A Cross-Linguistic Study on the Reflection of Metadiscourse Markers in the Acknowledgements of the Iranian and Native English Dissertations

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Abstract

The acknowledgement section in a thesis or dissertation expresses gratitude for the people who have helped the author in the process of conducting the research and writing the paper. The study sought to explore the extent to which metadiscourse markers have been employed in the dissertation acknowledgements. Excluding the rhetorical moves, emotional tones and cultural backgrounds, the research has primarily contrasted dissertation acknowledgements written by Iranian EFL doctoral graduates and English native speakers at an identical level. Hyland's metadiscourse model features and his four-tier main obligatory thanking move was applied to determine and interpret the features predominantly used in the thesis acknowledgements. A qualitative analysis of the results revealed that except for a meaningful difference in attitude markers, Iranian acknowledgements were consistent with the model and not any noticeable difference detected in using interactive metadiscourse features between Iranians and native speakers when writing their dissertation acknowledgements.

Keywords: *Dissertation Acknowledgement, Metadiscourse Features, Rhetoric Moves*

Introduction

Dissertations are expected to include a torrential list of the people in their acknowledgement section, which is meant to provide information about those who have contributed to the academic work. The acknowledgement section in a thesis or dissertation articulates the people, ranging

from university professors to friends and family members and even the people interviewed, who have helped the author while writing the research paper. They authorize the writer to thank all those who have facilitated the research and the relevant processes to be completed. Scholars (Thetela, 1997; Hoey, 2001; Hyland, 2004) contended that the written materials bear their own types of interaction that have the potential of being handled in similar ways as the spoken materials. Hyland (2004) identified three different moves of optional reflecting, main obligatory thanking, and optional announcing where reflecting move gives the research experience of the writer, and all the experiments encountered and overcome; thanking move embraces presentation of the participants, thanking for assistance in academic level, thanking for resources moral support; a final announcing move is comprised of accepting and/or dedicating responsibility. The order in which the contributors appear is that the academics such as supervisors and readers should be thanked first. Personal thanks to friends, family members, or anyone else who supported the process of writing is normally included next. The general advice is that appreciation should be expressed in brief and that strong emotional language should be avoided. Pronouns are generally avoided. This is done for various reasons: the writer proves to be a responsible scholar by giving credit to other researchers and acknowledging their ideas; by quoting words and ideas used by other authors, plagiarism is avoided; the reader trusts the accuracy of the footnotes, bibliography or reference list used as resources for citing in the paper; and the reader is encouraged whether to continue reading the research article. Many studies have been accomplished to assess the rhetorical organizations in various parts, including acknowledgements, but not metadiscourse in this section. Valero-Garces (1996, p. 281) has defined rhetoric as the art of effective and persuasive writing that the writer utilizes to persuade readers to accept the quality and credibility of his research. This study aimed at exploring whether the authors managed to correlate and associate with the audience or the readers since there are some techniques to be observed in this regard. Unfortunately, in many cases, the Iranian researchers have failed to establish a dialogue with the readers from the perspective of acknowledgement. An analysis of the samples seems to be needed grounded on the framework of metadiscourse elements proposed by Hyland (2005) en route for determining the extent to which these researchers have deviated from the norms. Meanwhile, the study will not seek to decide if this is arising from cultural or emotional values. Sub-categorizing metadiscourse features into the categories of interactive and interactional, which are being learned deliberately in L2, Hyland (2005) believed that employing these features shows the friendly attitude of the writer to the reader and offers comprehensible and correlated ideas from an individual writer to another reader. The research results of the inquiry will probably disclose the fact about whether interactive metadiscourse factors have been applied or it has been interactional factors of the acknowledgement segments of the research papers to brighten the objectives and attitudes of the writer. These results will hopefully help pave the way for Iranian researchers to abandon the emotion-stricken writing style.

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Review of the Literature

Metadiscourse is accomplished in several different ways and is essentially an open category defined as a key notion for analyzing the methods through which writers involve in their theme and the audience that enable us to match the tactics various social groups apply (Hyland, 2005). Metadiscourse related research has already been conducted on a wide variety of genres (Schiffrin, 1980; Valero-Garces, 1996; Hyland, 2001; Fuertes-Olivera et al., 2001; Milne, 2003; Dahl, 2004; Abdollahzadeh, 2007; Kuhi & Behnam, 2011; Noorian & Biria, 2010) including dissertations (Bunton, 1999; Hyland, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004). Fowler (1991) considered the text that the writer and reader jointly produced, negotiated the spirit and substance of a portion of language based on their comparatively communal worldly knowledge, society and language itself. Articulating the meaning, an author is required to take into account the influence it exerts on those involved in the interpretation of the meaning. As a matter of fact, they are the readers that the message is conveyed. Metadiscourse, as a leading instrument applied in writing, empowers the writer to achieve this goal (Hyland, 2005). Abdollahzadeh (2007) reported that the writers of the texts exploit metadiscourse to consolidate his/her text where their personality, trustworthiness, and deliberations are conveyed to the reader. Writing and language have widely been accepted to be cultural phenomena (Kaplan, 1966; Moreno, 1993). Accordingly, Connor (1996) contended that each and every language has its own unique rhetorical principles. Thus, it might be safe to conclude that the rhetorical patterns of a text written in different languages would not be necessarily identical. Metadiscourse, relishing a genres-bound trait, is an oratorical movement whose implication and practice are pertinent to an individual socio-rhetorical condition (Hyland, 2004). Some of the major metadiscourse classifications that have been developed are as follows: Metadiscourse is reflected as a concealment terminology that is comprised of various lexical items like text connectives (practiced for linking certain chunks of evidence together, but, therefore, so…), modality markers (practiced for measuring definiteness and indefiniteness of propositional substance and the amount of obligation to the measurement.) Modality markers and its subparts like hedges, emphatics and attributors are related to the interpersonal function of metadiscourse. Furthermore, it is linked to non-verbal fundamentals like punctuation, compositional markers (as parentheses, italics), and other graphical non-linguistic traits, including paragraph indentations, outlines, and typestyles (Kumpf, 2000). Therefore, they accompany the rhetorical moves, which could be really remarkable for writing acknowledgements. Moreover, authors need to understand the rhetorical devices and apply them.

Marandi (2003) examined the utilization of metadiscourse in the introduction and discussion segments of 30 Master's thesis by graduate students of Persian as well as English speakers. She analyzed the amounts and the subtypes of metadiscourse graduate students used. The model was developed from different established models by Marandi (2003) herself and found that interpersonal metadiscourse subtypes had been utilized in the discussion segments more than the other parts. The results showed that the Iranians used more rational linkers and English native speakers used fewer of them.

The current study is aligned with one of her comparisons working on texts written in English by Iranians and texts by English native speakers. Abdollahzadeh (2003) reviewed 65 articles, thirty-two of which were written by English native speakers while another thirty-three by Iranian academics in the field of ELT, and found a statistically substantial difference between the two groups in their application of interpersonal metadiscourse.

Kuhi and Mojood (2014) surveyed 60 editorials that had been written in English and Persian newspapers scrapped from ten principal newspapers in The United States and Iran and found that the Interactional category and attitude makers evidenced to be correspondingly the major metadiscourse classification and subclass in editorials of the journalistic genre. Ahmadi (2016) examined the employment of five types of interactive metadiscourse in three hundred and thirty research articles that had been presented in six academic fields and found that frame markers strategy was the one that had been occurred most in applied linguistics.

Likewise, in a contrastive study on Persian and English articles in computer engineering and applied linguistics, Zarei and Mansoori (2007) explored that interactive resources were employed the most compared to interactional features in the two fields. Alyousef (2015) explored the utilization of metadiscourse markers in three multimodal management reports that had been written by ten graduate Masters' of accounting worldwide, and the findings showed an extraordinary occurrence of interactive and interactional markers in the orthographic texts matched with a lack of implicit interactive markers and an extraordinary occurrence of implicit interactional markers through tabulations and diagrams.

Method

Instrumentation

This study explored how doctoral graduate students employed interactive and interactional resources of the metadiscourse model to write the acknowledgement section in their dissertations. The instruments employed to accomplish the analytical segments of the research was Hyland's (2005) pattern for metadiscourse. Also, Hyland's (2004) four-tier main obligatory thanking move (i.e., a. introducing participants, b. acknowledging educational support, c. acknowledging sources, d. acknowledging ethical assistance) for writing acknowledgements was applied to set the minimum required standard to select the data for the research.

Corpus

The data for the research was carefully selected, applying Hyland's (2004) four-tier obligatory thanking move, from ninety dissertations written in English (45 by Iranian EFL doctoral graduates and 45 by native speakers in an identical level) during the years2015to 2019 before the spread of covid-19 pandemic late December last year. All samples were selected from the EFL discipline in the fields of teaching methodology, translation studies and English literature since the authors in language-related disciplines are far more expert in the use of language compared to those in non-English fields. This has been done to avoid the problems arising from misused vocabulary and grammar or malfunctioning structures.

Procedure

Data collection procedure for the study was accomplished in two stages: First, the acknowledgement section of the Iranian EFL doctoral dissertations was randomly collected partially from https://tezpdf.com/, https://oatd.org/, https://pqdtopen.proquest.com/, https://gigadoc.ir/ databases offering PDF versions of the dissertations and theses, and partially from the National Library of Iran (NLI) in Tehran under tight restrictions due to pandemic and its website https://library.ut.ac.ir. The access limitations have been enforced since Nov. 20th, 2020, as declared on the website.

In the second stage, an identical data collection procedure was conducted within the same period for dissertations written by English native speakers published and circulated for public access by http://adt.caul.edu.au/, http://diva-portal.org/smash/search.jsf/, http://openthesis.org/, http://dart-europe.eu/basic-search.php/, https://etd.ohiolink.ed/, http://pqdtopen.proquest.com/search.htm/, http://ethos.bl.uk/, http://trove.nla.gov.au/. Then, the identified metadiscourse items in the texts were extracted and separately tabulated into interactive and interactional resources. Next, a quantitative analysis on the percentile tabulation was operated to decide the occurrence and frequency of each metadiscourse feature used. An average 300-word count per text (min. 150 to max. 450) was applied to calculate the frequency of features used since there has been no text with exactly the same length. The acknowledgements that failed to observe one of Hyland's (2004) four-tier main obligatory thanking moves were excluded from the study.

Data Analysis

Some examples of each four-tier obligatory thanking move have been investigated at this point of the study for the process of the analysis to be clarified. Only one sample has been offered for each move to be analyzed, including presenting participants, academic assistance, resources, and moral support.

1-   An example of presenting participants as the first part of thanking move:

Iranian: This dissertation might have never been completed without the contribution of the members of my dissertation on committee.

Native speaker: I would like to thank the members of the faculty committee for their kindness, patience and willingness to help in my time of desperate need.

2-   An example of thanking for academic assistance as the second part of thanking move:

Iranian: I am indebted to Dr. X whose unerring kindness helped flash the initial idea in my mind and Dr. Y who always supported me with his ocean of knowledge in this study.

Native speaker: My heartfelt thanks to professor X for discussing my texts and ideas, to professor Y and professor Z for their patient supervision and motivation, to professor Z' for his attentive reading, to professor Y' and professor Z' for their encouraging.

3-   An example of thanking for resources as the third part of thanking move:

Iranian: I can never thank my second supervisor enough who provided me with an invaluable resource I could hardly find in any other library.

Native speaker: <u>I</u> found the distant work colleagues <u>and</u> Ph.D. students an unending source of help who kept <u>me</u> going through tough times.

4-   An example of thanking for moral support as the final part of thanking move:

Iranian: <u>I</u> am indebted to <u>my</u> parents <u>and my</u> wife whose unconditional love reinforced <u>my</u> confidence.

Native speaker: <u>I</u> would like to express <u>my</u> deep gratitude to <u>my</u> friends <u>and</u> family members, especially <u>my</u> grandfather, <u>my</u> wife and <u>my</u> sisters whose supports, kind deeds <u>and</u> words were of valuable help to <u>me</u>.

The features of the thanking moves stipulated in the examples above have been tabulated in Table 1.

Table 1

Analysis of an Example for Four-tier Obligatory Thanking Move

Examples	Interactional M Features		Interactive M Features	
	SM (Self-mentions)	H (Hedges)	EM (Endophoric markers)	T (Transitions)
No.1 (presenting participants)	My 2, I,	Might,	This dissertation 2,	and
No.2 (academic assistance)	I, my 3, me,	----	This study,	And 5,
No.3 (resources)	I 3, me 2,	------	------	And,
No.4 (moral support)	I 2, my 8, me,	------	------	And 3,

Table 1 briefly displays the methods through which the types, as well as the numbers of the features in each one of the examples, have been analyzed based on the four-tier obligatory thanking moves. For each thanking move, including presenting participants, academic assistance, resources and moral support only one example was selected for reasons of brevity. The other non-used or rarely-used features comprising frame markers, evidentials code glosses in interactive group and boosters, attitude markers and engagement markers in the interactional group have been excluded from the table. The numbers by the words refer to the times they had been repeated in the example analyzed. The process was completed for the whole data in this study, and results were reported in the results

Results and Discussion

The current study was designed to explore the employment of interactive and interactional metadiscourse markers based on Hyland's (2005) model of metadiscourse. Once the metadiscourse feature analysis was accomplished for all the samples collected, they were tallied and calculated in the following percentile tabulations.

Table 2

Frequency and Percentages of Interactive Metadiscourse Features in Iranian and English Native Speakers' Acknowledgements

Metadiscourse Features	Iranians		Native English	
Interactive	**Tallies**	**Frequency**	**Tallies**	**Frequency**
Transitions	315	2.33%	397	2.9%
Frame markers	54	0.4%	15	0.11%
Endophoric markers	198	1.46%	75	0.55%
Evidentials	0	0	0	0
Code glosses	0	0	0	0
Total	**567**	**4.19%**	**487**	**3.56%**

Table 2 plainly demonstrates that there is not much difference in using interactive metadiscourse features between Iranians and native speakers when writing their dissertations, although Iranians have used them slightly more, that is 0.63%. Iranians have used endophoric markers nearly 1% higher than native speakers, and native speakers have used transitions 0.5% more than Iranians. The tendency of employing transitions more than the other features by both groups is quite evident, and there is no indication of using evidentials or code glosses in both groups. The use of frame markers less than 1% by both groups could also be considered negligible. Figure 5.1 displays the frequency of the features used and endorses the same results.

Figure 1

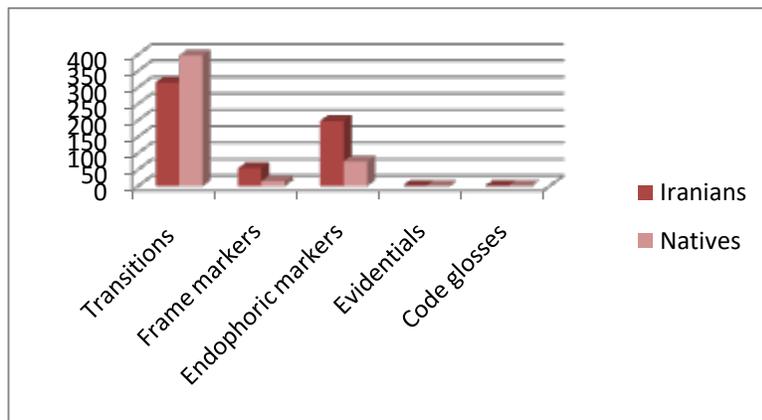*Frequency of Interactive Features Used by Iranians and English Native Speakers*

Figure 2

Categorical Distribution of Interactive Features Overall Use by Iranians and English Native Speakers
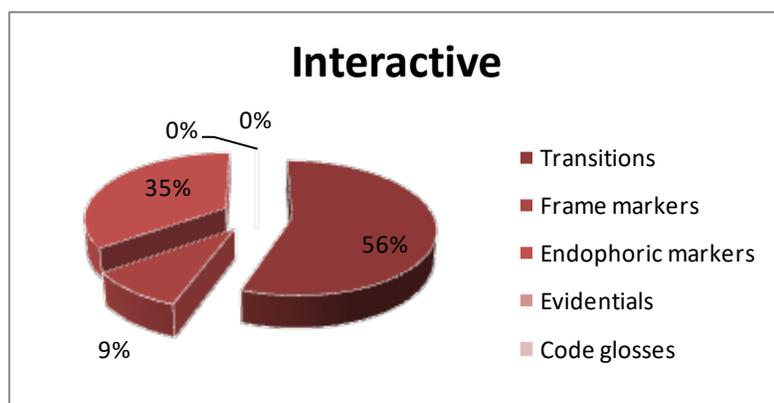

Figure 2 displays the overall categorical distribution of interactive features used by Iranians and native speakers, revealing that the use of transitions stands well over 50% while frame markers fall under 10%. Endophoric markers take the middle ground by 35%, which implies that both groups used about one-third the numbers of whole features in this category. Evidentials and code glosses take no place in the acknowledgement writings of neither group.

Table 3

Frequency and Percentages of Interactional Metadiscourse Features in Iranian and Native English Acknowledgements

Metadiscourse Features	Iranians		Native English	
Interactional	**Tallies**	**Frequency**	**Tallies**	**Frequency**
Hedges	17	0.12%	0	0
Boosters	46	0.34%	12	0.08
Attitude markers	83	0.61%	10	0.07%
Engagement markers	0	0	0	0
Self-mentions	812	6.01%	882	6.53%
Total	**958**	**7.08%**	**904**	**6.68%**

Table 3 clearly shows that the rate of using interactional metadiscourse features both by Iranians and English native speakers is not dissimilar. Meanwhile, native speakers have never employed hedges, and the use of boosters and attitude markers tend to zero in this group. Of course, this does not mean that Iranians have outnumbered the other group using these features because the figures fall far below 1%. However, the use of attitude markers by Iranians is nearly ten times as much as by English native speakers. Self-mentions have been extensively used by Iranians and English native speakers, although the 0.4% difference is a rebuff, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Frequency of Interactional Features Used by Iranians and English Native Speakers
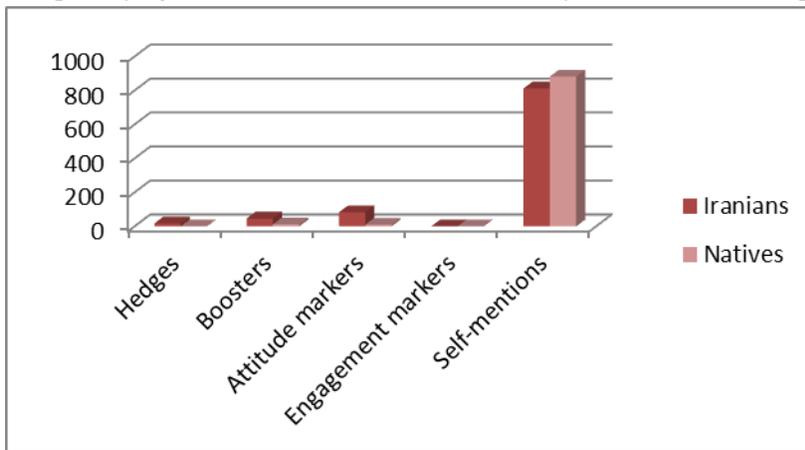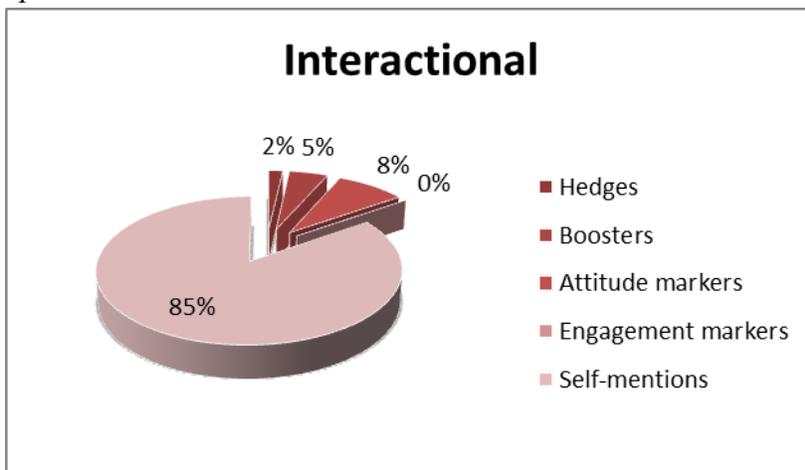

Figure 4

Categorical Distribution of Interactional Features Overall Use by Iranians and English Native Speakers

As displayed in Figure 4, the largest share of interactional metadiscourse features used both by Iranians and native speakers are found in self-mentions, while engagement markers are the portion neither group was inclined to use in their writings of acknowledgements. Though minuscule, attitude markers have been the second main feature prevalent among Iranian writers of acknowledgement for dissertations. Both groups applied boosters not more than 5% altogether, giving it the third grade among features.

The overall results clearly proved the nonexistence of evidentials and code glosses in interactive classification and engagement markers in interactional classification in the works written by both English native speakers and Iranians. This implies that there has been no tendency at all among dissertation writers in the two groups to use the mentioned Metadiscourse

features. Meanwhile, native English speakers also showed no inclination to employ Hedges, although the percentages for the same features used by Iranians are also slim and far less than one percent. Hedges are those words that are utilized in sentences conveying doubts and obscurity, rather than surety of and firmness in what is being stated. Thus, it can be said that native speakers are rather more confident in what they declare in their writings. On the other hand, Boosters and Attitude markers used by the native speakers are also insignificant and tend to zero. Boosters are similar devices at hand for the writers to enable them to express and stress an idea with confidence, whereas attitude markers, as the term implies, are applied to elucidate personal emotional states and allow them to enter into the expressions made. Consequently, it is inferred from the comparative results that English native speakers are not predisposed to unveil their mental status or inner feelings in acknowledgements since the written piece is academic. In other words, the native English writers, unlike Iranians, do not foreground the reader-writer relationships in an academic text on an emotive basis. However, a significant point worthy of indicating here is that the relinquishment from sentimentality in writing acknowledgement sections by English native speakers is not accidental but a thoughtful action taken to show respect to the reader. Nonetheless, Iranians' willingness to use a bit more attitude markers may reveal the fact that they wish to remain faithful to their culture.

Conclusion

The results of this research divulged the fact that interactional features have been employed far more, nearly twice as much as Interactive features by both Iranians and native speakers. Moreover, Iranians preferred to use the features in the two categories around 0.5% more than the native speakers. While the elements in the interactive category (transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, code glosses) are used to deliver organized and coherent text, those in the interactional category (hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, engagement markers) are used to establish interactions between readers and writers. Interactional metadiscourse, or "interpersonal metadiscourse" in Milne's terms, constructs a text-based persona that seems appealing, undoubted and trustworthy to the reader, revealing the persuasive nature of these resources (2003, p.33). As a result, it could be concluded that Iranians needed to implement a bit more features from the two categories to equally deliver an organized text as well as start interaction with the reader compared to native speakers. Moreover, interaction with the reader has been more important than textuality for both groups. For example, through the use of more hedges, the claim by the writer is weakened since it is an undeniable capability of the writer's obligation to cast doubt; it stipulates a view and not an eligible truth (Hyland, 1998). Hyland also argued that "in especial types of writings such as convincing ones, hedges are vital tools to associate with the writer's pledge to enforce suspicion and form a connection between writer and reader (1994). As to attitude markers, they take a leading role in persuading their readers. Writers use attitude markers to hint at an assumption of shared attitudes, positions, and values to win the reader's agreement (Hyland, 2005). Except for evidentials, the other four sub-categories of interactive resources, especially transitions, are used to support the cohesion of the

texts. Based on the findings, native speakers used more transitions than Iranians, while Iranians applied more endophoric markers than native speakers to make their texts more coherent.

Whereas transitions and endophoric markers apparently have been used most frequently in this category, code glosses and evidentials have never been applied by either group. Nevertheless, the fact cannot be denied that there was no substantial variance in employing interactional category in either group. This implies that the dissertation acknowledgements are written by Iranians and native speakers relish an identical level of cohesion and organization of the text. Meanwhile, the inclination of Iranian writers to employ additional interactional resources in their texts implies that they intend to build closer interaction with the reader in comparison with the English native speakers. Depending on the research results, it would be fair to claim that there was not a noteworthy difference in applying rhetorical techniques for establishing discourse in both groups, although some culture-bound moves are traceable in Iranian writings, especially religious ones. Generally speaking, Iranian authors have employed more metadiscourse items in order to attain a deeper conveyance of the message.

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