

“My heartfelt gratitude goes to ...”: The construal of gratitude in master’s dissertation acknowledgements

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Abstract

Dissertation acknowledgements have attracted scholarly attention over the last two decades. However, the research focus on them has been on rhetorical organisations and linguistic features, with particular attention to disciplinary, cross-cultural, and cross-linguistic variations. The present study examined the construal of gratitude in 100 master’s dissertation acknowledgements submitted to the Department of Economics of the University of Ghana. The data were obtained online from the dissertation repository of the University. The data were analysed within the systemic functional linguistics framework. It was found that gratitude was construed as a Thing, Process, and Quality. As a Thing, gratitude is realised by nouns and grammatical metaphors, presented as that which can be owned, modified by the Deictic, *a* or *an*, to show non-specificity, and accompanied by the Numerative to show number or quantity, or ordering. It additionally accepts Epithets to colour it with interpersonal meanings and functions as Actor or Goal in transformative material clauses as well as Verbiage in verbal clauses. As a Process, gratitude is realised by material clauses which can be presented in either the operative or receptive case. Gratitude as a Process also admits adverbs of manner, degree, or time, as a means of indicating the kind, degree, or time of gratitude. The construal of gratitude as a Quality, realised by adjectives, allows for modification by Premodifier adverbs which serve as interpersonal resources that mark gratitude as significant. The present study contributes to knowledge on dissertation acknowledgements and has implications for theory, writing pedagogy, and further research.

Keywords: dissertation acknowledgements, Ghana, gratitude, master’s students, systemic functional linguistics

“My heartfelt gratitude goes to ...”: The construal of gratitude in master’s dissertation acknowledgements

1. Introduction

Gratitude is conceptualised as a positive emotional response to a perceived benefactor (Cownie, 2017). It is a universal social construct which is very important for the cohesion of every society, serving as a bridge connecting individuals (Howells, 2004). Gratitude is expressed both verbally and in writing, though research on it has disproportionately focused on its verbal expression (Cheng & Kuo, 2011). Gratitude is commonplace in academia, with the acknowledgements genre being one of the few avenues for its written expression (Hyland, 2003; Yang, 2012a) which dates back to a period where people were required to recognise the generosity of “the powerful” as a prerequisite for the publication of written materials (Hyland, 2003).

Today, while experts, scholars, and researchers still acknowledge the contributions of others in book prefaces and footnotes, acknowledgements have grown in importance and length, evident in the devotion of a separate textual space to them in most written materials, including books, research articles, and dissertations (Hyland, 2003). In particular, acknowledgements appear to be universal in dissertations, allowing students to show gratitude to people and construct their social and academic identities (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Acknowledgements also provide the opportunity for researchers to signal their interpersonal relations with people whose contributions have shaped their academic lives in various ways (Afful, 2016).

Recent years have seen a burgeoning line of research on dissertation acknowledgements, focusing on their schematic structure and linguistic realisations (Afful, 2016; Al-Ali, 2010; Alemi & Rezanejad, 2016; Cheng, 2012; Cheng & Kuo, 2011; Giannoni, 2002; Yang, 2012a, 2012b). Generally, the findings reveal that the schematic structure of dissertation acknowledgements and their linguistic realisations are conditioned by disciplinary, cross-linguistic, and cross-cultural underpinnings. By relying on systemic functional linguistics (SFL), the present study contributes to the literature by investigating the construal of gratitude in dissertation acknowledgements written by master’s students in the Department of Economics of the University of Ghana.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Theoretical Framework

The present study is situated in SFL as a theoretical framework. SFL focuses on the contextual use of language, with the tenet that language is organised to perform three metafunctions: (a) ideational, (b) interpersonal, and (c) textual. Ideational metafunction concerns how language is used to communicate ideas or experiences. It involves how language is used for the representation of the world around us and its experiences (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Ideational metafunction, thus, focuses on how transitivity resources and lexis are used to construe experience (Christie, 2002). In contrast, interpersonal metafunction concerns how language or grammatical resources are used to communicate the relationship that exists between people involved in a communicative situation. It focuses on mood, modality, and person. Textual metafunction refers to the grammatical resources used in organising language into a successful message, including the resources of theme, information, and cohesion (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).

SFL also conceptualises language as a system. Specifically, language is considered to be polysystemic. This means that language is a system which presents us with a wide range of choices that allow us to make meaning (Christie, 2002). For example, when constructing an English clause, one makes choices from the grammar regarding theme (the point of departure for the message of the clause), mood (the speech function taken up), and

transitivity (the type of process, associated participants, and circumstances). There are quite complex available choices with respect to each of the systems—theme, mood, and transitivity—which, for the most part, are not conscious (Egins, 2004). The choice made determines the resultant clause type, whether declarative, imperative, interrogative, or exclamative.

In addition, SLF presents language and context in a meaning-making relationship where they interact and realise each other (Martin, 2000). The language choices related to a particular context of situation or domain are referred to as *register*. Register is usually described with reference to three contextual variables: (a) field, (b) tenor, and (c) mode. Field concerns what is going on in a text (field of activity) or the subject matter of a text (field of experience) (Matthiessen, 2019). Tenor involves the relationship between participants in a text, whereas mode denotes the channel of communication. These three contextual variables—field, tenor, and mode—respectively correspond with the three metafunctions identified earlier (i.e., ideational, interpersonal, and textual metafunction) (Christie, 2002).

Another important aspect of the SFL model is its view of stratification. As far as language use is concerned, SFL makes a distinction between *content plane* and *expression plane*. While content plane concerns meaning-making, expression plane focuses on the realisation of meaning through the organisation of segmental and prosodic features. Content plane is further stratified into lexicogrammar and semantics (Doran, 2016; Martin, 2000). According to Martin (2000), lexicogrammar focuses on meanings made within a clause while semantics focuses on the realisation of meanings beyond the clause by means of, for example, cohesion. Lexicogrammar comprises two sub-strata (i.e., lexis and grammar), and grammar encompasses syntax and morphology (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Figure 1 illustrates the stratal organisation of language.

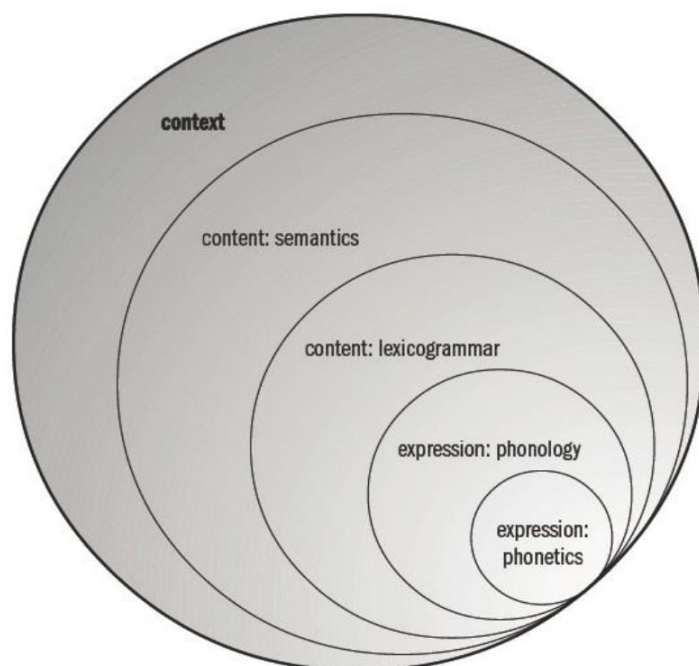


Figure 1: *Strata of language* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 26)

Every instance of language involves choosing from all strata, with each stratum contributing its meaning. In effect, choices made in semantics are realised by choices in lexicogrammar, and choices in lexicogrammar are realised by phonology/graphology (Martin, 2014). The present study focuses on how a choice in semantics (i.e.,

the concept of gratitude) is realised at the level of lexicogrammar. The present study, therefore, builds on previous SFL studies on the construal of phenomena such as pain (Halliday, 1998), death (Marrugo, 2017), motion (Kashyap & Matthiessen, 2018), and space (Kashyap & Matthiessen, 2017; Matthiessen & Kashyap, 2014).

2.2 Previous Research on Dissertation Acknowledgements

This section reviews previous works on dissertation acknowledgements, with the view of revealing the gaps that the present study seeks to fill. Essentially, previous studies on dissertation acknowledgements focused on their rhetorical organisation and linguistic features.

Studies that have focused on the generic structure of dissertation acknowledgements abound (Afful, 2016; Al-Ali, 2010; Alemi & Rezanejad, 2016; Cheng, 2012; Cheng & Kuo, 2011; Giannoni, 2002; Nkemleke, 2006; Yang, 2012a, 2012b). Some of these studies have focused on disciplinary variations (Afful, 2016; Afful & Mwinlaaru, 2012; Alemi & Rezanejad, 2016; Yang, 2012b). Of most relevance to the present study are disciplinary variation studies on dissertation acknowledgements in Ghana (Afful 2016; Afful & Mwinlaaru, 2010, 2012). For instance, Afful's (2016) study on undergraduate dissertation acknowledgements in the Departments of English, and Entomology and Wildlife of the University of Cape Coast revealed a three-move pattern, with slight variations in the schematic structure, sequencing, textual space, and frequency of moves across the two departments. The study also revealed that gratitude expressions include verbs such as *appreciate* and *acknowledge*, nouns such as *appreciation* and *indebtedness*, and adjectives such as *grateful*. Unlike Afful's study which focused on the undergraduate level, Afful and Mwinlaaru (2010) analysed the rhetorical organisation of a master's dissertation acknowledgement in the field of Literary Studies and found a two-move structure, consisting of the thanking and taking responsibility moves. The study also revealed that linguistic choices used in expressing gratitude vary, depending on the people being thanked. Similarly, Afful and Mwinlaaru (2012) concentrated on master's dissertation acknowledgements in three sub-disciplines of Education, namely Guidance and Counselling, Educational Administration and Management, and Science and Mathematics Education. The study revealed a three-move structure composed of reflecting, thanking, and concluding moves, with a marginal difference in the textual space of moves across sub-disciplines.

Aside from studies which focused on Ghana, other studies have looked at the rhetorical organisation of doctoral acknowledgements written by Taiwanese students in the soft and hard sciences (Yang, 2012b), and English Language Studies (Jaroenkitboworn, 2014), TESOL master's dissertation acknowledgements written by Vietnamese students (Loan, 2017) as well as master's and doctoral dissertation acknowledgements written in Hong Kong universities in the fields of Applied Linguistics, Biology, Business Studies, Computer Science, Electronic Engineering, and Public Administration (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Of these studies, Hyland and Tse's (2004) study is unique in its attempt to compare acknowledgements across master's and doctoral levels while maintaining its cross-disciplinary focus. They found that PhD students, especially those in the soft sciences, wrote more expansive acknowledgements, compared to their master's counterparts. In terms of generic structure, the study revealed a three-move pattern with accompanying steps. Similar to Afful (2016), Hyland and Tse observed that verbs and nouns feature predominantly in gratitude expressions, with master's students giving preference to nominalised expressions. Loan's (2017) study also revealed a three-move pattern, with gratitude expressions realised by nouns, performative verbs, adjectives, nominalised expressions, and passive constructions. In the Persian context, Alemi and Rezanejad (2016) analysed 503 acknowledgements of dissertations submitted to two universities: (a) University of Tehran and (b) Sharif University of Technology. The study compared the dissertations across eight disciplines and revealed varying degrees of complexity in the linguistic realisation of acknowledgements across the disciplines studied.

Thus far, the review has considered studies that focused on disciplinaryity. Apart from these studies, others have examined dissertation acknowledgements from cross-cultural and cross-linguistic perspectives, focusing on English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts (Nkemleke, 2006; Yang,

2012a), English and Italian (Giannoni, 2002), Taiwanese and North American students (Cheng, 2012), the Persian context (Alemi & Rezanejad, 2016), Arabic (Al-Ali, 2010), Malay and Chinese (Afip et al., 2013), and Persian and English (Zare-ee & Hejazi, 2019). Given that the present study is situated within an African ESL context, it shares some similarities with Nkemleke’s (2006) study in Cameroon, which revealed that acknowledgements “reflect the ‘good manners’ of deference to elders and those who have played an important role in the writer’s life and success” (p. 166). Yang’s (2012a) research examined the acknowledgements accompanying doctoral dissertations written by two categories of Taiwanese students: (a) those who obtained their PhD in Taiwan and (b) those who obtained theirs in the United States of America. The study found that while both groups of authors followed a three-move pattern in constructing their acknowledgements, the linguistic resources used were influenced by socio-cultural factors. In addition, Yang revealed that performative verbs, adjectives, and nominalised expressions were generally used to express gratitude. Al-Ali (2010), who focused on PhD dissertation acknowledgements written in Arabic, revealed that writers incorporated religious elements in their acknowledgements and used gratitude expressions that had different levels of intensification. Afip et al. (2013) also revealed that Malay students were elaborative in their expressions of gratitude.

Unlike studies that focused on the schematic structure of acknowledgements, others have focused exclusively on the linguistic items found in them. Cheng’s (2012) study which compared master’s dissertation acknowledgements written by Taiwanese and North American students focused on thanking strategies employed by these two groups of authors in their acknowledgements. The study revealed that Taiwanese students employed more explicit thanking strategies than their North American colleagues. Similarly, in their pragmatic investigation of master’s acknowledgements, Cheng and Kuo (2011) found a dominant use of explicit thanking strategies, involving nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Razali and Jan (2020), focusing on PhD acknowledgements of Malay students, found that explicit thanking strategies were the most preferred choice. Afful and Awoonor-Aziaku (2017) devoted attention to the prevailing naming patterns in acknowledgements of master’s dissertations submitted to the Departments of English and French of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The study revealed that writers tend to name God, dissertation supervisors, lecturers, other faculty, family members, colleagues, participants, and other individuals.

On the construal of gratitude in dissertation acknowledgements, the studies of Gesuato (2004) and Tongwen (n.d.) remain significant. Relying on Hunston and Francis’s (2000) pattern grammar, Gesuato examined the construal of gratitude in 40 dissertation acknowledgements across eight disciplines. The study found that gratitude was represented as processes realised by the verb phrase, with benefactors and benefits realised as entities. It was also found that expressions of thanks focused on several aspects of gratitude, such as indicating the benefactor’s merits, favourably evaluating their contributions, indicating the writers received more than they gave, manifesting pleased acceptance of the services offered, expressing a favourable feeling towards the benefactor, or a combination of these. Tongwen (n.d.) similarly investigated the construal of gratitude in dissertation acknowledgements across Chinese and English, focusing on the disciplines of Linguistics, Education, and Psychology. The study, which relied on SFL as its theoretical framework, revealed that gratitude was construed as a Thing, Process, and Quality. The study also revealed some differences in the use of these representations of gratitude across the two groups of students, one of which was that North American students preferred to use gratitude as a Thing while Chinese speakers used more of gratitude as a Process.

In this section, I have critically reviewed the extant literature on dissertation acknowledgements, revealing insightful observations. First, it can be seen from the review that previous studies on dissertation acknowledgements have disproportionately focused on their schematic structure, adopting the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach to genre analysis (e.g., Afful, 2016; Afful & Mwinlaaru, 2010, 2012; Al-Ali, 2010; Alemi & Rezanejad, 2016; Cheng, 2012; Cheng & Kuo, 2011; Giannoni, 2002; Yang, 2012a, 2012b). Also, with the exception of Afful’s (Afful, 2016; Afful & Mwinlaaru, 2010, 2012) studies, most of these studies were conducted in socio-cultural contexts other than Ghana. In addition, social sciences disciplines, especially Economics, are yet to feature in studies of this kind. With the strand of research which focused on the linguistic features of acknowledgements, with the exception of Cheng and Kuo (2011), and Tongwen’s (n.d.), who adopted

the Speech Act Theory and SFL respectively, others appeared to be atheoretical. Even with Tongwen's (n.d.) research which used SFL, it focused on a different socio-cultural context and disciplines other than Economics. This foregrounds the seeming neglect of Economics in studies of this kind, especially in Ghana. In line with this, Blackhouse et al. (2017) have recently called on language researchers to focus on Economics as a discipline. In response to this call, the present study examined the construal of gratitude in dissertation acknowledgements submitted to the Department of Economics, University of Ghana, using SFL as a theoretical framework.

3. Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

Hundred (100) master's dissertation acknowledgements selected from a population of 165 dissertations submitted to the Department of Economics of the University of Ghana constituted the data for this study. These master's dissertations were submitted to the Department from June 2013 to July 2020. The dissertations, which were freely available online, were downloaded from the University's dissertation repository (<http://ugspace.ug.edu.gh/handle/123456789/4899>). The acknowledgements sections were copied and saved as a separate file in Microsoft Word.

Qualitative content analysis was applied to the acknowledgements, manually teasing out all references to gratitude. Applying systemic functional grammar (Halliday, 1998; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Marrugo, 2017), gratitude expressions were categorised into (a) Thing, (b) Process, and (c) Quality. Then, the gratitude expressions were labelled and numbered for easy identification. Specifically, gratitude as a Thing was labelled GraTh, gratitude as a Process was labelled GraPro, and gratitude as a Quality was labelled GraQua. With these labels, the first instance of gratitude as a Thing, for instance, was labelled GraTh 1. Gratitude as a Thing was further analysed in terms of its grammatical roles in the transitivity system, while intensifications of gratitude as a Process and Quality were also examined. To conceal the identities of people mentioned in the acknowledgements, I replaced their names with "XXX".

4. Findings

The analysis revealed the construal of gratitude as a Thing, as a Process, and as a Quality. These are presented in detail in the subsequent sub-sections.

4.1 *Gratitude as a Thing*

The first realisation of gratitude in the data is as a Thing, where gratitude is realised by a nominal group. As such, the Thing takes determiners, particularly the possessive determiner, *My*, indicating that the writer is the owner of the gratitude, as shown in Extracts 1-3 below:

1. I do not know how to express my gratitude to them. [GraTh 21]
2. Again, I will also like to show my appreciation to my supervisors, Prof. XXX and Dr. XXX, all of the Department of Economics, University of Ghana, Legon, for their suggestions, guidance and the effort to supervise this thesis out of their tight schedule [GraTh 136]
3. My thanks also go to my supervisors Prof. XXX, Mr. XXX and Dr. XXX for their support and good supervision. [GraTh 166]

Extracts 1-3 above exemplify the realisations of gratitude as a Thing. In these extracts, the Thing, realised by the noun head, *gratitude*, *appreciation*, and *thanks* in Extracts 1, 2, and 3, respectively, take the possessive determiner, *My*. The word, *appreciation*, is a grammatical metaphor derived from the Process, *appreciate*. With the possessive determiner, the Thing, gratitude, is conceptualised as belonging to the writers of the acknowledgements.

Gratitude as a Thing also allows the Thing to be introduced by the Deictic. In the data analysed, the Deictic function was mainly realised by the non-specific determiners, *a* and *an*. This is shown in Extracts 4-6 below:

4. A final thanks goes to all those who played a significant role one-way or the other to bring me this far, God richly bless you. [GraTh 168]
5. Also, a heartfelt gratitude to the Graduates’ Christian Fellowship (GCF), The Apostolic Church, Ghana – Mt. Zion Assembly, Tema. [GraTh 128]
6. Again, an earnest thanks to my supervisors for their guidance through comments and suggestions for making this work a success. [GraTh 153]

Extracts 4-6 above illustrate the realisation of gratitude as a Thing accompanied by the non-specific determiners. In all three extracts, it is seen that there is an adjective between the determiner and the Thing. We have the determiner, *a*, accompanying the nouns, *thanks* and *gratitude*, in Extracts 4 and 5, while in Extract 6, *an* accompanies *thanks*.

Additionally, the noun that denotes gratitude as a Thing can take a Numerative. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) note, “The Numerative element indicates some numerical feature of that particular subset of the Thing: either quantity or order, either exact or inexact” (p. 274). This implies that Numeratives come in two forms: (a) quantifying Numeratives and (b) ordering Numeratives. The quantifying type shows whether the Thing is an exact number or inexact number, as illustrated in the extracts below:

7. All thanks to God almighty for giving me the strength, direction, courage and wisdom to finish this study successfully [GraTh 5]
8. Again, to Professor XXX, who have contributed a lot throughout my MPhil programme, many thanks to you. [GraTh 22]
9. I want to show much appreciation to my parents, Mr. XXX and Madam XXX, for their countless sacrifices to ensure that my academic carrier was not terminated [GraTh 45]
10. I owe all lecturers of the Economics Department, University of Ghana a great deal of gratitude for their resourceful lectures, which has contributed to the success of this project work. [GraTh 106]

The underlined structures in Extracts 7-10 above are the nominal groups used to construct appreciation. In Extract 7, the Thing, *thanks*, takes the definite quantifying Numerative, *all*, while in the remaining extracts, the quantifying Numeratives used are indefinite: *many* in extract 8, *much* in extract 9, and *a great deal* in Extract 10.

Unlike quantifying Numeratives, ordering Numeratives show “either an exact place in order (ordinal numerals, e.g. *the second train*) or an inexact place (e.g. *a subsequent train*)” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 375). Ordering Numeratives are used together with the head noun to denote gratitude as a Thing, as shown in the extracts below:

11. My next appreciation goes to all my program colleagues and those who played various roles during my studies; I say a big thank you for your backing. [GraTh 55]
12. For this reason, my first acknowledgment goes to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for His divine guidance and directions throughout this period. [GraTh 72]
13. A final thanks goes to all those who played a significant role one-way or the other to bring me this far, God richly bless you. [GraTh 168]

As shown above, *next*, *first*, and *final* are the ordering Numeratives used in Extracts 11, 12, and 13 respectively. In the acknowledgements, this use of ordering Numeratives helps writers to show the chronological arrangement of the gratitude expressions, given that several people need to be acknowledged, each for a specific reason.

Finally, the nominal group realising gratitude as a Thing also comes with adjectives functioning as Epithet, indicating some quality of the subset. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p. 376) have noted:

(i) The quality of the subset may be an objective property of the thing itself, construed as a depiction of the experience of the entity that it represents; or (ii) it may be an expression of the speaker's subjective attitude towards it.

The above quote suggests that the quality of the entity may be an objective description of the entity or a subjective one. This subjective expression of Epithet is what is called the interpersonal or attitudinal Epithet, since it communicates interpersonal meanings. The data analysed revealed the use of adjectives to express subjective viewpoints of the writers, by way of expressing gratitude as a Thing:

14. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisors Prof. XXX and Dr. XXX for their comments, constructive criticism and a wealth of advice. [GraTh 6]
15. My heartfelt gratitude goes to my supervisors, Professor XXX and Dr XXX for their guidance, support, suggestions, comments, corrections, and overall supervision throughout the preparation of this work. [GraTh 24]
16. Third, my endless appreciation goes to my brother Mr. XXX for being like a father to me and also for his financial support and sound advice that brought me back to school. [GraTh 164]
17. I wish to also express my intense appreciation to my supervisors, Dr. XXX and Prof XXX, under whose guidance and constructive criticism this thesis has successfully been completed. [GraTh 155]
18. Finally, my special thanks go to XXX, XXX, XXX, XXX, XXX and my study mates for their relentless assistance throughout my MPhil course. [GraTh 141]

In Extracts 14-18 above, the writers express interpersonal meanings or attitudes by the use of the adjectives, *sincere*, *heartfelt*, *endless*, *intense*, and *special*, each of which functions as Epithet.

Having presented the findings on the features of gratitude as a Thing, I now move on to the analysis of the grammatical roles of gratitude as a Thing. My examination of the grammatical roles of gratitude as a Thing in the transitivity system revealed three main patterns: (a) gratitude as an Actor in material clauses, (b) gratitude as a Goal in material clauses, and (c) gratitude as a Verbiage in verbal clauses.

Material clauses denote outer-world experiences, where reality is construed as happening through some input of energy. In material clauses, the Actor is the one that performs the action described by the clause; thus, the actor is the Subject. Extracts 19-21 below show material clauses with gratitude as a Thing functioning as an Actor:

19. My utmost gratitude goes to my supervisors, Dr. XXX and Dr. XXX for the immense support and guidance granted to me, without which this thesis would not have been completed. [GraTh 1]
20. My sincere thanks also go out to Professor XXX of Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER) for giving me the opportunity to use their data for this study. [GraTh 8]

21. My gratitude goes to Mr. XXX who played a key role in my achievement of this higher degree [GraTh 16]

As seen in the extracts above, the underlined structures are the nominal groups denoting gratitude as a Thing. In Extract 19, the verb, *goes*, functions as a transformative material Process of motion. The same applies to Extracts 20 and 21. In effect, gratitude, the Actor, is conceptualised as moving from one direction to another. In other words, the writer’s gratitude as a Thing is represented as moving from the writer to the person(s) being acknowledged.

In transformative material clauses, the nominal group representing gratitude may also function as a Goal. This is especially the case in transformative clause types denoting extension, specifically, extending possession, typically realised by the Process, *give* or *extend*, as seen in Extracts 22-24 below:

22. First and foremost, I give thanks to the Almighty God for His grace, mercy, favour, guidance and strength that have enabled me to successfully complete this work. [GraTh 138]
23. I give the Lord Jesus all the thanks for this thesis... [GraTh 25]
24. Again, I extend a heartfelt appreciation to the Department of Economics, University of Ghana, Legon for the opportunity to pursue a master’s degree in economics and expanding my knowledge in this field. [GraTh 60]

In Extracts 22-24 above, the underlined structures are gratitude as a Thing functioning as a Goal in transformative material clauses. In Extract 22, *I* is the Actor of the clause, *give* functions as a Process, and *thanks*, which denotes gratitude, serves as a Goal. Similarly, *I* serves as an Actor in Extract 23, with *give* and *all the thanks* functioning as a Process and Goal, respectively. Extract 24 presents a similar case, with *I*, *extend*, and *a heartfelt appreciation* functioning as an Actor, a Process, and a Goal, respectively. In this sense, these clauses conceptualise showing gratitude as extending or giving what one has to another person.

Verbal clauses are clauses of saying. They construe experience as verbal expressions. As such, they are characterised by three main participant roles: (a) Sayer, (b) Verbiage, and (c) Target. The Sayer is the one who does the saying. Unlike the Actor, which needs to be a conscious being, the Sayer does not necessarily have to be a conscious being—it can be anything that sends signals. Thus, verbal processes are referred to as “symbolic processes” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 304). In contrast to the Sayer, the Verbiage is the content or nature of what is said while the Target is the one the information or Verbiage is directed at. Extracts 25-27 below show the realisation of gratitude as a Thing as Verbiage in verbal process clauses:

25. I will also want [[to express my profound appreciations to all lecturers in the Department of Economics who taught me both in my undergraduate and graduate studies, especially Mr XXX, Dr XXX, and Dr XXX.]] [GraTh 19]
26. I also express appreciation to my mother and siblings for their love and encouragement over the years. [GraTh 154]
27. Lastly, I express my gratitude to my parents for the moral support when the going got tough and for believing in me enough to support my dream [GraTh 143]

In Extracts 25-27 above, the underlined structures are nominal groups denoting gratitude as a Thing. In Extract 25, the underlined structure functions as Verbiage in the to-infinitive clause, showing the nature of what the writer says or expresses. Similarly, *appreciation* and *my gratitude* function as Verbiage in Extracts 26 and 27, with the Process denoted by *express*. In these clauses, the Thing, i.e., gratitude, is conceptualised as a verbal expression by the writers to individuals who have helped them in various ways.

4.2 Gratitude as a Process

Aside from the construal of gratitude as a Thing, the data analysed revealed that gratitude was also construed as a Process. Generally, the representation of gratitude as a Process involves denoting it with a verbal group, especially in material process clauses, as shown in the extracts below:

28. I appreciate the contribution of Mr. XXX, Mr. XXX, all of Sefwi Akontombra CODAPEC for furnishing me with information on cocoa production in the study area. [GraPro 21]
29. To my friends XXX, XXX and XXX who have been of great assistance throughout the course, your support is very much appreciated. [GraPro 18]
30. I salute my parents Mr. XXX and Mrs. XXX, my beloved XXX and my siblings Mr. XXX and Mrs. XXX for being there for me in all these difficult times. [GraPro 7]
31. I also acknowledge all the lecturers and other non-teaching staff at the Department of Economics for the knowledge impartation, sincere advice and help from the commencement of this study to its completion. [GraPro 32]

Extracts 28-31 above show the realisations of gratitude as a Process in the data analysed. In Extract 28, the Process is denoted by the verb, *appreciate*, with the Actor being *I*. Here, the Actor is present and begins the clause, since the clause is the operative type of material processes. In contrast to Extract 28, a receptive material process clause is presented in Extract 29, where the process of gratitude is highlighted without a mention of the Actor. In this extract, the Goal, which is *your support* is presented as a Theme and given modal responsibility, showing that the writer is interested in highlighting the assistance or support he received without stressing his own agency. Extracts 30 and 31 also present operative material clauses, with the Process realised by the verbs, *salute* and *acknowledge*, with the Actor being *I*. In these two extracts, the Goal is realised by the names concealed with XXX.

Gratitude as a Process allows for the modification of the Process by adverb groups. Such adverb groups are mainly circumstantial Adjuncts that show degree, manner, or time, as shown in Extracts 32-35:

32. To all those who supported me through this period, your help is immensely appreciated. [GraPro 4]
33. I also strongly acknowledge the sponsors, organizers and co-coordinators of the Collaborative Masters Programme (CMAP)-Joint Facility for Electives (JFE). [GraPro 16]
34. To all my friends not mentioned here, your efforts in diverse ways towards the success of this thesis are well appreciated. [GraPro 25]
35. I finally salute the management of University of Ghana Economics Department, including the administration and the entire lecturers who imparted the knowledge leading to my successful completion of this programme. [GraPro 13]

The underlined structures in the extracts above are expressions of gratitude as a material process, modified by circumstantial Adjuncts. In Extract 32, the verbal group is *is...appreciated*, and it has the circumstantial Adjunct, *immensely* in between *is* and *appreciated*, highlighting the degree of gratitude. Also, in Extract 33, the Process, *acknowledge*, is modified by *strongly*, which shows the manner of appreciation. Similar to Extract 33, *well* is used to indicate the manner of appreciation in Extract 34. In contrast, Extract 35 presents gratitude as occurring in sequence, using the time Adjunct, *finally*, to signal that that appreciation is the last one.

4.3 Gratitude as a Quality

The final construal of gratitude is gratitude as a Quality. As a Quality, gratitude is realised by adjective groups which function as the Attribute within Attributive relational clauses, where the writer of the acknowledgement, realised by *I*, is presented as the Carrier. Typically, such adjective groups are headed by the adjectives, *grateful* and *thankful*, as shown in the extracts below:

36. I am grateful to Prof. XXX, Prof. XXX, and Mr. XXX at Central University for their assistance. [GraQua 6]
37. I am immensely grateful to Pastor XXX and Mrs. XXX as well as XXX for their support in prayers. [GraQua 18]
38. I am eternally grateful to African Economic Research Consortium in collaboration with the Government of Kenya (AERC- GoK) joint capacity building project for awarding me a full scholarship and fully financing my M.Phil. Economics programme. [GraQua 27]
39. I am sincerely grateful to all my friends and course mates particularly XXX who immensely contributed to the success of this research.
40. I am very thankful for the mentorship given me. [GraQua 31]
41. I am most thankful to the Almighty God, for giving me grace and strength to sustain me throughout this period. [GraQua 15]
42. I am indebted to all members at the Department of Economics (UG) for the immense knowledge impacted during the course work. [GraQua 24]

Extracts 36-42 illustrate the realisations of gratitude as a Quality in the data analysed. As can be seen in all these extracts, the Carrier is represented by the pronoun, *I*, which refers to the writer of the acknowledgement. The adjective groups which construe gratitude in Extracts 36-39 are headed by the adjective, *grateful*, while Extracts 40 and 41 each have the adjective, *thankful* as Head. Another remarkable feature of these adjective groups is the presence of adverbs serving as Premodifiers to the various adjective Heads. These adverbs include *immensely*, *eternally*, *sincerely*, *very*, and *most* in Extracts 37-41 respectively. As well as intensifying gratitude, these adverbs also communicate interpersonal information, placing gratitude on an “interpersonally significant scale” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 421). In Extract 42, gratitude is communicated by the adjective, *indebted*, which seems to suggest that gratitude given is not commensurate with the benefit received.

5. Discussion

The aim of the study was to examine the construal of gratitude in master’s dissertation acknowledgements in the field of Economics. The preceding section highlighted the findings of the study. In this section, I discuss the findings in relation to the existing literature.

The present study revealed that gratitude is construed as a Thing, Process, and Quality. This finding agrees with the extant literature on dissertation acknowledgements. At the undergraduate level, Afful (2016), for instance, has revealed that gratitude is realised by nouns such as *appreciation*, verbs such as *appreciate* and adjectives such as *indebted*. Hyland and Tse’s (2004) study that focused on both master’s and doctoral levels also revealed an extensive use of nouns in expressions of gratitude especially among master’s students. Among master’s students in Vietnam, Loan (2017) also found nouns in gratitude expressions. Cheng and Kuo (2011), in their pragmatic investigation of gratitude expressions in dissertation acknowledgements, found gratitude being realised by nouns which were often modified by adjectives to show the intensity of gratitude as well as by verbs

and adjectives. The construal of gratitude as a Thing, Process, and Quality agrees with the SFL literature on the construal of some other phenomena, such as pain (Halliday, 1998), death (Marrugo, 2017), motion (Kashyap & Matthiessen, 2018), and space (Kashyap & Matthiessen, 2017; Matthiessen & Kashyap, 2014).

Also, the study revealed that as a Thing, gratitude is presented as that which can be owned (e.g., *my gratitude, my appreciation*) and modified by the Deictic, *a* or *an*, to show non-specificity (e.g., *a heartfelt gratitude, an earnest thanks*). It accepts the Numerative to show number or quantity (e.g., *many thanks, all thanks, much appreciation*), or ordering (e.g., *next appreciation, final appreciation*). It additionally accepts Epithets to colour it with interpersonal meanings (e.g., *special thanks, heartfelt gratitude*). These features of gratitude as a Thing are in tandem with pain as a Thing, as found in Halliday (1998). Additionally, Afful's (2016) observation on how gratitude expressions included possessive pronouns that identified the writer as well as adjectives that showed the intensity of the writer's gratitude to the benefactor agrees with the findings of the present study. In a similar vein, Loan (2017) noted how Vietnamese master's students use adjectives to show the intensity or degree of their gratitude. Showing a high level of gratitude, as evident in the use of such adjectives, therefore, appears to cut across cultures. Thus, given that acknowledgements serve as one of the few resources that allow students to show gratitude to their benefactors (Hyland & Tse, 2004), students make conscious efforts to give maximum credit to those whose assistance has shaped their academic careers.

Further, gratitude as a Thing performs grammatical functions, such as an Actor or a Goal in transformative material clauses as well as Verbiage in verbal clauses. As an Actor in transformative material clauses frequently characterised by the Process, *goes*, gratitude is conceptualised as that which moves from the writer, often represented by the personal pronoun, *I*, to someone who has made some notable contributions to the writer's academic life. In the case of gratitude as a Goal, it is found in transformative material clauses with the verb, *give* or *extend*, signifying that gratitude is presented as a possession being given to someone else, while gratitude as a Verbiage is conceptualised as a verbal expression. In such instances, the one at the receiving end of the gratitude is presented as the Target, and the giver as the Sayer. These findings agree with the findings of Gesuato (2004) and Tongwen's (n.d.) on the grammar of gratitude in dissertation acknowledgements. Similarly, in agreement with the findings of the present study, in their analysis of the structure and pragmatics of gratitude in dissertation acknowledgement, Cheng and Kuo (2011) reports on how gratitude expressions functioned as a Subject/Actor in clauses.

Gratitude as a Process is realised by material process verbs such as *acknowledge, appreciate, salute, and thank*, which can be presented in either the operative (e.g., *I appreciate...*) or receptive case (e.g., *...is very much appreciated*). The operative case highlights the agency of the writer, while the receptive case gives agency and modal responsibility to the particular contribution the writer received from the one being acknowledged. The verb, *appreciate*, indicates a favourable assessment of the assistance gotten, while *acknowledge* shows the benefactor's merits (Gesuato, 2004). The use of the receptive case in gratitude expressions has been reported in the literature (Gesuato, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Yang, 2012a; Yang, 2012b). However, the study by Afip et al. (2013) found no realisation of gratitude in the receptive case, showing that those writers were more interested in showing their role as givers of gratitude. In consonance with the findings of Gesuato (2004), gratitude as a Process also admits adverbs of manner, degree, or time, as a means of indicating the kind, degree, or time of gratitude. Generally, positive adverbs such as *strongly* and *well* are used, showing that the gratitude offered is the highest of its kind. Also, time adverbs (e.g., *finally, firstly*) are used to show the order of occurrence of the gratitude. In the case of adverbs of manner and degree, they highlight "the subjective, interpersonal relevance of the assistance received" (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 267).

Like gratitude as a Thing and Process, its construal as a Quality, realised by adjectives such as *thankful, grateful, and indebted*, allows for modifications by Premodifier adverbs such as *immensely, eternally, sincerely, and very*, which serve as interpersonal resources that mark gratitude as significant. The adjectives, *thankful* and *grateful*, show the beneficiary is pleased with the assistance received, while *indebted* indicates that the writer received more than he gave (Gesuato, 2004). In his research among Ghanaian undergraduates, Afful (2016) also

found the conceptualisation of gratitude as indebtedness. Similar observations were made by Yan (2012b), Chen and Kuo (2011), and Hyland (2003). According to Hyland, acknowledgement allows students to construct a reciprocal relationship of indebtedness and responsibility, which is relevant to the unity and continuity of the academic community and can result in a long-term relationship between the benefactor and beneficiary.

6. Conclusion

Acknowledgements offer an avenue for writers to show gratitude to people who have contributed in diverse ways to their academic journeys. Since Hyland’s (2003) recognition of the neglect of dissertation acknowledgements in research despite the growing body of knowledge on book acknowledgements, there has been a burgeoning strand of research on dissertation acknowledgements of various levels (undergraduate, master’s, and doctoral). Such studies, which relied mostly on the ESP perspective to genre, have mainly focused on the rhetorical organisation of dissertation acknowledgements (Afful, 2016; Golpour, 2012; Jaroenkitboworn, 2014). By adopting the SFL framework to analyse the linguistic construction of gratitude in master’s dissertation acknowledgements in the field of Economics, the present study departs significantly from previous studies on this genre. In this section, I conclude the study by presenting the implications of the study and suggestions for further research.

The present study contributes to knowledge on dissertation acknowledgements, with implications for theory. In respect of knowledge on dissertation acknowledgements, the present study advances the focus of research from rhetorical organisation to the linguistic construction of gratitude, the significance of which lies in the application of the SFL framework which brings a fresher perspective on how to approach the language of acknowledgements. As mentioned earlier, previous research on acknowledgements relied heavily on the ESP genre theory to examine the schematic structure of acknowledgements (Afful, 2016; Golpour, 2012; Jaroenkitboworn, 2014). Thus, the use of SFL in the present study to analyse the construal of gratitude rather than the structural organisation of the genre steers the research on acknowledgements along a new direction which promises to reveal interesting insights.

Also significant is the fact that the present study uses acknowledgements from Economics, a discipline that hardly featured in previous studies on dissertation acknowledgements. This means that the study also advances our disciplinary knowledge on writing practices of novice writers in the field of Economics in a non-native English-speaking country. The theoretical implication of the study lies in the successful application of SFL on the language of acknowledgements. Given that the present study is one of the earliest studies to analyse gratitude expressions in acknowledgement within the transitivity framework, it adds to the SFL literature, prominent among which are the construal of pain (Halliday, 1998), death (Marrugo, 2017), space (Matthiessen & Kashyap, 2014), and motion (Kashyap & Matthiessen, 2018).

The findings of the present study also promise to be of immense significance to writing pedagogy. In particular, given that the present study used academic texts as data, the findings will be significant to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) scholars and practitioners. In essence, the findings will aid EAP practitioners in the development of teaching and learning materials pertaining to the writing of acknowledgements in African universities and elsewhere. The finding will also be useful to dissertation supervisors as it will enable them to effectively and efficiently teach students the grammatical means of expressing gratitude in dissertation acknowledgements. Additionally, it has been noted that students need to consult reliable sources to guide them in their writings (Afful, 2016). In line with this, post-graduate students will draw insights from the findings to enable them to express themselves competently when writing their acknowledgements.

The present study has opened doors for further studies. First, the present study focused on master’s dissertation acknowledgements. This allows for further investigations of dissertation acknowledgements of undergraduate and doctoral students, with the help of the SFL theory, since acknowledgements in such dissertations are yet to be examined with SFL, especially in the Ghanaian context. Second, the fact that the

present study focused on Economics means that further studies can be conducted on other disciplines that have received limited attention from research on dissertation acknowledgements. Third, the present study concentrated on a non-native English-speaking country. Further studies can, therefore, be conducted on acknowledgements written by native speakers of English. It is also significant for studies to adopt a comparative lens so as to reveal the similarities and differences that exist in the construal of gratitude across levels of higher education, disciplines, and writers' linguistic backgrounds. Such comparative studies can draw on the synergy of SFL and quantitative approaches, especially corpus linguistics, to offer a numerical account of the possible similarities and differences.

7. References

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