laughter and tears. And the many nameless others whom I have met in countless encounters whose lives have touched and enriched mine in ways that I would find hard to articulate. (AL PhD)

This account of the rapport established between researcher and subjects graphically testifies to the intimate relations and a political commitment that might not be possible to include so explicitly in the main text. This not only testifies to the hardships and commitments of ethnographic data collection, but to a political stance and the insights of someone who attained the status of an insider.

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 the analysis shows that acknowledgements are not simply random checklists of useful people or institutions. They also allow writers to represent some of the procedures and practices which have gone into the dissertation and so present a competent professional identity. They portray 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, academics and other experts helps to communicate the authenticity and plausibility of the research and the skill of the writer. This, then, is a site where writers can textualise themselves as autonomous intellectuals worthy of respect, familiar with the norms and practices of their discipline, and deserving of the qualification sought.

Acknowledging friends and family: the construction of a social identity

While I have discussed the ways that these students carefully created a disciplinary situated persona in their acknowledgements, the fact that almost 40% of the thanks in the corpus were to friends and family members suggests that the genre is not simply an opportunity for political strategising. Acknowledgements also provided these students with the chance to mention what they considered to be decisive influences on the processes of completing their research. These influences extend beyond the public
worlds of the academy to the private forces shaping their response to those influences, often alluding to the tensions and difficulties experienced in graduate study:

(14) I should thank my dear parents and husband. Though they are thousands of miles away from me, their continuous encouragement, silent concern and endless love converge to my momentum to work hard and achieve the best I can. 

(Bus 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.

(PA PhD)

I want to thank my girlfriend, Ms Grace Chang. Without her support, I do not think that I could overcome the difficulties during these years.

(AL PhD)

The category of ‘moral support’ in Table 3 includes all expressions of thanks for encouragement, friendship, sympathy, patience, and care. Such expressions are unevenly distributed across the Masters texts and are overwhelmingly found in the more liberal social sciences of applied linguistics and social work. These dissertations tend to be considerably lengthier than those in the other disciplines and perhaps involve greater isolation from other students in their creation, factors which might make personal support more important. The PhD students are far more likely to recognise the significance of human concern in sustaining their long hours of study and writing. Sometimes this recognition extends to the encouragement provided by supervisors and mentors, but friends and family predominate, providing an opportunity for writers to inject the personal into this public space:

I think we should not only be thankful for intellectual help, but also for moral 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)

It is also appropriate to thank for spiritual support, so I’d also include my friends in church and family members.

(Bio PhD interview)

Friends and family members tended to be thanked succinctly, a brevity often in stark contrast to the lengthy tributes offered to supervisors and academics, and to be mentioned after academic thanks (Hyland, forthcoming). There was also a surprising use of full names for both friends and non-
academics, with over 90% in each category identified in this way, occasionally with an honorific. Family members too were often mentioned using the full form of their name, with only two cases of first name reference in the entire science corpus. In the PhD dissertations the full name pattern accounted for three quarters of all acknowledgements to family:

(15) My personal thanks to Miss Katherine Ng for friendship and help. (EE PhD)

Last, I would like to say thanks to my lovely spouse Melody, Wong Wai Fong for her patience during my study and research period. (PA MA)

The last, but not the least, I thank from the bottom of my heart, my parents, Mr. Lun Wai-Kan and Ms. Yeung Nga-Mong, for their wholehearted supports of my scholarly endeavors and for always being there when I need them. (Bio PhD)

These naming practices mirror Swales and Feak’s impressions of US practices, with First Name + Family Name predominating. The decision to refer to family and friends by full names in this way is perhaps related to writers’ perceptions of the formality of the genre, a desire to make a *formal* and almost ritually ceremonial acknowledgement for services received. But it also once again draws attention to the public nature of this discourse and an intention to ensure that the recipient is clearly identifiable by a professional readership for the credit owed to him or her. This is in marked contrast to the few intensely personal acknowledgements in the corpus which carry the obvious sincerity of the thanks by addressing an actual reader directly by his or her first name only:

(16) I owe immeasurable thanks to my best friend. Thank you very much, Stanley, for your infinite supports, round-the-clock services, emergency help, intellectual contributions and all other things that I forgot. (Bio PhD)

Thanks to all my friends, especially for Vivian who is my best friend in the graduate school. Her friendship is much cherished. (PA PhD)

However, for some students the acknowledgements is a place to address only scholarly readers for academic things. It is because of this public and perhaps rather ritualistic character of the genre which made them reluctant to include family and friends at all:
I thanked mainly those who have actually helped in my project. I didn’t include my family. I don’t feel comfortable to thank my family. I’m not sure why, but I just feel uneasy to do so, maybe it sounds insincere. (PA PhD interview)

I think it is ok to thank family and friends in writing a thesis, but I didn’t include them. I think it is a personal style and I expect my family and friends to understand I’m grateful to them even if I don’t put them in. (Bio MSc interview)

I think we should only thank our family in writing a book, I mean, writing a thesis is not a great achievement. (Bus MA interview)

However, in thanks to family and friends we see the writer’s expression of a personal self and a recognition of contributions beyond the academic. Here writers are able to present themselves as individuals with lives and relationships outside the pages of their manuscripts. They become more human and sympathetic to readers and therefore more deserving of consideration. Equally, these acknowledgements allow writers to demonstrate their recognition of ethics and ideals shared by the reader, affirming their commitment to values such as modesty, generosity and gratitude which are prized by academic communities as the public face of their discipline.

If encouragement and guidance are the main themes of acknowledgements to academics, underlying those to family and friends is human care and concern, although thanks was not limited to human sources:

(17) I would like to thank God for giving me the strength and sustaining me through this whole course. (CS MA)

First, I thank God’s guidance so that I can have the opportunity to study and complete this thesis. During the course of my study, I have lost hope and felt disappointed many many times. It was God who granted me serenity, courage and wisdom to continue. (CS PhD)

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 Written Communication reviewer mentioned 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, also projects a social persona as the strategic choices regarding the textual construction of gratitude are related to the strategic choices involved in careering.

The invocation of spiritual help in writing a dissertation perhaps testifies to the kinds of pressure research students often feel subject to, but more broadly, as with thanks to friends and family, it also contributes to a more rounded picture of the writer. Here we see acknowledgements as the bridge between the professional and the personal. References to those outside the academic world allow writers to break free of the constraints of the anonymous research rhetoric which has enmeshed them for the duration of the study to convey a sense of themselves as social individuals. So the apparent anomaly of recording thanks to those outside the academy in a text directed exclusively to those within it is explained by the fact that here writers can express what was hidden in the pages of the thesis: a view of a person not limited to an academic persona.

**Some observations and directions**

Acknowledgements are sophisticated and complex textual constructs which bridge the personal and the public, the social and the professional, and the academic and the lay. Their widespread use in postgraduate dissertations across different fields reflects their importance to students and underlines their considerable significance in scholarly discourse. This is perhaps the most explicitly interactional genre of the academy, one whose communicative purpose virtually obliges writers to represent themselves more openly. It is also a genre which allows readers to peer behind the carefully constructed façade of research texts to see a human writer with a real identity enmeshed in a network of personal and academic relationships. Here the writer can present a self disentangled from the complex conventions of powerful academic discourse types and reveal a real individual coping with the perplexing demands of research and overcoming a myriad of contingent issues which conspire to overwhelm the project.

Yet despite this relaxation in the authorial roles, purposes, and writer-reader relationships of the research genre, the choices available to writers of acknowledgements are not entirely arbitrary. Acknowledgements are not mere lists of thanks to a random group of people for miscellaneous services. There are clear patterns in the texts and discernable constraints acting on their writers. As in the dissertation
proper, the problem for students is to demonstrate an appropriate degree of competence and intellectual autonomy while recognising readers’ greater experiences, knowledge of the field, and influence over the fate of the text. As a result, acknowledgements can play an important rhetorical role in promoting a competent, even rhetorically skilled, scholarly identity while signalling important professional connections and relationships as well as the valued disciplinary ideals of modesty, gratitude and appropriate self-effacement.

The analysis suggests that the textualization of gratitude reveals social and cultural characteristics, an intimation of disciplinary specialisation within a broad generic structure. It remains to be seen whether there are distinct Hong Kong features at work here but, much like the dissertation itself, disciplinary field rather than national characteristics is likely to be the strongest determinant of the shape this genre takes (Johns and Swales, 2002). The public display of thanks is shaped by larger forces and interests than simple thanks, and is mediated by disciplinary preferences, personal gratitude, and strategic career choices. We can see here one way which postgraduate writing represents a situated activity. Writing a dissertation does not stand alone as the discrete act of a writer but emerges as a stream of activity which weaves together the personal, the interpersonal, and the institutional, and which often continues beyond the completion of the text, through the patronage and loyalty signalled in this genre, to a future career.

Acknowledgements, then, are intimations of the shared ways of understanding experience, representing a window into the personal worlds of student writers and the processes of engaging in the disciplines. In these texts we glimpse students’ disciplinary life-worlds, the ways their experiences of community work patterns and organisational affiliations are reflected in those they choose to recognise and what they recognise them for.

While this paper begins to suggest something of these rhetorical characteristics, the picture is incomplete. This has been a textual study and there are opportunities to dig deeper into the meanings acknowledgements have to those who write and read them and to those they include. If there are social consequences of the rhetorical choices students make in their acknowledgements and in whom they choose to include and omit, then 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. It is also possible that exploring the potential impact of other situational factors, such as the author’s age, gender, seniority, and publishing experience, may reveal interesting differences. More also needs to be done to investigate what Swales and Feak (2000) call “elegant variation” and the ways that gratitude is non-repetitively realised. Finally, and most importantly, we need to see this genre as a significant site of rhetorical engagement; a place where writers’ draw on linguistic resources to promote themselves and their contributions, and where analysts can learn how students understand their participation in the research and discourse practices of their disciplines.

References


1 Except where permission has been given by acknowledgees to use their real names, all names in the corpus examples have been changed to protect anonymity.