Rhetorical Structure of Research Acknowledgment Sections in Master’s Thesis Manuscripts

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Abstract

This study was conducted to establish the rhetorical patterns of master’s thesis acknowledgment sections in different masters’ degree programs of one of the leading state universities in the Philippines. The analysis of the fifty-one (51) randomly sampled research acknowledgments revealed that the research acknowledgments from different programs follow the general framework proposed by Hyland (2004). However, some specific moves and steps in the acknowledgments sections under study are not consistent with the model provided by Hyland. This implies that the research acknowledgment section can be written in a variety of styles depending on the orientation of the writer.

Keywords: Rhetorical Moves, Acknowledgment Section, Thesis Manuscripts

Introduction

Like any other academic genres or subgenres, acknowledgments play a significant role in research publications. Acknowledgments represent an appreciation for certain personal, social, financial, technological, intellectual, and philosophical support offered by certain organizations, agencies, colleagues, advisors, academics, or family affiliates (Cronin, 1995). It provides the writers with a platform to convey heartfelt gratitude for the people who supported them to complete their work in a more formal approach (Dunams, 2010). As Ben-Ari (1987) asserts, this section is a unique textual structure governed by rules and conventions; thus, it is considered distinct from the main text of research. He further points out that acknowledgment sections are formulations that take an intermediate place between the internal contents of ethnography and the people and relations beyond it, and that they are both an introduction to the intellectual substance and a reconstruction of the external contributions that have been made to it. Hence, one should be knowledgeable enough on the fundamentals of writing research acknowledgments. As Hyland (2004) affirms, a lack of awareness in the construction of acknowledgments can lead to inappropriate expressions of gratitude, which may characterize the incompetence of academic and social identity of students who are aspiring to complete their graduate degree programs. The status quo then can lead to poor knowledge of acknowledgment configurations, which may cause inappropriate acknowledgment writing (Rofess & Mahmood, 2015).

Equally important, compared with other sections of theses, dissertations, articles, and books, acknowledgments have received less attention in the pedagogical environment.
Students most often copy what others have written with no good awareness of their purpose. Student research writers therefore, should be taught of the essentials of writing, which might affect how they utilize the moves/steps, lexical, and grammatical choices. In addition, identifying keywords and structural patterns used in theses acknowledgments can serve as a reference for the students to show them the possible word choices and structures. Additionally, most scholars in the field of genre analysis consider acknowledgment sections as immaterial. For Swales (2004) it is a “part genre,” and for Hyland (2003), it is “a practice of unrecognized and disregarded value” (p. 242) and that “its importance to research students have been overlooked in the literature” (p. 243). In the past research on genre, acknowledgments have been considered insignificant and generally disregarded types of the academic genre (Giannoni, 2002). Therefore, by revealing the generic structure and examining how the writers frame their thanking expressions in research manuscripts, the researchers hope to highlight the importance of this genre, add to the literature, and provide the students and their instructors with a comprehensive understanding of the genre, and finally help the students write impressive and proper acknowledgments.

To this end, the study aimed to provide descriptions through genre-based inquiry as to how acknowledgments are written in graduate school thesis manuscripts. It also aimed to probe as to how graduate school research writers write their acknowledgments in relation to various linguistic features (lexemes and syntax) that realize acknowledging acts. This undertaking is relevant as it can serve as a basis for intervention in teaching students and prospective research writers on how to write conventional and customized acknowledgments. This research can also offer insights to scholars and researchers which will result in a consensus of presenting and accepting the most applicable pattern in writing acknowledgments for academic purposes.

**Theoretical Framework**

The conception of this paper is anchored on Ken Hyland’s (2004) three generic structures (Reflecting, Thanking, and Announcing Move) in expressing gratitude in academic discourse.

Hyland first concluded that the generic structure of academic writing acknowledgments reflects alterations in different disciplines as well as patterns of national disciplinary communities. Recognizing this fact, he analyzed the rhetorical structure of the acknowledgment section written by MA and Ph.D. graduates from Hong Kong Chinese-speaking postgraduates. Expounding Swales’ (1990) CARS model to his study, Hyland identified reflecting move as optional move, thanking move as an obligatory move, and announcing move as an optional move. Since then, this model of rhetorical structure for acknowledgments has become the basis for all the later similar studies on acknowledgment. The detailed system of order for research acknowledgments consists of Move 1: Reflective move; Move 2: Thanking move having four sub-steps namely: Step 1: Presenting Participants, Step 2: Thanking for Academic Assistance, Step 3: Thanking for Resources, and Step 4: Thanking for Moral Support; Move 3: Announcing move with two sub-steps namely Step 1: Accepting and Step 2: Dedicating the Thesis.
Methodology

Data Analyses

Using the three-move model of Hyland (2004), we analyzed 51 acknowledgment sections of unpublished thesis manuscripts of graduate school students of the University of Southern Mindanao Graduate School. The research acknowledgment section served as the genre and corpus of the study.

Each research acknowledgment was labeled and evaluated for easy identification and interpretation in terms of their generic structures, linguistic choice, and acknowledgees. Sentences and paragraphs were analyzed if they indicate expressions such as words or phrases comparable to the indicators presented in Hyland’s model for the acknowledgment section. To analyze the corpus, every statement was coded and classified conforming to the rhetorical moves of research article acknowledgment of Hyland. To ensure the utmost confidentiality of the research writers, every thesis manuscript was coded with TMA1 to TMA51 (Thesis Manuscript Acknowledgment) to refrain from revealing the names of every researcher.

Data Sources

There were two main materials used in this study. The first material was the 51 acknowledgment sections of thesis manuscripts from various Master of Arts graduate programs such as Language Teaching, Educational Management, Extension Education, Industrial Arts, and Home Economics Education while the second material was the three-move model of Ken Hyland (2004) for acknowledgment which was used as the basis in analyzing the move structure of thesis manuscript acknowledgment section.

Results and Discussion

Move 1: Reflective move

In this move, writers normally utilize reflective comment on their research experience. This move relates the reader to the writers’ research undertakings that they have come across and the ordeals that they have surpassed and hurdled during research. The writers here tend to narrate their experience all throughout the research journey which usually involves a certain prophetic saying and direct quotation or proverbs. According to Hyland (2004, p. 49), this move is considered as “peripheral to the main purpose of the genre” which means it may or may not be included in the section. This move is optional since only 19 (37.25%) out of 51 used it. This step is illustrated in the following examples below.

We can only be said to be alive in those moments when our hearts are conscious of our treasure. (Thompson Wilder) TMA 12

Knowledge is empty save without labor. Labor is empty save without love. Love is empty save without others who willingly and selflessly share their thoughts, time, effort, resources in making this paper a success. TMA 37

Truly, the road to success is not an easy path. It squeezes our mental, emotional and physical strength drains the pocket as well. The outpouring of the spring of gladness and reward is priceless however. TMA 3
Move 2: Thanking moves

In this move, the writers give recognition to the people and institutions who became part of the completion and success of the study. This move has four steps wherein, mapping credit to individuals and institutions is done by the writers. This move provides readers the participants who are expected to appear in the acknowledgment texts based on the contribution made by people and institutions involved in the research. Move 2 has two consequent steps, namely: Presenting participants and Thanking for academic assistance.

Step 2.1: Presenting participants

In this step, writers convey appreciation to various individuals who served as participants and respondents of their study. This move is considered a conventional move since 46 (90.20%) out of 51 researchers used the step. The absence of this step can affect the full text since this step is principally textual wherein, the researchers are required to introduce the people to be thanked and that would be mentioned in the subsequent steps (Hyland 2004, p. 313). This is where the writer introduces the persons who are involved in the progress of the study. Some of the illustrations are the following:

*It gives me great pleasure in expressing my gratitude to all the people who supported me and contributed in making this thesis possible specifically to the students who served as respondents of the study.* TMA 14

*The researcher wishes to express his immeasurable and deepest gratitude for the help and support extended by the following persons who have contributed in their own ways to make this study possible. To the principals of the different divisions who became my participants.* TMA 18

*The successful completion of this manuscript was made possible through the invaluable contribution of number of people particularly, SHS teachers who served as the respondents of my study.* TMA 31

Step 2.2: Thanking for academic assistance

In this step, writers give thanks to the people who examined and gave constructive feedback to the research. Writers mention the name of the faculty and stakeholders in the academic institution for the scholarly support, concepts, and comments. This step is regarded as an obligatory step since it appeared in all the corpora analyzed. Hence, in the study of Al-Ali (2006, p. 707), this step is intended for those who have great involvement in inspiring or developing the research reported, and for those who have helped put the work into shape and form through their valuable concepts, insights, and views.

In realizing this step, mentioning expressions like valuable support, worthy suggestion, great knowledge is evident. These expressions are in the form of descriptive adjectives that function as attributive adjective phrase modifier. The following illustrations below are the realization of step 2.2.
Her intelligent and knowledgeable mentors for sharing their time, skills and expertise; TMA 11

My sincere thanks to the dynamic members of my thesis advisory and examining committee; Dr. Riceli C. Mendoza, Dr. Lawrence Anthony Dollente, Dr. Jacinta Pueyo and Dr. Consuelo Tagaro for generously sharing their time to offer valuable comments toward improving my work. TMA 14

Dr. Consuelo A. Tagaro, the dean of the Graduate School and chair of the panel as well as the panel members, Dr. Riceli C. Mendoza, Dr. Donnie M. Tulud, and Prof. Nora B. Bolences, my panelists for extending their time and professional expertise to patiently go through the content of my paper, for their constructive criticisms in order to refine this research which contributed much in improving this study; TMA 45

Step 2.3: Thanking for resources

In this step, writers convey gratitude for the support received from colleagues, participants, and those who avail or provide assistance. This includes data access, clerical, technical, utilization of facilities such as apparatus and libraries (Yang, 2012). This is regarded as a conventional step since it has 90.20% occurrence in the corpora.

The most frequently recognized resource was data access, clerical assistance, technical help, and financial support. Thus, the most distinctive expression used is for encoding, for lending, for granting, for sharing, and for letting where gerunds are used as objects of the preposition for indicating purpose. Below are the illustrations of this step.

To her parents, Mr. Diogenes C. Aguilar and Mrs. Rebecca S. Aguilar and siblings; Raiza, Kryza and McDaniel, for unending financial and emotional, and for the inspiration and unconditional love; TMA 5

To Hon. Onofre Respicio and other members of the LGU, for granting the LGU Scholarship Program for Teachers in the Municipality of Makilala; TMA 11

Kim, for encoding some of the stories needed in the study; Ateneo de Davao University Library for letting the researcher to use their graduate School unpublished thesis. TMA 20

Step 2.4: Thanking for moral support

Realizing this step, the writers give thanks to the persons who gave them moral support during the progress of the study. To realize this step, writers mention various persons whom they have an immediate affinity. In this part, the writers tend to express their heartfelt gratitude to their parents, wife/husband, children, siblings, and friends. Based on the result, the occurrence of this step is considered obligatory since it was evident in all the corpora analyzed. This occurrence according to Al-Ali’s (2006) can be attributed to the religious affiliations specifically, on the teachings of divine scripts like Quran (Quran 31:14) which states that the first thing that God enjoins upon man is to show gratitude to Him and to one's parents as he says: Show gratitude to Me and to thy parents.
In this step, abstract nouns like (love, care, support, prayers, encouragement, understanding, considerations, inspirations, and friendship) are common expressions used as an object of the preposition for indicating a benefit. This step is realized in the following samples below.

The researcher extends her warm love and care to her beloved parent, Mr. Braulio Q. Diaz Jr. And Rosalinda C. Diaz for their inspiration, guidance and encouragement to finish the degree. Gratitude is also express to her brothers, sisters and relatives who extended their moral support. TMA 1

And those persons whom the researcher failed to mention but contributed much to the success and the realization of this study, the researcher is sincere and grateful. TMA 9

Dear Parents. Lorenzo I. Alcantara and Mrs. Francisca Alcantara, for being the ultimate reason of not giving up, for the love, care and inspiration. TMA 18

His son, Brennxor Yaesle, for serving as his inspiration and for making his life colourful; TMA 23

**Step 2.5: Thanking God**

Realizing this step, researchers acknowledged God and expressed their appreciation for the help and provisions. Based on the result, almost all acknowledgments show evidence of Thanking God which usually appears in the last paragraph of the thanking move. As Al-Ali (2006) states, the inclusion of this step may be credited to religion which dominates researchers’ culture and belief. Moreover, this structure move is not evident in Hyland’s (2004) model structure for acknowledgment, which means this step is considered as a new reported structure in the acknowledgment section.

As can be gleaned from the result, this step can be regarded as a conventional step since 49 (96.01%) out of 51 researchers employed this step.

My outmost gratitude goes to Allah, Almighty for His kindness in blessing me with good health, strength and most importantly endurance to successfully complete my work on time. TMA 16

And most of all, to GOD for HIS providence financially, physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually. The success of this work would not be realized without HIS presence and guidance. TMA 23

Most of all to our Almighty God, the source of life and provider of all blessings. For the infinite guidance, protection, providence and wisdom for this piece of work made possible according to his plan. TMA 50
Move 3: Announcing Move

In this move, the researchers make a public declaration of accountability and inspiration through accepting responsibility and dedicating the thesis.

**Step 3.1: Accepting responsibility**

This is an affirmation of authorial obligation for imperfections or errors that might have transpired during the conduct of the study. This move does not appear in all of the research articles. Hence, it is considered a non-evident move.

**Step 3.2: Dedicating the thesis**

In this step, the writer formally offers the research work to an individual(s), mostly parents and family. Researchers who use this step in this section feel “they have something of great value to offer, if only symbolical for the ‘addressee’ as a reward for a unique effort” (Al-Ali, 2006, p. 40). However, this step is realized using mass dedications in all the acknowledgment sections analyzed. Markers like to all, to all persons, to them, and to all of them are used in stating dedication. This step is considered optional since 6 (9.8%) out of 51 employed this step. Below are the illustrations of this step.

*To all who contributed for the success of this endeavor, this study is wholeheartedly dedicated. TMA 3*

*Thus, this masterpiece is humbly dedicated. TMA 9*

*And to all persons not mentioned in the chapter who in some ways helped in the success of the pursuit, this academic accomplishment is humbly dedicated. TMA 13*

**Table 1**

| Moves in Acknowledgment section | Occurrences | Percentage |
|----------------------------------|-------------|------------|
| Move 1: Reflective Move          | 19          | 37.25%     |
| Move 2: Thanking Move            |             |            |
| Step 1: Presenting participants  | 46          | 90.20%     |
| Step 2: Thanking for academic assistance | 51 | 100% |
| Step 3: Thanking for resources   | 46          | 90.20%     |
| Step 4: Thanking for moral support | 51  | 100% |
| Step 5. Thanking God             | 49          | 96.01%     |
| Move 3: Announcing Move          |             |            |
| Step 1: Accepting responsibility | 0           | 0%         |
| Step 2: Dedicating the thesis    | 6           | 9.8%       |

*Note:*  0% - non-evident move  
< 60% - optional move  
> 60% - conventional move  
100% - obligatory move
The present study investigated the rhetorical pattern or the sequence of moves that occurred in the thesis manuscript acknowledgment of selected Master’s theses. Findings revealed that every thesis writer has his/her own pattern in expressing gratitude. It can be observed that the writers from the dataset we analyzed did not follow the moves proposed by Hyland in writing research acknowledgments. Thus, there were some moves that appeared to be optional and conventional. Few of the writers applied move 1 in writing their acknowledgments, while all of the writers applied two steps in move 2 which were steps 2.2 and 2.4. There were also some who used move 2.1 and 2.3, but only a few of them used move 3 which indicates that these moves are peculiar. The result further implies that there are one or more moves omitted in every acknowledgment which indicates that research writers follow various conventions in putting their research acknowledgments into shape and form.

It is observed also that most of the thesis manuscripts used the thanking move. Presenting the participants were in the initial paragraph, and some were in the second after the reflective move. Pattern PP, TAA, TMS, TR and TMS can be found in TMA27 and TMA28. Since some moves may occur repeatedly in every article, it means that some rhetorical patterns may also occur repetitively. This indicates that there is no universal pattern or format in writing acknowledgment in thesis manuscripts.

The move structures found in the corpus revealed that the writers do not follow any rigid move structure in writing their acknowledgments. Despite the fact that the Graduate School of the university has institutionalized a research manual for the researchers to follow still, most of the thesis writers seem to follow their own pattern, and their educational context does not affect how they write their acknowledgment sections. Hence, the findings of this study corroborate the result of Hyland (2003, 2004), Hyland and Tse (2004), and Zhao and Jiang (2010) on Chinese research acknowledgments, which also revealed that variations are evident in presenting moves/steps and in using linguistic signals even though, research writers share a mutual writing norm. Factors such as academic standards, English language learning experience, contextualized values, individual viewpoints, associations with acknowledgees, and distinct writing styles may contribute to such variety. Thus, the results of this paper also conform to the argument of foregoing researches which claims that acknowledgment section is constantly changing, unstable, and can be heavily influenced by the writer’s orientation. Hence, rhetorical practices and styles are dependent on the specific settings which are affected by the writers’ desired choices and value systems.

In expressing gratitude, regardless of moves and steps, writers used various types of expressions such as nominalization (my sincere thanks go to…., it gives me great pleasure in expressing my gratitude to….) performative acts (the researcher wishes to express his immeasurable and deepest gratitude to….) and passive voice (e.g., sincerest gratitude is given to…). Majority of the modifiers are used to strengthen feelings in thanking acts. Personal expressions in the form of axiological adjectives or adverbs are mostly evident in all the steps in move 2. The extent of expressing gratitude varies based on the status of the acknowledgees. In expressing thanks to mentors and professors, honorific, and superlatives such as deepest, sincerest, heartfelt were predominantly used to convey utmost deference and superiority. For minor personas such as external advisers and committee members, adjectival expressions such as intelligent, dynamic, professional, knowledgeable were frequently utilized. According to Hyland and Tse (2004), these adjectives are used because it makes thanking acts more formal. In thanking relatives, the writers used words showing intimacy such as dear, profoundly, deep, or especially. On the other hand, performative acts are commonly used with very limited modifiers to express gratitude for friends (the researcher would like to thank all his friends…or
he would like to thank his friends…), which indicates a lesser amount of formality. This result affirms the finding of Afful and Mwinlaru (2010) which revealed that the variation of these lexical use depends on the degree of affinity between the acknowledger and acknowledges, which further implies that this kind of genre is a complicated type of discourse and that hybridization and variation of tones might be its salient characteristics.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

This paper provides practical implications for those involved in studying and teaching specific writing instruction. This study enables future research writers to become more cognizant of the conventions in writing specific chapters or sections of thesis manuscripts. To realize this, Valle and Vergel (2019) suggested the necessity of providing more authentic, practical, and meaningful exercises aligned with specific language skills in order to address students’ identified difficulties in learning. Also, David and Dumanig (2019) shared the same idea from their study which states that authentic materials do not only provide awareness about the English language, but they also enhance the learners’ English language skills. It substantiates the notion that learners who are exposed to actual authentic materials develop an awareness of the languages used in various contexts and writing environments.

Moreover, on the bases of the foregoing findings, academic writing classes can emphasize the functions of moves and steps by incorporating them in their institutional research manual and instructional materials, which will serve as a guide when writing impressive and effective research acknowledgments. Prospective writers should be taught with the fundamentals of writing acknowledgments applying the structures provided by Ken Hyland. In addition, presenting a model template to students can raise the consciousness of students who will be engaged in research writing.

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