

Comparing Dissertations Acknowledgment Pattern of Malaysian Post Graduates

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Received: June 12, 2017

Accepted: September 21, 2017

ABSTRACT

Writing acknowledgment for an academic dissertation may reveal not just a person's depth of gratitude, but also order of priority as well as personal beliefs. This study in particular examines acknowledgement in Malaysian postgraduate's dissertations by focusing on the structure of Masters' dissertation acknowledgements. The purpose of this study is to examine Malaysian post graduates' acknowledgement patterns, identify insertions of religious element as well as find other distinctions in the pattern that may make it similar or distinctive to other findings found by other researchers. The method of this study is by the comparison of structure. The results show that there are similarities, but also some differences between the patterns studied that may be due to cultural considerations.

KEYWORDS: Acknowledgement Pattern, Distinctions, Similarities, Indirect Rhetoric, Post Graduates.

INTRODUCTION

Writing a dissertation is hard work and one is never completed without assistance from others. Thus, it is only right and proper to acknowledge these assistance and this action is a seemingly agreed-must-have-component of dissertations everywhere. Dissertation acknowledgement writers though, are limited, in the sense that they are only able to write about only limited number of pages of acknowledgement per dissertation. Being that most people only have one or two Masters or Doctoral degree dissertation to produce in one lifetime, this renders the writing of acknowledgement as a complicated task due to the fact that most writers tend to want to thank everyone. Nevertheless, this complicated task is made easier by the fact that there is actually a common sense of agreement on the proper structure and content of the thesis acknowledgement. Studies done by [1-2, 9, 12-13, 6-7] are examples of researches done previously involving the structure of acknowledgement. With most of those studies, it begun when in [4] study proposed a move that tried to define the generic structure of acknowledgement. The proposed move became a popular method of analysis and led to the production of other researches highlighting acknowledgement as a genre of writing. Earlier research like one did by [3] which contrasted native and non-native acknowledgements, also becomes a source of reference for examining how one genre of writing can be similar and different with and from each other. In [3] in particular established the general idea that generic frameworks reverberate across linguistic borders, but also reinforce the national proclivities of the disciplinary communities they serve.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Analysis of acknowledgement writing whether by its structure or its linguistics features is a field of study within the Contrastive Discourse Analysis. Earlier proponents of this study are distinguished figures such as John Malcolm Swales and the American Applied Linguist John Kaplan. Their work nurtured interest in the study of contrastive discourse analysis and led to the growth of many discourse based researches. Swales's work in particular increases attention to other academic genres as many researchers try to apply his suggested idea genre as consisting of a framework. They try to come up with a different framework that best explain their studied genre of writing [8]. In [4] framework is one such example. When Hyland proposed his generic structure model of acknowledgement pattern in 2004, his model provides a standard to which written acknowledgement are compared to. From his model, various other researches began to compare and develop a more precise idea of the schematic structure of acknowledgement patterns. In his article, Hyland, himself admitted the necessity of studying acknowledgement written in other languages and with other situational factors such as age and experience. Thus, from that point on other studies of acknowledgement have explored other acknowledgement written by others from different situational backgrounds that may affect the finding that led Hyland to propose his generic structure model of acknowledgement pattern in 2004.

One such study was carried out by [1]. His study determined that the moves structures determined by Hyland's proposed scheme was influenced by the writers own academic values, socio-cultural practices and personal identity of the writer. This means that there are variations to the moves aside to the one proposed. In [1] in

particular found that participants of his study who were Moslems, inserted a ‘Thanking God’ moves within the acknowledgement. This for him supported the notion that cultural and social context may play a role in shaping the structure and content of an acknowledgement. A Malaysian study conducted by [9], which studied Malaysian Muslim student acknowledgements also noted the same finding as in [1]. In [9] also found that participants of her study actually begin their acknowledgement with a praying move instead of reflective comments on their research experience which is as proposed by [5]. Furthermore, a study done by [13] who studied acknowledgement pattern of Philippines, Chinese and American English variations reported that contrary to Hyland’s proposed move, no reflecting moves were found in this particular study while the announcing moves were underrepresented. Aside from that, in [13] also found evidence of religious element (Bible quotation) included in her participants’ acknowledgement. In [13] study significantly supported by [1, 9] findings noted that religious element inclusion in acknowledgement written by students from certain backgrounds. A study done by [6] which compared Iranian and non-native Iranian student’s acknowledgment also noted the existence of the ‘thanking God’ step. It also stated that in comparison, there is a significance difference between the Iranian natives and the non- native’s use of the ‘thanking God’ step. This according to the author could be attributed to religious conventions of Muslims Iranian who tend to start and end works by thanking God. A most recent study by [7] which studied acknowledgement written in Persian language by native speakers of Persian compared to acknowledgement written by native speakers of English also supported the finding. In [7] found that 80% of the Persian’s sample studied committed the ‘thanking God’ step. He too noted that influence of religion in the aspects of life of these writers and said that such finding can only be expected. In comparing the acknowledgement of the two different native speakers, he claims that both as much followed the norm as described in [4] scheme.

Apart from this significant religious element, there are also findings in other studies that indicate acknowledgement writing can be influenced and therefore have some variations when compared cross-culturally. In [12] who compared dissertations’ acknowledgement of Taiwanese authors based in Taiwan universities to Taiwanese authors based in universities in the U.S. reported that the acknowledgement pattern of these two Taiwanese authors acknowledgement mostly followed the structured proposed by [4] in 2004. However, in [12] study noted that one major difference between the two is the fact that among the Taiwanese university dissertations acknowledgment, the reflecting moves is comparatively little in number. Taiwanese in U.S based universities with numbers twice as high have reflective moves in their acknowledgement. Also found is the relatively low number of U.S based students who committed to steps 3.1, which is the claiming responsibility for shortcomings of the dissertation.

Another aspect of acknowledgement pattern study raised researchers is the notion of a scientific or a religious approach to writing dissertations. A comparative study between acknowledgement written by students in university in United Kingdom and students in a university in Ghana concluded that the ones written by the western authors are describable as science bound scripts whereas the ones by Ghana writers are religio-scientific scripts [10]. The finding is so because again the cultural way of life is different in both places of study and the matter of religion in majority of the cases have different priority.

The findings of all the researches thus far have indeed shown that there are points of similarities as well as point of differences between dissertations written acknowledgment. The differences are more apparent if we take into considerations the different social background of the writers. The fact that most of these findings reflected the same result would indicate that other future research would also be finding the same conclusion. While that may be true it does not minimize the fact that most of these studies are limited in their own selves, and thus future studies still need to be carried out because there are always gaps and information that can still discovered.

METHODOLOGY

The corpus compiled for this study is collected from 4 different public universities in Malaysia. The choice of selection is confined to the selections of thesis available in the e-print databases made available by these universities. In total, there are altogether 160 samples collected, 40 from each university and from each race namely, Malay, Chinese, Indians and others (Sabahan, Sarawakians and foreign students). It may be relevant to note here that the Malay writers are Muslims, the Chinese and Indian writers could be Buddhists, Hindus or Christians while others are not particularly identifiable. All the items selected were written in English. The samples selected were from various departments and faculties at the four universities. It was not possible to collect from other universities at that point of time as some universities did not make available the database to the public and some may have been too new, and therefore have limited number of post graduates students.

Table 1: The distribution of the sample

University	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others	Total
Universiti Sains Malaysia	10	10	10	10	40
Universiti Malaya	10	10	10	10	40
Universiti Teknologi Malaysia	10	10	10	10	40
Universiti Putra Malaysia	10	10	10	10	40
Total	40	40	40	40	160

Method of Analysis

All of the samples were analyzed by using the moves structure identified by [4] in 2004.

Table 2: Hyland [4] proposed generic acknowledgement moves

Move 1	Reflecting Move	Introspective comment on the writer's research experience.
Move 2	Thanking Move	Mapping credit to individuals and institutions
Step 2.1	Presenting participants	Introducing those to be thanked.
Step 2.2	Thanking for academic assistance	Thanks for intellectual support, ideas, analysis, feedback, etc.
Step 2.3	Thanking for resources	Thanks for data access and clerical, technical and financial support.
Step 2.4	Thanking for moral support	Thanks for encouragement, friendship, sympathy, patience, etc.
Move 3	Announcing Move	Public statement of responsibility and inspiration.
Step 3.1	Accepting Responsibility	An assertion of authorial responsibility for flaws/errors.
Step 3.2	Dedicating the Thesis	A formal dedication of the thesis to an individual(s)

The same data were then also compared to the other significant findings identified by other researchers which especially has religious connotations.

Table 3: Religious element/influence in acknowledgement content

Praying Move (Opening)	[9]
Thanking God Moves	[1, 6-7, 9]
Religious quotation	[11]

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The result of this study is as shown and described in the tables below.

RQ1: What is the move structure of MA thesis acknowledgements in English as written by Malaysian students of different races?

Table 4: Move structure compared to Hyland's [4] 2004 scheme

		Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others	Total, n (160)
Move 1	Reflecting Move	2	3	4	4	12
Move 2	Thanking Move					
	Step 2.1	9	13	10	12	44
	Step 2.2	40	40	40	40	160
	Step 2.3	37	40	38	34	149
	Step 2.4	40	40	40	34	154
Move 3	Announcing Move					
	Step 3.1	0	0	1	0	1
	Step 3.2	1	4	2	1	8

From the above table, it is found that the reflecting move is small in number for all Malaysian students of different races. Others had the highest move (4), followed by Chinese and Indian (3) and Malay had the least (2).

Out of 160 samples, all students made their thanking moves for academic assistance. The same went with the thanking move for moral support with the exception for others having short of 6 moves. Chinese had the highest (100%) thanking move for resources, followed by Indian (95%), Malay (93%) and others (85%). Thanking move for presenting participants did not carry even one third of the Malaysian students of different races acknowledgements. Chinese acknowledgement is 32.5%, others is 30%, Indian is 25% and Malay is 23%.

Also found for move 3, no Malay, Chinese and others Malaysian students committed to accepting responsibility for flaws/errors. However, only one Indian writer is having the exception. Dedicating writers' work to others is not popular among Malaysian students of different races. Only a small number dedicated their work.

RQ2: What religious elements were inserted into acknowledgement content of dissertations researched by Malaysians post-graduates students?

Table 5: Religious element inclusion

	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others	Total, n (160)
Prayers	12	4	10	2	28
Thanking God	126	0	5	15	36
Religious Quotation	0	0	0	1	1

From the data which we collected, we found that there were only 3 religious elements found in this study. There were the elements of prayers, thanking God and the elements of the religious quotation. Out of 160 samples, there were only 28 (17.5%) samples stated the element of Prayers in their acknowledgements. While, 36 (22.5%) samples stated the element of Thanking God and only 1 (0.6%) sample had the religious quotation element written in his/her dissertation acknowledgement.

RQ3: What are the other variations that can be detected in Malaysian post -graduates students acknowledgement as compared to Hyland's proposed scheme?

Table 6: Distinctive traits not fitting Hyland's 2004 scheme

	Malay	Chinese	Indian	Others	Total, n (160)
Lack of reflecting moves	2	2	3	9	16
Lack of announcing moves	1	4	3	1	9
Repetitive steps					
Move 2					
Thanking Move					
Step 2.1	9	13	10	12	44
Step 2.2	40	42	40	40	162
Step 2.3	37	48	38	34	157
Step 2.4	42	48	40	34	164
Hope, wishes and prayer	6	1	1	1	9
Religious quote	0	1	0	0	1
Named	0	2	0	0	2

The findings of the study also reported six other variants detected in those 160 acknowledgements. Those variants include the lack of reflecting and announcing moves in 25 (15.6%) acknowledgements, the insertion of hope, wishes, prayer and the writers' names, both in 9 (5.6%) and 2 (1.25%) acknowledgments respectively and only 1 (0.6%) acknowledgment with the insertion of poetry quote. However, a statistically significant variation was found to occur in the repetitive steps of thanking move (steps 2.1 to 2.4) which mostly found in the acknowledgements written by the Chinese as compared to other races.

By looking at the results shown in previous section, it is evident here that acknowledgement writing can vary and yet at the same time generally follow the structure proposed by [2]. While, this is not a surprising finding as other researchers have noted it as well [1, 9, 6, 12-13], it is important to highlight that with regard to Malaysian acknowledgement writers the style of writing is distinctive with the dispersion of religious element. Clearly here, culture plays a crucial role. Asian writers do not regard their endeavour as free standing. For some if not most, their academic endeavour would not have come to fruition without Divine's assistance. The same is finding is reported in studies done by [1, 6-7]. Although those studies specifically refer to Middle Eastern graduates' acknowledgement writers who are most likely Muslims, this particular study shows that religious value can also be found in acknowledgement written by non-Muslims. While the finding did not provide significant number of acknowledgement with religious element included, it must be noted that religious element was found to be included in some acknowledgement regardless of the racial background of the writer.

Furthermore, Malaysian post graduates dissertations acknowledgement also actually reflects a social norms and etiquette that also emphasized on family value along with other value such as academic obligation. Even though, there are slight difference in the number of steps for thanking moves for moral support compared to academic assistance, at some of the time it appears in the finding that the writers remembered to thank their family members first before thanking their academic supervisors. In some acknowledgements, thanking for moral support also appears repetitively even after the writer has already moved on to another step in the move structure. This is also true for other steps. There is a lack of uniformity in the order of use. Steps do not necessarily follow the order of academic first and personal last. Some of the times, the steps were even combined together whereby writers would thank their person or people for both academic and moral support. For example, "I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the chair of my supervisory committee ...I am grateful to her for being patient and encouraging to me not only in my thesis but also in my work and in my health".

Other than that, there also seems to a casual flair to the writing in some of the acknowledgements. For example, paragraphing may not signify new movement but rather new group of people to thank. The new group of people though may or may not be personal or academically related to the writer. The order is not fixed nor is paragraph membership. For example, "Special thanks to Prof. Dr, the Head of Oral and Maxillofacial Surgery Department and all the lecturers for their support and encouragement and made 4 years study in OMFS Department was a great moment in my career... To my beloved wife...and also to my parents...All sweet memories in this department were unforgettable."

In one acknowledgement, the thanking move even goes to the bus driver who is otherwise an absolute stranger to the writer. Lack of uniformity in these writings indicates that there is no fixed rules and structure that were adhered to in the process of writing this acknowledgement. According to [6], this could be because these students

only imitate acknowledgement written in other dissertation when planning to write their own. Thus, there are variety in their interpretation and implementation of writing

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There might be variation in acknowledgement pattern when studied across culture, it is nevertheless a writing that is supposed to be academic and therefore must portray a certain organized structure. If the variation is too varied, the genre will be in danger of losing its scholarly identity. Thus, writers of acknowledgement must always be made aware of the “rhetorical importance of this genre and the ways they can structure their acknowledgements to promote a competent scholarly identity. Writing dissertations acknowledgement is “not an opportunity for students to lay aside their academic persona and freely express themselves in inconsequential flourishes [4]. Regardless, academic conventions, socio-cultural expectations, personal dispositions, relationships with acknowledgees and individual writing styles may account for this diversity [11]. Thus, because it can be seen in the finding that the variety and the lack of uniformity in structure contribute to the variation in Malaysian acknowledgment therefore such nature of writing should be should subject of further studies.

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