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Title

Religion-Related Expressions in Research Report Acknowledgements
by Indonesian EFL Learners

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Abstract

Expressing religiousness is part of Indonesian socio-cultural norms. Religion-related expressions are often produced by Indonesian people in any occasions: formal and informal, spoken and written. This “divine presence” is also found in research report acknowledgments by Indonesian learners of English. This article explores religion-related expressions in acknowledgements accompanying 120 undergraduate and graduate theses and 23 doctorate

dissertations. This corpus-based study found that most acknowledgements contain religion-related expressions in the forms of (1) thanking God, (2) prayers for blessing on the Prophet, (3) spiritual support as a reason for thanking, and (4) invocation for the acknowledgees as elaboration of thanking. Another typical aspect of Indonesian acknowledgements is the preferred order of acknowledgees, where most writers put thanking God at the initial position. Besides confirming that acknowledgements reflect socio-cultural identities of the writers and revealing an Indonesian variety of English, this study provides evidence of pragmatic transfer among Indonesian EFL learners.

Keywords: *Religion-related expressions, Indonesian EFL learners, acknowledgements*

Introduction

Expressing religiousness is part of pragmatic routines which frequently occur in daily communication in Indonesia, both in formal and informal situations, either in oral or written use of language. Religion-related expressions also frequently appear in the acknowledgments of theses, dissertations, or books. The ‘divine presence’ or “Praise be to the Lord ...” also goes ineluctably into the magister theses and doctoral dissertations, in spite of the fact that they are full-fledged scholarly works (Kadarisman, 2009:208). This confirms Al-Ali’s (2009:8) claim that acknowledgement is a genre that exhibits a rich mix of identities reflecting personal, social and academic collaboration and interactions that establish and shape social, academic and personal identities.

Studies on the acknowledgments section accompanying thesis and dissertation have been conducted from the view points of genre (Giannoni, 2002; Hyland, 2003 and 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004; Al-Ali 2009 and 2010; Zhao and Jiang 2010, Yang, 2013), pragmatics (Cheng and Kuo, 2011), and error analysis (Erfan, 2007). The studies examined thesis or dissertation acknowledgments written by native speakers of several languages: Persian (Mohammadi and Tabari (2013), Chinese (Cheng, 2012; Yang, 2013), Italy (Zhao and Jiang, 2010), Arabic (Al-Ali, 2009 and 2010), and Indonesian (Basthomi, 2010; Kadarisman, 2009; and Erfan, 2007). However, there is no previous study examining social and cultural characteristics in research report acknowledgements (henceforth RRAs), particularly religion-related expressions. So, the present study aims to find out types of religion-related expressions in RRAs and probable reasons why they occur in purely academic discourse.

Literature Review

Hyland (2004:303) states that acknowledgements are almost universal in dissertation writing where they provide writers with a unique rhetorical opportunity, not only to convey

their genuine gratitude for the intellectual and personal assistance they have received in completing their research, but also to promote a competent scholarly identity. In addition, acknowledgments offer students a unique rhetorical space to convey their genuine gratitude for assistance and to promote a favourable social and scholarly character (Hyland and Tse, 2004:259).

Hyland (2003:242) also points out that the textualization of gratitude in acknowledgements can reveal social and cultural characteristics. Al-Ali's study (2010) also supports the influence of socio-cultural values. These findings confirm Mauranen's (1993, as quoted in Al-Ali, 2009:13) proposal that a written genre is a cultural object.

Accordingly, studies on acknowledgements written by Indonesian learners of English indicate the influence of Indonesian culture. A study by Erfan (2007) found that the dominant cultural transfer in thesis acknowledgements was the use of religion-related expressions. Kadarisman (2009) investigated the expression of religiousness in the acknowledgements of *magister* theses and doctoral dissertations written by students of Indonesian and English departments, and found that the students of these two different departments use significantly different expressions of religiousness.

Methodology

The corpus is acknowledgements sections of research reports written by Indonesian EFL learners, taken from 60 undergraduate theses, 60 graduate theses, and 23 doctorate dissertations written by students of English Language Teaching at State University of Malang in a three-year period: 2011–2013. The data were firstly organized using the coding scheme adapted from Cheng & Kuo (2011). Modifying Cheng & Kuo's coding scheme, every thanking expression in the acknowledgements was segmented into 7 semantic units: (i) thanking; (ii) acknowledgees; (iii) reasons due to academic assistance; (iv) reasons due to resources; (v) reasons for spiritual or moral support, such as blessing, love, prayer, support and encouragement; (vi) elaboration, elaborating on reasons for thanking; and (vii) invocation. Religion-related expressions were then identified by using some basic key terms in religious expressions, such as *God*, *Allah*, *Prophet*, *divine*, or other words having similar meaning.

Findings and Discussion

Thanking God

Overall, praising and thanking God occurs in 95 RRAs (67%) by Indonesian learners of English. This frequency (67%) is not too far from the occurrence of similar expressions in Arabic acknowledgements by Arabic native speakers, that was 70 % (Al-Ali, 2010:9). The

expressions were in the form of praising, thanking, or praising followed by thanking, as shown by the following three quotations:

1. “*Alhamdulillahirabbil’alamiin*, this thesis finally can be accomplished well”
2. First and foremost, let me express my never-ending gratitude to the Most Merciful Allah SWT.
... .
3. “*Alhamdulillah*, I am really grateful for Allah SWT, for the blessing ...

Praising is mostly expressed using the Arabic phrase *Alhamdulillah* *rabbil ‘alamin* ‘Praise be to Allah, Lord of the universe’, an expression of thank-giving common among Muslims. Al-Ali (2010: 17-18) points out that the use of *Alhamdulillah* ‘Praise be to Allah’ contains a strong preference for the overt expression of praise, which is only used when the writers offer their thankfulness for their God (Allah). Similar to Arab writers, Indonesian writers of RRAs tend not only to fall back on their socio-cultural norms but also have a perception of how best to address and interact with their heterogeneous audience (see Al-Ali-2010: 17). The words used to address God are also affected by the writers’ religious background. There are four lexical variants used to address God; they are *Allah* (64%), *God* (23 %), *Jesus* or *Jesus Christ* (8.4%), and *Lord* (4.2%).

Prayers for Blessing on the Prophet

Another conventional expression that frequently appears at the opening part of RRAs is prayers for blessing on the Prophet. They occur in 33 RRAs (23%), being placed immediately after thanking Allah. The typical wording of these prayers is presented in excerpt 4, and more elaborately in excerpt 5.

4. Blessing and peace should always go to Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him
5. Blessing and peace be upon His messenger and servant, Muhammad, and upon his family and companions and whoever follows his guidance.

It is also worth noting that some student-writers did code-mixing by inserting Arabic expressions that are commonly used in other communicative events, as in 6:

6. *Shalawat* and *salam* only for my beloved prophet, Muhammad *SAW*¹, the last prophet sent to enlight human kind in the world with Islam as *rahmatan lil ‘alamiin*.

Prayers for blessing on the Prophet is evidently observed not only in RRAs but also in acknowledgements of introduction of books or other scholarly works written by Indonesian

¹ SAW that stands for *shallallahu ‘alaihi wa sallam* (may Allah’s blessing and peace be upon him).

Muslims, especially those discussing Islamic studies or teachings. Al-Ali (2010) found similar data in Arabic acknowledgements, that 6 % of acknowledgements by Arabic writers are opened with prayers for the Prophet.

Moral and Spiritual Support as a Reason for Thanking

Another form of religion-related expressions observed in Indonesian RRAs is the dominance of thanking for moral and spiritual support. In the whole corpus, more than one third of thanking expressions are for spiritual and moral support (42%), followed by thanking for academic assistance (35.2%), and thanking for resources and technical assistance (22.8%). Among expressions of thanking for moral and spiritual support, 136 expressions (21 %) of them are specifically devoted for spiritual support, namely, guidance, blessings, or prayers. Thanking expressions for spiritual support are commonly delivered to family members, as exemplified in excerpt 7.

7. My beloved parents, mom and dad, thanks a bunch for the endless love, support, sincere pray (*sic.*) and everything.

This frequently occurring gratitude for moral and spiritual support indicates that moral and spiritual support plays a crucial role in the realm of Indonesian collective mind.

Invoking and Blessing

This expression of religiousness also occurs when the writers elaborate their thanking and occasionally when they open or end their acknowledgements. Invoking and blessing are expressions of asking for God's (Allah's) divine favors and blessings upon acknowledgees. Out of 1484 identified thanking strategies in the corpus, 58 (or 4 %) are accompanied with invocation. More than half invoking and blessings are intended for those who provided moral and spiritual support (57.4%), technical assistance (8.5%), and academic assistance (10.6%), as well as while opening (2 %) and closing (21.3%) acknowledgements. Data analysis also reveals that the invocation involves not only relatives or friends, as in quotation 8, but also academics such as advisors, as in quotation 9.

8. **to my beloved parents and whole family, May God give you all the best that life can give.**
9. I am indebted for the great help to (*sic.*) my advisor: X, S.Pd, M.Ed God bless you.

Al-Ali (2009: 15) points out that neither of these invocations is arbitrary; they are part of their culture reflecting their realm of thought. "It may seem obvious that words with special

culture-specific meanings reflect and pass on not only ways of living characteristic of a given society but also ways of thinking” (Wierzbicka 1997, as quoted in Al-Ali (2009: 15)).

Conclusions

Religion-related expressions observed in RRAs by Indonesian EFL learners reveal that “divine presence” as part of Indonesian socio-cultural norms has been evidently rooted in written genre. This finding confirms that acknowledgements reflect academic and social identities as noted by Hyland (2003) and Al-Ali (2009); and that socioal practices can affect writing habit (Mauranen, 1993). Socio-pragmatic transfer among Indonesian EFL learners which characterizes Indonesian variety of English is also evidenced in this study.

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