

The Structure and Discourse Analysis of Acknowledgments in Persian M.A. and Ph.D. Dissertations

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Abstract

An M.A. M.S. or Ph.D. thesis is a written report of an organized research conducted by a post-graduate university student to receive an academic degree. In spite of the variation in structure and tone of theses, some sections of these reports are well-established and somehow fixed. One initial section of theses is the acknowledgement page, a usually short section where the student thanks his or her supervisor(s), advisor(s), family, friends, colleagues as well as institutions such as libraries, faculties, departments, and/or companies and non-academic centers. This section enjoys a double opposite nature. While it is included in an academic and thereby formal text, it usually violates the essential patterns of such texts as writers tend to be personal and emotional in rendering their gratitude.

Academic disciplines are usually divided into hard and soft sciences. The differences between these two scientific endeavors are discussed by scholars of philosophy, sociology as well as linguistics. Discourse analysts have paid attention to these two paradigms through similarities and differences of texts written in hard and soft sciences. The acknowledgement section of theses in both hard and soft sciences has been investigated by scholars and Hyland's (2004) model is regarded as the most cited theoretical framework. Following Hyland's model, the present study addresses the following questions;

- (1) Do acknowledgement patterns in Iranian M.A., M.S. and Ph.D. theses support those reported in Hyland (2004)?
- (2) Are acknowledgement patterns in Iranian M.A. and M.S. theses different from those in Ph.D. theses?
- (3) Are acknowledgement patterns in Iranian post-graduate theses different in hard and soft sciences?

To answer these questions, 240 acknowledgements have been collected from 120 M.A. dissertations and 120 Ph.D. theses from six hard sciences (computer science,

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electrical engineering, and biology) and soft sciences (management, accounting, and linguistics). The collected data were limited to postgraduate students and therefore reports prepared by undergraduate students in some universities were not included in the corpus of study. It should be mentioned that in selecting the thesis, features such as the number of pages, the grade of thesis, the level of advisor or reader were not taken into account. The acknowledgement sections have been extracted from theses presented in 16 universities from which Tabriz University (48 cases), Islamic Azad University of Ahar (47), Tehran University (40), Ferdowsi University in Mashad (16), Tarbiat Modares University (13), Shahid Beheshti University (13), Esfahan University (12), Islamic Azad University of Tabriz (12) have had larger shares.

The whole corpus contained 29431 words and while the general linguistics acknowledgements topped with 6340 words, the lowest number of words was counted in accounting as 3804. The number of words could be evaluated with regard to other variables, too. For example, it was revealed that the acknowledgement section in soft sciences is longer than that of hard sciences. It was also noticed that the level of students was significant as compared with M.A. or M.S. students, Ph.D. candidates had written longer texts (2913 more words) in rendering their gratitude. The gender variable played no significant role here as female students used just 205 words more than their male peers. The longest acknowledgement (with 312 words) was written by a female Ph.D. candidate in general linguistics, and the shortest one was prepared by a male Ph.D. candidate in biology (with 13 words).

Considering Hyland's (2004) model which includes three moves, i.e. (1) reflecting, (2) thanking and (3) announcing, it was shown that the structure of Iranian students' acknowledgments is quite compatible with the Hyland model, with the significant difference that in 50 percent of the Persian acknowledgements, students have thanked God while no such move or step is considered in Hyland's framework.

From the disciplinary perspective, it was shown that there are no significant differences in hard and soft sciences as far as Move 1 (reflecting) and Step 2-2 (thanking advisors and readers) are concerned. The main difference was witnessed in Step 2-1 (presenting participants) and Step 2-4 (thanking for moral support) as in sub-corpus of humanities (soft sciences), writers have paid more attention to their family and friends. On the contrary, in Step 2-3 (thanking for resource) the situation is the opposite as hard science students have referred to and thanked factories, laboratories as well as manufacturing and financial institutions. The trend seems reasonable since most studies in hard sciences are typically conducted through close collaboration with non-academic centers.

Although this study has been a descriptive one, the findings could provide a framework for preparing a manual for writing dissertation acknowledgements. It is recommended that the specific guidelines of this genre are exposed to students.

Keywords: acknowledgement, hard sciences, soft sciences, thesis, Hyland's Model