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A corpus-based study of the expression of stance in dissertation acknowledgements

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ABSTRACT

Although much previous research has examined the expression of stance in different registers, it is restricted to such primary genres as published research articles, textbooks, and student essays. Little is known of the ways writers express stance in an underexplored academic genre – acknowledgements. Using a corpus-based approach, this present study builds on previous research, notably from Biber (2006), aiming to investigate to what extent the frequencies of the range of lexico-grammatical devices used for the expression of stance in acknowledgements vary across disciplines. In particular, it focuses on disciplinary writing practices of the soft and hard disciplines and on stance expressions with regard to social functions and lexico-grammatical patterns. A quantitative analysis shows important distributional trends of stance expressions across disciplines, with the soft disciplines using more stance features than the hard disciplines, and a qualitative analysis of selected concordance lines identifies various social functions and distinctive lexico-grammatical patterns. It is found that stance devices appear to be motivated by different factors such as the nature of research, the imbalance of the power and position between the writers and thanked addressees, the amount of assistance and support the writers receive from different sources, and their strategic career choices.

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1. Introduction

Stance is used to express the writer's or speaker's attitudes, feelings, judgements, or commitment about the propositional content of a message (Biber & Finegan, 1989). Over the decades, the study of stance expressions has attracted considerable scholarly attention. It has been carried out in various genre-specific texts, namely research articles (Hyland, 1996a, 1996b, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c), academic speeches (Mauranen, 2003), classroom talks (Biber, 2006), theses (Charles, 2006), conversations of outsourced call centers (Friginal, 2009), and data description tasks (Wharton, 2012). It has also been done from a wide range of perspectives, such as "evaluation" (Hunston, 1994; Hunston & Thompson, 2000), "intensity" (Labov, 1984), "affect" (Ochs, 1989), "evidentiality" (Chafe, 1986; Chafe & Nichols, 1986), "hedging" (Hyland, 1996a), "appraisal" (Martin & White, 2005), and "stance" (Barton, 1993; Beach & Anson, 1992; Biber & Finegan, 1988, 1989; Precht, 2000) as well as with different approaches, ranging from qualitative analyses of a single text to quantitative analyses of a collection of texts in corpora (Biber, 2006).

Previous research on academic discourse has examined various ways in which writers in different disciplines expressed stance and engagement in academic writing. For example, the use of various linguistic features (e.g. hedges and boosters) to

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express stance meanings (e.g. certainty, tentativeness, and possibility) has been widely examined in such academic texts as textbooks, published research articles, and student essays (Hyland, 1996a, 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002c). Abstracts of published research articles were also examined in Hyland and Tse's (2005) study in which they analyzed the discourse functions of the evaluative *that* construction. Their results indicated that this construction was used to mark the introduction of the main argument, summarize the purposes or direction of the research, and indicate the reliability or validity of the proposition presented. In Poudat and Loiseau's (2005) study of stance in the disciplines of linguistics and classic contemporary philosophy, two specific styles of authorial presence were found, with a personal or neutral stance being common in linguistic papers and a universalist stance in philosophical papers. It is also found that the use of hedging and attitudinal stance devices was less common in pure mathematics articles, whereas that of shared knowledge and reader references was common in the texts (McGrath & Kuteeva, 2012).

As can be seen from the above section, the expression of stance in academic genres such as students' and academics' research writing has long been a major area of research in the disciplines of Applied Linguistics (AL), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and English for Specific Purposes (ESP). However, one genre which has been relatively neglected in the AL/EAP/ESP literature is acknowledgements (Cheng, 2012; Hyland, 2003a, 2003b; Yang, 2012). For this reason, little is known about how stance is expressed in this genre. In the sections that follow, I begin with a brief discussion of acknowledgements as a scholarly genre, followed by a description of the analytical framework used for the analysis of stance in this study.

2. Acknowledgements in academic research writing

In academia, gratitude is often expressed in the form of an acknowledgement. The writing of this text involves both the linguistic and cultural repertoires of scholars (Brodkey, 1987; Cheng, 2012). Dissertation acknowledgements – the focus of this study – are seen as a "Cinderella" genre which is "neither strictly academic nor entirely personal" (Hyland, 2003a, p. 243). These marginal texts are particularly important to students since they can reconcile their personal achievement with the interpersonal debts by expressing gratitude for the intellectual, emotional, technical, and moral support, personal guidance, and financial assistance they have received during their research studies (Cheng, 2012; Hyland, 2003a). However, dissertation acknowledgements cannot be seen simply as an official announcement of the end of one's research journey or a listing of individuals that one wishes to acknowledge for any kind of assistance, support, and advice offered; rather, they 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, 2003a, p. 265). In other words, dissertation acknowledgements serve various functions: to textualize gratitude for any contributions made by those who have offered help with the successful accomplishment of one's research (Al-Ali, 2010), to develop interpersonal relationships between acknowledgers and thanked addressees and maintain their mutual interactions in the scholarly networks (Yang, 2012), and to display one's active membership of his/her own academic discourse community and observance of the accepted modesty norms and gratitude (Hyland & Tse, 2004).

The role of acknowledgements is also related to the promotion of a personal identity and the management of one's relationships with thanked addressees. Ben-Ari (1987) argued that the formulation of acknowledgements act as strategic career choices in at least two ways: a) by managing the author's relationships with those involved in his/her research including supervisors, colleagues, peers, funding bodies, and families, and b) by constructing authorial credibility. His study also found a wide range of textual and linguistic devices used in acknowledgements. For instance, politeness forms are used to "fit with careering and characterize relationships in ways that will not impair the future chances of acknowledger vis-à-vis acknowledged" (Ben-Ari, 1987, p. 70), and the use of qualifications, apologies, and justifications is seen as an attempt to allude to some problematic issues caused by the asymmetrical tensions of power and position between acknowledgers and thanked addressees (Ben-Ari, 1987).

In addition, how acknowledgements are formulated has much to do with the disciplines and the contexts in which acknowledgers are engaged. Giannoni (2002) indicated that the length of acknowledgements varies across disciplines with more elaborated texts included in soft fields than in hard fields. His findings confirmed that disciplinary variations and the objective conditions in which different academic communities operate influence the ways acknowledgements are created and the linguistic resources are exploited. Several disciplinary differences in the patterns of acknowledgements were also observed in Hyland's (2003a) study. For example, supervisors in hard fields often make up the largest proportion of thanks in students' acknowledgements due to greater participation in their students' research at various stages ranging from selecting the research topic to deciding on the methodology and from offering resources to monitoring the research progress. In soft fields, however, these stages are flexible because soft disciplines tend to emphasize an autonomous endeavor often "conducted at a distance or in a circumstance where the supervisor's assistance is restricted to bursts of involvement at the beginning and end of the research process" (Becher, 1989; cited in Hyland, 2003a, p. 255).

Likewise Hyland (2003b) and Hyland and Tse (2004), who proposed a three-tier structure of acknowledgements consisting of an obligatory thanking move (Move 1) framed by optional reflecting (Move 2) and announcing (Move 3) moves, similarly observed that students in soft fields tend to construct more complex acknowledgements with a wider range of generic patterns than students in hard fields. Finally, how cultural and language contexts affected the rhetorical structure and linguistic features of acknowledgements was examined. Al-Ali (2010) identified an eight-move structure of Arabic acknowledgements, with some specific socio-cultural moves such as praising and thanking Allah (God) and invoking God's blessing upon thanked addressees, and some socio-cultural resources such as preferred address forms and social honorifics used to describe members from different academic and social communities. It is also found that Taiwanese students in both

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