

Acknowledgement Structure in Persian and English Theses and Dissertations: A Contrastive Genre Analysis

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Abstract

Acknowledgement appears at the forefront of the high-stakes academic genre of thesis/dissertation writing. Previous research shows the generic structure of acknowledgements written by native Persian postgraduate students contains a 'thanking-God move', absent in native English speakers' acknowledgements. In an approximate replication of Hyland's (2004) study of the generic structure of acknowledgments, we aimed to verify the occurrence, frequency, and variation of moves and steps in three small corpora of acknowledgments from six disciplines (applied linguistics, business management, computer science, electrical engineering, microbial biotechnology, & biochemistry). Each corpus contained 200 sample acknowledgements written in Persian or English. The authors were native Persian speakers and native English speakers. Fifty acknowledgements (100-400 words) were randomly selected from each corpus and analyzed using Hyland's model. Two coders carefully, content-analyzed, and coded the acknowledgments. Then the data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The results confirmed findings of previous research indicating that acknowledgements written by native Persian speakers (in Persian & in English) contain all the moves and steps defined by Hyland plus a new step called 'thanking-God' step. The use of this step was significantly different across Persian and English (84% in English & 100% in Persian; $X^2= 1.63, p \leq 0.05$) and across writers (84% Persian & 34% English; $X^2= 28.17, p \leq .05$). 'Accepting responsibility' and 'dedicating the thesis' were used least frequently by all writers, while 'thanking move' and 'reflecting move' were used most frequently. Pedagogical and conceptual implications are discussed.
Keywords: acknowledgment, genre analysis, M.A. thesis, move analysis, Ph.D. dissertation

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Introduction and Background

One of the major responsibilities of postgraduate learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) is to master 'academic discourse'. "English academic discourse is a clearly defined entity distinguished by a series of identifiable characteristics" (Bennet, 2009, p. 44). This type of discourse, as Bennet (2009) observes, is governed by certain principles including general principles (e.g., clarity, economy, objectivity, argumentative techniques, & caution about claims), text structure principles (e.g., planning, text structure, paragraph organization, coherence, & cohesion), grammatical issues (e.g., coordination & subordination, active/passive, tense usage, & modality), lexical features (e.g., diction & technical jargon), and other features (e.g., citation, plagiarism, & data presentation). To succeed as members of academic communities, postgraduate EFL learners need the strategically vital familiarity with English academic discourse including the different parts of theses and dissertations.

Recent instruction of and research on English academic discourse has been greatly informed and influenced by developments in Bakhtinian genre analysis. Scholars working in this tradition (e.g., Giannoni, 2002; Swales, 1990) define academic discourse as a particular genre system used by academic communities for distinct communicative purposes. This genre system includes a variety of text types used in academic communities. Based on Giannoni's (2002) summary, there are three major categories in the academic genre system:

- 1) primary genres (research article, journal abstract, conference abstract, oral presentation, thesis, dissertation, book, monograph, chapter, case report, review, & review article),
- 2) secondary genres (lecture, textbook, introductory text, post-introductory text, tutorial, & course description), and
- 3) occluded genres (grant proposal, recommendation letter, request letter for material/advice, application letter, submission letter, cover letter, research proposal, evaluation letter for tenure/promotion, referees' review of book/article, referees' grant proposal review, memo to dissertation committee, & editorial correspondence) (p. 3)

The present study looks at the genre of theses and dissertations, both of which fall under the category of primary academic genres. The terms *thesis* and *dissertation* are not internationally used in the same way. Whereas the terms *dissertation* and *thesis* are used for the final research work of M.A. and Ph.D. students in the British convention, respectively, it is the reverse in the American convention. In this study, we consider acknowledgments written by both M.A. and Ph.D. students in their final research projects. Located on the highest point of the 'academic genre ladder' (Swales & Feak, 2000), the dissertation is a high-stakes genre and probably the most important piece of writing which students perform in their academic studies (Hyland, 2004). Written academic discourse including theses and dissertations are used not only to produce texts representing an external reality but also to establish and maintain social relations (Hyland, 2003). Apart from the function of transmitting information about the research carried out by authors, thesis and dissertation acknowledgments also help establish interpersonal relations between students, supervisors, scholars, and readers. In fact, the acknowledgment section in theses/dissertations is a section where various manifestations of academic relationships can be observed and studied. Dating back to "a time when the benevolence and generosity of those in authority were a prerequisite for publication" (Giannoni, 2002, p. 4), acknowledging contributions of others has now become an essential feature of academic communication and writing, in general, and theses and dissertations, in particular (Hyland & Tse, 2004).

The acknowledgment genre is a significant academic genre particularly appreciated "by its positional prominence, by survey data, and by its widespread use in a range of forums" (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 259). Acknowledgments provide students with "a unique rhetorical space to both convey their genuine gratitude for the assistance and promote a capable academic and social identity" (p. 259). They "allow students to demonstrate their awareness of some central academic values such as modesty and gratitude, establish their credibility, recognize debts, and achieve a sense of closure at the end of what is often a long and demanding

research process” (Hyland, 2004, p. 304). As Ben-Ari (1987) argues, acknowledgements are important from a professional point of view since they enable the writer to not only manage his/her relationship with various individuals involved in the research project such as supervisors, families, colleagues, etc. but also build authorial credibility. Acknowledgments “support the research publication process but are not themselves part of the research record” (Swales, 1996, p. 45). Thus, acknowledgments do not simply contain a list of individuals to be thanked (Chan, 2015) but are “sophisticated and complex textual constructs which bridge the personal and the public, the social and the professional, and the academic and the lay” (Hyland, 2003, p. 265).

Research evidence on the genre structure of acknowledgments in different cultures is not yet inclusive to clarify possible cross-cultural generic variations in this area. For example, some studies (e.g., Alemi & Rezanejad, 2016; Abdollahian & Hashemi, 2013) have shown that Persian EFL writers consistently thank God in their theses acknowledgments, a step claimed to be totally absent in academic acknowledgments in other cultures. Since evidence supporting this claim is scanty, the present study methodologically replicated Hyland’s (2004) analysis of the moves and steps of acknowledgments for further verification of this finding on the structure of thesis/dissertation acknowledgments. The study aimed to not only verify this previous finding but also add to the wealth of the available data.

To this end, in the current study, the frequency of moves and steps in English and Persian acknowledgment sections of theses/dissertations written by native Persian-speaking writers were analyzed and compared with those written by native speakers of English using Hyland’s (2004) model. Since acknowledgments are not completely personal but reflect the writers’ linguistic and cultural background leading them to write with different thought patterns, (Cheng, 2012), this cross-linguistic/cultural examination of genre structure can be illuminating.

Review of Literature

Whereas a growing body of literature exists on genre analysis of thesis/dissertation introductions (e.g., Samraj, 2008; Soler-Monreal, Carbonell-Olivares, & Gil-Salom, 2011), abstracts (e.g., Friginal & Mustafa, 2017; Lorés, 2004; Martin, 2003; Samraj, 2005; Tanko, 2017), research article introductions (Bhatia, 1993; Lim, 2012; Samraj, 2002), titles (Haggan, 2004; Jalilifar, 2010), method (Cotos et al., 2017; Lim, 2011, 2017), results (Atai & Falah, 2005; Lim, 2010; Williams, 1999), discussion (Basturkmen, 2012; Holmes, 1997; Lim, 2008), and conclusion (Bunton, 2002; Loi, Lim, & Wharton, 2016), there is not considerable in-depth research on thesis/dissertation acknowledgments. A few studies have focused on different academic features used to establish and maintain such scholarly identity and academic relationships (e.g., Hyland, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2005; Kuo, 1999; Thompson, 2001). However, there is scanty research on possible cross-cultural variations in the generic structure of acknowledgment sections of these/dissertations. More specifically, based on expert views, “little is known of the ways other language groups or English L1 writers express thanks, the boundaries of personal choice, or of the influence of situational and personal factors” (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 274). The latest retrieved studies, addressing a single language, are less than two decades old (e.g., Giannoni, 2002; Hyland, 2003, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004). Moreover, not much is known about possible cross-cultural variations in acknowledgement sections of theses/dissertations in various international academic contexts.

Acknowledgments, as our review of the related literature shows, are used to perform a variety of functions. According to Hyland (2003), acknowledgments serve “as a means of demonstrating academic credibility, recognizing debts, and achieving a sense of closure at the end of a long and demanding research process” (p. 343). The role played by acknowledgments is related to both EFL learners and teachers. Learners can show truths about the path that they took to complete one of their most serious academic journeys, i.e., that of writing their thesis or dissertation. “For teachers, the fact that acknowledgments allow learners to both formally record gratitude and construct a credible and sympathetic identity located in networks of association suggests that this is a genre deserving of pedagogic attention” (Hyland & Tse, 2004,

p. 261). Acknowledgments provide student writers with an opportunity to appreciate the intellectual guidance, support, inspiration, moral care, and research offered to them by different agents including institutions, supervisors, informants, research committees, family members, etc. They bring authors into legitimate discourse communities and guide them for future academic interactions (see Martin & Rose, 2003). In short, the literature shows that thesis/dissertation acknowledgments play very valuable roles, not probably proportionately reflected in the volume of research devoted to them.

Seminal works on acknowledgments have attempted to explore their formal properties and show their common linguistic and socio-communicative patterns including the analysis of their moves and steps in the genre tradition. Dating back to 1972, one of the earliest attempts to explore the structure of acknowledgments was the work of Mackintosh who investigated the structure of acknowledgments and found that they were written to appreciate the help of different persons, access to data, and facilities (Tiew & Sen, 2002). Much more recently, Hyland (2003) studied the way acknowledgments are textualized and observed that they show rhetorical selections shaped by socio-cultural attributes. He identified both *the persons* (professors, friends, family, etc.) and *the activities* (scholastic assistance, moral care, specialized help, etc.) that were acknowledged in theses/dissertations at both M.A. and Ph.D. levels. He showed that ‘professors’ and ‘scholastic assistance’ were the most acknowledged ones comprising about half of the acknowledgments. In 2004, Hyland developed a content-based framework for acknowledgments by proposing three distinctive moves: *Reflective Move* (comment on the author’s experiences), *Thanking Move* (appreciation of academic help, resources, family, and friends), and *Announcing Move* (acceptance of responsibilities for flaws and the dedication).

Following these valuable attempts, another group of researchers have attempted to study the acknowledging behavior of native speakers of different languages mostly based on the move and step analysis carried out by Hyland (2004). Focusing on texts written in a particular language, this group of researchers have not considered any cross-cultural comparisons. Examples include studies on thesis/dissertation acknowledgments in English (Ben-Ari, 1987; Gesuato, 2008) and in other languages like Arabic and Chinese (Al-Ali, 2009, 2010; Cheng, 2012; Cheng & Kuo, 2011; Lasaky, 2011; Zhang, 2012; Zhao & Jiang, 2010).

Studies comparing cross-cultural variations in acknowledgements written by native and nonnative speakers of English are very rare in the literature. Because of the academic identity roles associated with acknowledgments, it is expected that there should be notable differences across languages and cultures in the way people write the acknowledgements. To us, there can even be individual differences: in a very strange case (probably aimed at showing journal gate-keepers’ and reviewers’ lack of due attention to the acknowledgment sections of research articles submitted for publication), Beni, Koochi, and Abadyan (2010) decided to write a very funny, totally meaningless acknowledgment that went unnoticed and was published! Generally speaking, expression and arrangement of acknowledgments are related to several different factors such as “socio-cultural values, social norms, discourse communities, relationships between acknowledgers and thanked addressees, identity and authorial credibility construction, and strategic career choices” (Chan, 2015, p. 178).

Finally, some studies have shown that there are even inter-disciplinary variations in acknowledging contributions to research. For example, research has shown that acknowledgements in soft sciences are significantly more elaborate than those in hard sciences (Giannoni, 2002). Acknowledgements are reportedly indicative of disciplinary practices in that scholars in hard sciences, compared with those in soft sciences, use more acknowledgements, which might be due to the greater financial and institutional support they receive (Cronin, McKenzie, & Rubio, 1993). Afful (2016) also found variations in acknowledgements written by students in the English and Entomology and Wild-Life departments of a Ghanaian university.

In addition to the above studies, the related literature includes some studies that particularly look at acknowledgments written by Persian EFL writers. Abdollahian and Hashemi (2013) used Hyland's (2004) model to analyze the acknowledgement sections of Ph.D. dissertations written by native Persian speakers in English and Persian in several soft science majors. They found no statistically significant differences between the generic structures used by these two groups. However, their analysis revealed two additional steps, namely, *thanking God* and *opening*, used by native Persian Ph.D. students. Twenty-five percent of the acknowledgements written in Persian included, in what was called the *opening step*, a Quranic verse, a prophetic saying, prayers on the prophet, and an invocation followed by the expression *and then*, bringing the author to the main acknowledgement body. Also, they reported the use of another move, i.e. *thanking God*, through which the dissertation writers expressed their appreciation for God's help. Their study, however, does not make use of acknowledgements written in English by native English writers.

Mohammadi (2013) also used Hyland's (2004) model to compare the generic move structures of Ph.D. dissertation acknowledgements written by native Persian and English speakers in a wide variety of fields including literature, translation studies, applied linguistics, history, sociology, library sciences, theology, and philosophy. He discovered the *thanking God* step used by a large number of native Persian speakers. It is noteworthy that he did not consider acknowledgements written in English by native Persian writers, providing no basis for direct comparison of acknowledgements written in English and Persian by native Persian writers. In a similar study (seemingly a replication of Mohammadi's work), Lasaky (2011) established a small corpus comprising acknowledgements written in English in applied linguistics and found the new *thanking God* step reported to be used in a statistically significant way by native English and native Persian writers.

In a later work with a remarkably similar methodology to Mohammadi (2013), Jalilifar and Mohammadi (2014) studied 140 doctoral dissertation acknowledgments written in Persian by native speakers of Persian and in English by native speakers of English in 7 soft science disciplines. They found four moves with some constituting steps and reported both qualitative and quantitative variations between the Persian and English texts. Their focus was on the role of beliefs in God in forming the structure of acknowledgements written by Muslims including Iranians. It should be noted that their study did not focus on English acknowledgements written by native Persian writers.

Alemi and Rezanejad (2016) analyzed the generic structure of dissertation acknowledgements written in Persian from various disciplines in both hard and soft sciences. The results of their work revealed that Iranian students use three main moves including 'framing', 'thanking', and 'closing' moves with six, eleven, and four steps, respectively. They found some minute differences between acknowledgments written in hard and soft sciences. Focusing on only Persian acknowledgments, their study does not provide a good platform for any cross-linguistic comparisons.

Finally, Kuhi and Rezaei (2014) carried out an analysis of the generic features of acknowledgments in applied linguistics written by native English writers and native Persian writers. They found that the use of *thanking God* step by native Persian writers was the main difference between these acknowledgements.

To contribute to this body of research, the current study attempted to analyze acknowledgement sections in dissertations and theses based on the descriptions of common moves and steps provided by Hyland (2003) and explore cross-linguistic variations between Persian and English. More specifically, the present study was guided by the following research questions:

1. In terms of frequencies of moves and steps, do thesis/dissertation acknowledgements written by native Persian writers in English differ significantly from those written by native Persian writers in Persian?

2. Is there any statistically significant difference between the frequencies of moves/steps in thesis/dissertation acknowledgments written by native Persian writers in English and those in the acknowledgments written by native Persian writers in Persian?

Methodology

The present contrastive genre analytic study focused on the description of moves and steps in acknowledgment sections of theses and dissertations written by native and non-native speakers of English following Hyland's (2004) model in an approximate replication attempt. Methodological choices in the current study described below were informed by available guidelines for the analysis of academic genres, in general, and acknowledgment analysis, in particular (e.g. Hyland, 2003, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Swales, 1990).

Corpus

Three small corpora of acknowledgements were constructed for the purposes of the study: 1) Thesis and dissertation acknowledgments written in 'Persian' by native Persian postgraduate students; 2) Thesis and dissertation acknowledgments written in 'English' by native Persian postgraduate students; and 3) Thesis and dissertation acknowledgments written in 'English' by native speakers of English. Each corpus contained 200 acknowledgements of varying lengths (100-400 words) from six disciplines, namely, applied linguistics, business management, computer science, electrical engineering, microbial biotechnology, and biochemistry. This original data were collected from two universities in Tabriz (for native Persian speakers) and ProQuest (for native English speakers from the US, England, & Australia) from 2012 to 2016. It should be noted that authors were considered native speakers of English or Persian based on names, affiliations, and biographical notes, and online data.

Table 1. *Distribution of acknowledgements selected for analysis*

Language	Author	Texts	Words
	Native	50	4795
English	Non-Native	50	5131
Persian	Native	50	4989
Total		150	14915

Fifty acknowledgements were randomly selected from each category as the final sample of texts considered for analyses, making a total number of 150 thesis and dissertation acknowledgements. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of the texts from each corpus. Each category of text type contained approximately 5000 words (Table 1).

Text Analysis

To analyze the selected texts, Hyland's (2004) model of 'move structure of dissertation acknowledgements' was adopted, according to which there are three major moves in acknowledgment sections of theses/dissertations: *reflecting move*, *thanking move*, and *announcing the move*. Definitions for these moves and their constituent steps are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Move structure of dissertation acknowledgements (Hyland, 2004, p. 308)

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

Move/Step Identification Procedures

The main task in the analysis of the data was the identification of moves and sub-moves or steps. In genre analysis, the unit of analysis is a rhetorical move, which may carry more specific communicative functions as reflected in steps (Swales, 2004). Following Hyland (2003), we considered any text segment (varying in size and shape), which was constrained by a specific discourse goal, as a move. In other words, the moves in the texts were considered as a functional unit used for some identifiable discursive objective (see Connor, 2000; Holmes, 1997). The researchers read the acknowledgments meticulously sentence by sentence, paying attention to the communicative purpose of each sentence. Suggestions for this type of analysis have also been made by Bhatia (1993) based on which sentences are chosen as the unit of analysis, and their communicative purpose becomes the identifying feature of each move. The process of identification of moves involved focusing on formal clues such as explicit lexemes and expressions, verb forms, markers, and sentence functions. Based on the descriptions provided by Hyland (2004), the communicative function of each fragment in acknowledgements was given priority in identifying the move. The move structure model was discussed and applied by both researchers to code the texts, and an inter-coder agreement of 93% was achieved. When there were disagreements in coding, the discrepancies were resolved by discussion. In sum, linguistic evidence, practices of previous scholars (e.g. Hyland 2003, 2004), and double-check comprehension of the acknowledgement texts were the main guidelines in the coding process.

Data Analysis and Results

To address the first research question concerning the moves/steps common in native Persian speakers' thesis and dissertation acknowledgments written in English and Persian, move analysis of acknowledgment sections of theses/dissertations was carried out. The analysis revealed some interesting results: 1) the coding and analysis of acknowledgements written by native Persian speakers (in Persian & in English) indicated that they contained all the moves and steps defined by Hyland (2004), and 2) an additional step called 'thanking-God' was also discovered. In his move structure model, Hyland (2004) had suggested a four-step thanking move. However, we needed to add a fifth step since a considerable number of the acknowledgements written by native Persian speakers in English and Persian included strings that fulfilled this function (N = 42, 84%: English; N = 50, 100%: Persian). Below are examples from the two types of acknowledgements where the author's communicative purpose was to thank God. These and other similar instances in our sample could not be taken as academic or moral support, nor could they be coded as thanking sources or participants directly involved in the research. Hence, they were coded as a new step, i.e., 'thanking-God'.

Corpus 1: Examples of acknowledgements written in English by Iranian writers

- 1) I thank God for helping me to complete my thesis.
- 2) First of all, I want to thank God for all the many blessings he has bestowed upon me, for giving me the opportunity to begin and finish
- 3) My heartfelt thanks go to God for his
- 4) First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to God: I thank God for all the wisdom and perseverance.
- 5) Thanks God for supporting me all the time.

Corpus 2: Examples of acknowledgements written in Persian by Iranian writers

- 1) سپاس ایزد منان را که الطاف بی کرانش را از من دریغ ننمود.
(I thank the holy God who did not withdraw His great favors from me.)
- 2) حمد و ستایش خداوند را که مرا در انجام این پروژه پژوهشی یارا بود.
(Praise and thanks go to God who helped me complete this research project.)
- 3) در ابتدا، نهایت سپاس خود را از خداوند باری تعالی دارم.
(First of all, I would like to express my unending thanks to the great God.)
- 4) اکنون که به لطف ایزد منان، این پایان نامه با وجود تمام موانع به پایان رسیده است ...
(In spite of all limitations, this thesis has now come to an end because of the mercy of our great God...)

Table 3. *Frequencies of the moves/steps used by native Persian speakers in English and Persian*

Moves/steps	Frequency (Percentage)		Chi-Square	
	English	Persian	Value	Sig.
1. Reflecting Move	35 (70%)	28 (56%)	.78	.677
2. Thanking Move	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	.00	1
2.1 Thanking God	42 (84%)	50 (100%)	1.63	.000
2.2 Presenting participants	22 (44%)	27 (54%)	.51	.774
2.3 Thanking for academic assistance	43 (86%)	45 (90%)	.18	.948
2.4 Thanking for resources	34 (68%)	31 (62%)	1.07	.584
2.5 Thanking for moral support	30 (60%)	29 (58%)	.66	.719
3. Announcing Move	18 (36%)	21 (42%)	.74	.692
3.1 Accepting responsibility	14 (28%)	14 (28%)	.34	.843
3.2 Dedicating the thesis	4 (8%)	7 (14%)	.88	.646

As can be seen from the results in Table 3, all native Persian speakers (100%) used the ‘thanking God’ step when writing in Persian, and 84% used this step when writing in English. In other words, native Persian authors thanked God as an obligatory step in their writing in both their mother tongue and English. The percentages of the use of this step (84% in English & 100% in Persian) were significantly different ($\chi^2=1.63, p \leq 0.05$).

The second research question probed possible differences between the moves/steps used in the acknowledgment sections written in English by native Persian speakers and those by native speakers of English. To this end, move and step frequencies were tabulated, and Chi-square tests were run in SPSS (version 22) to find any statistically significant differences. As Table 4 shows, ‘accepting responsibility’ and ‘dedicating the thesis’ were the least frequently steps used by both native and nonnative writers, while ‘thanking move’ and ‘reflecting move’ were the most frequently used moves.

Table 4. Differences in frequencies of the moves/steps used by native Persian and native English writers in English acknowledgements

Moves/Steps	Native English writers	Native Persian writers	Chi-square	Sig.
1. Reflecting Move	32 (64%)	35 (70%)	.407	.523
2. Thanking Move	50 (100%)	50 (100%)	--	--
2.1 Thanking God	17 (34%)	42 (84%)	28.17	.000
2.2 Presenting participants	25 (50%)	22 (44%)	.361	.548
2.3 Thanking for academic assistance	42 (84%)	43 (86%)	.078	.799
2.4 Thanking for resources	26 (52%)	34 (68%)	3.405	.065
2.5 Thanking for moral support	35 (70%)	30 (60%)	2.102	.147
3. Announcing Move	17 (34%)	18 (36%)	.174	.677
3.1 Accepting responsibility	12 (24%)	14 (28%)	.457	.492
3.2 Dedicating the thesis	5 (10%)	4 (8%)	.122	.727

Moreover, Chi-square analyses indicated a statistically significant difference between native and nonnative speakers of English in using the *thanking God* step ($\chi^2 = 28.17, p \leq .05$). More specifically, only 17 native English speakers (34%) thanked God while 42 native Persian speakers (84%) used this step.

Discussion

This study was an approximate replication of Hyland's (2004) study of the generic structure of acknowledgment sections of theses and dissertations. It explored the occurrence, frequency, and variation of moves and steps in three groups of acknowledgments: those written in Persian by native Persian speakers, those in English by native Persian speakers, and those in English by native English-speaking authors. Hyland's (2004) model, utilized for the contrastive genre analysis of acknowledgment texts, fitted the data (except for a minor step) and adequately explained the generic organization and communicative functions of strings in the selected acknowledgments. Strings which could not be assigned to any of the steps or moves specified in Hyland's model were classified as an additional step called *thanking God* based on their content. These strings could not be considered as expressions of gratitude for the moral support received from family and friends because they had already been mentioned as realizations of another step. Findings confirm the results of similar research by Iranian scholars (e.g., Alemi & Rezanejad, 2016; Jalilifar & Mohammadi, 2014; Kuhl & Rezaei, 2014).

This finding can best be explained in the light of cultural/ideological dimensions of genre. As Cheng (2012) observes, authors of acknowledgment sections are highly influenced by their cultural backgrounds in employing rhetorical devices to fulfill communicative functions and express their identities. Iranian students can rarely be seen to start a viva session, an academic presentation, a term paper, or in this case, a thesis/dissertation acknowledgement without mentioning and thanking God. This additional step is, to us, a reflection of how authors' ideology can alter an otherwise agreed-upon generic structure. Even though English acknowledgments written by Iranians included the *thanking God* step significantly less than Persian acknowledgments (84% versus 100%), the high frequency of the use of this step in both English and Persian texts clearly indicates how genre features may be transferred across cultures/languages.

Native Persian authors' use of *thanking God* step reflects Fairclough's (1995) view that the place of text production and its situational and socio-cultural contexts highly affect its generic structure. Castleton (2006) also confirms that social relations are regulated by religious percepts. To Castleton, such values are indistinguishable from religious values, and communicative practices tend to be derived from an inner need to satisfy religious beliefs. Individuals do not have to be either those who do favors or those who must

fulfill obligations for the thesis/dissertations writers to be acknowledged. They could be thanked because of religious obligations, and in this context, the obligation to see God as present in man's every act is very noticeable.

Similarities between the moves and steps used by native Persian and native English writers can be explained by a) possible similarities between the communicative purposes in the two contexts, and b) the effect of instruction by professors and imitation of acknowledgements written by native English writers.

The findings of the study revealed that the most frequent moves in acknowledgments written in English (by both native and nonnative speakers of English) were *thanking* and *reflecting* moves, while *accepting responsibility* and *dedicating* steps were the least frequently used steps. The *thanking-God* move discovered in the present analysis was not commonly used by native speakers of English. This finding also shows that genres can vary across cultures. More specifically, some generic variations can assumably result from writers' authorial backgrounds as well as the requirements of the language in which the text is produced. In other words, authors with different first languages write differently, and Iranian authors also write differently when they compose texts in two different languages.

Conclusions and Suggestions

The findings of the current study not only confirm the generic structure of thesis/dissertation acknowledgments described by Hyland (2004) but also show minor cross-linguistic and cross-cultural variations in producing the same genre. Familiarity with these variations can be illuminating for both research and pedagogy. As Hyland (2002) suggests, the mastery of genre knowledge would help students in becoming members of their disciplinary community. Bhatia (1997) also confirms that genre analysis provides novice writers with useful information about the conventions of a particular genre to enable them to produce more complex texts. With the awareness of genre practices, novice writers can gain long-term benefits from the explicit knowledge of genre conventions to ultimately produce more complex genres based on genre exemplars (Loi & Evans, 2010).

Compared to the considerable amount of research on oral compliments across different cultural settings, the literature on written acknowledgments is scanty. Future research in this area can shed more light on the contrastive genre analysis of acknowledgments by collecting larger corpora from a wider range of disciplines and first language backgrounds. This can provide opportunities to explore the effects of nationality, linguistic and cultural background, and academic discipline on possible variations in composing the acknowledgements.

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