

Reconciliation or Obligation? A Discourse Analysis of Written Land Acknowledgements Produced in an Academic Context

*Stephanie Hammond-Thrasher, Research Analyst
Department of Research and Advocacy*



Introduction

Canadian land acknowledgements recognize Indigenous people and their traditional territory. Indeed, many Indigenous communities still reside on the land, making the recognition an important act of reconciliation declaring non-Indigenous groups as visitors that are accountable to the rich history and populations of the territory (Shahzad, 2017). These acknowledgements are made primarily by non-Indigenous individuals or groups, and they honour Indigenous communities as well as recognizing settlers' and visitors' responsibilities to the traditional groups and their territory. Typically, Canadian land acknowledgements reference the Treaty territory upon which an event or group is situated. The majority of Canada was divided into 11 territories by the Numbered Treaties, which were signed from 1871 to 1921 between Indigenous groups and the crown (Filice, 2019). However, parts of the territories and eastern Canada are unceded, meaning that there is no Numbered Treaty to mention in land acknowledgements made in those areas. Nevertheless, it is still vital to produce such statements on unceded land, as Indigenous communities continue to have a deep connection to the land.

As customary openings at most public Canadian events, land acknowledgements are also seen with increasing frequency on organization webpages and even in email signatures. However, this prevalence raises questions about their value: are non-Indigenous individuals replicating these statements out of simple obligation or meaningful accountability? In other words, criticism of land acknowledgements highlights their underlying similarities, doubting their genuine nature and instead emphasizing their superficial, scripted insincerity ("Questioning the usefulness of land acknowledgements," 2019). These concerns are particularly acute in an academic setting: institutions must honour the territory they reside on while consciously ensuring the "correct instruction of communal history" (Dion, 2019). That is, land acknowledgements serve to correctly educate audiences about relevant Indigenous history as well as to honour and remain accountable to Indigenous communities. The language used in territory acknowledgements indicates how well the narrator has achieved these two goals. For example, a detached stance demonstrates a

lack of responsibility, while incorrect facts show carelessness and promotes misinformation.

This project investigates two categories of English land acknowledgements made in a similar academic context: statements from the webpages of eight schools on Treaty 6 territory (Appendix A), which encompasses large portions of Alberta and Saskatchewan (Filice, 2016); and samples from four institutions on unceded land (Appendix B). This enables a context-specific juxtaposition of common rhetorical devices while attending to the second category's inability to reference a determined Numbered Treaty. Specifically, I compare variations in their genre, modality, register, structure, and lexical choices, demonstrating the discursive weaknesses of the statements. Indeed, characteristics distancing the institutions from the topic of their pronouncements, such as a highly formal register, missing structural elements, and lexical choices that promote misinformation, are detrimental to the effectiveness and authenticity of a land acknowledgement. Overall, this discourse analysis provides a survey of ineffective rhetorical techniques in Canadian land acknowledgements in an academic context.

Genre, Modality, and Register

Understood as a “patterned, typical, and therefore intelligible form,” a specific genre is recognizable and even predictable (Wardle & Downs, 2014, p. 213). The genre of land acknowledgements is well established: it involves an individual recognizing the connections between the land they are on and traditional Indigenous communities in order to honour these groups and remain accountable to historic relationships between settlers and Indigenous populations. All land acknowledgements in Appendix A and B are firmly situated within this genre, allowing a close examination of their rhetorical devices without departing from the established conventions of form and function.

Pertaining specifically to the form of a text, modality refers to how a passage of discourse is delivered (Sulkunen & Torronen, 1997). Indeed, a written excerpt from a novel has a distinct modality from a formal speech, which involves extra-linguistic factors beyond words and sentences. Interestingly, while all the sample land acknowledgements are in writing, they are not always expected to be delivered in this modality. That is, they are prepared to be included in academic documents, policy guidelines, websites, brochures, and email signatures, as well as to be recited at conferences and public events. Considering this, it is important that their register, structure, and lexical choices are appropriate for both written and spoken modes. Specifically, register refers to a passage's degree of formality expressed through lexical, morphosyntactic, and cohesive choices (Nordquist, 2019).

Category A: Treaty 6 Land Acknowledgements

The eight sample land acknowledgements are all written in a formal style due to their politicized subject matter, academic context, and lexical constructions (Appendix A). That is, they do not use morphosyntax characteristic of informal writing, such as conjunctions, nor do they use informal lexical items like colloquialisms (Rice, 2019). However, their different degrees of politeness creates variation within this formal register. Indeed, Samples 3 and 5 begin with “[I] would like to acknowledge,” while the other texts state simply “[I] acknowledge.” The former contains an added degree of courtesy which effectively sets a distant stance between the narrator and their audience, while the latter is assertive and takes ownership of the acknowledgement, bringing the narrator closer to the audience within discursive space. Hence, the civil conditionality in Samples 3 and 5 creates a more formal, removed tone than the other samples. Importantly, the genre of land acknowledgements necessitates an accountable recognition of territory, and thus the less distanced approach taken in the other six samples situates those texts in an appropriately formal register, rather than detaching them from their subject matter.

Category B: Land Acknowledgements of Unceded Territory

The four land acknowledgements maintain a formal tone due to their political subject matter, academic context, and lack of informal linguistic constructions (Appendix B). Furthermore, their stance is polite yet distanced: all four statements use “we would like” which, as previously addressed, adds a degree of courtesy that effectively distances the narrator from both their subject matter and their audience. Emphatically, the genre of land acknowledgements requires a closeness between the speaker and their audience in order to achieve the discursive goals of accountability, acknowledgement, and the promotion of correct information.

Structure and Lexical Choices

While past scholarly literature does not outline the appropriate structure of land acknowledgements, a survey of existing statements quickly highlights their crucial elements that combine to achieve the discursive goals of promoting correct information, honouring Indigenous communities, and acknowledging settlers’ and visitors’ responsibility to the land. Indeed, all the territorial acknowledgements examined here contain the same basic components: the first person plural pronoun “we,” or the affiliated association or institution name; the verb “acknowledge;” an

indication of Treaty 6 or unceded territory; and the identification of at least one Indigenous group. This structure certainly recognizes the key participants in the speech act of a land acknowledgement. However, the purpose of such statements goes beyond simply recognizing an institution's location: it involves honouring Indigenous communities and recognizing a non-Indigenous group's responsibility to the territory on which they reside. Hence, most statements include additional elements that increase the depth of information and the academic institution's accountability.

Category A: Treaty 6 Land Acknowledgements

A key structural difference between the eight sample land acknowledgements addresses the syntax of the first phrase (Appendix A). While most of the samples clearly state that they "are (located) on," they are "gathered" on, or that "this" is Treaty 6 territory (Samples 1, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8), one of the statements follows a different framework. That is, Sample 2 does not directly situate the Alberta Teachers' Association, simply writing that they "acknowledge Treaty 6 territory." This omission of a location-establishing phrase fails to highlight the institution's ownership of the statement, thus weakening the acknowledgement.

A second, relatively smaller structural detail found in Samples 3 and 5 (Appendix A) performs to their detriment: as previously mentioned, the addition of "we would like to" in their first sentences distances the non-Indigenous narrator from their audience due to its formal register. However, this lexical choice also establishes an asymmetrical power dynamic in favor of the two institutions. Indeed, the modal verb 'would' functions to ask permission. In these examples, the narrators demand consent without seeking a response, indicating their presumption that they are already licensed to continue as the party of higher status. In other words, this rhetorical device asserts their power over the subject of their statements, namely Indigenous communities, rather than expressing their respectful accountability.

Another structural difference considers the statements' expressions of the value of Indigenous groups (Appendix A). Lexical additions like respect, grateful, peace, friendship, and honour emphasize the institutions' respect for Indigenous communities (Samples 1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8). This accomplishes the goal of outlining a responsibility to traditional territories and their populations as it relegates the non-Indigenous group from authoritative to compassionate. However, Samples 4 and 6 appear scripted and distanced due to their omission of personal, respectful words and phrases. Indeed, other statements have full phrases recognizing Indigenous contributions (Samples 1, 2, 7), while these two neglect any care whatsoever.

Perhaps the most obvious structural variation between the eight sample land acknowledgements is the naming of Indigenous groups (Appendix A). The samples

approach this in three different ways: mentioning a single group (Samples 6 and 8); recognizing a small number of communities, such as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (FNMI) (Samples 1, 3, 7); and identifying a large number of communities (Samples 2, 4, 5). The first technique promotes misinformation and exclusivity, as mentioning a single collective and omitting all others fails to recognize diversity within the scope of Treaty 6. Alternately, recognizing FNMI communities certainly includes a larger variety of groups, but when juxtaposed with the third approach, this still appears exclusive. Nonetheless, identifying a large number of communities raises questions about the ordering of names, which can be perceived as a spectrum of superiority, as well as the issue of which groups must be mentioned. Indeed, Samples 2, 4, and 5 recognize different arrangements of names, and do not all mention the same groups. However, if all three approaches promote exclusivity to some extent, how can a land acknowledgement promote appropriate, inclusive information? Samples 1 and 7 solve this problem by recognizing FNMI communities as well as all “First Peoples” of Canada, which identifies major Indigenous groups while acknowledging other important collectives.

Category B: Land Acknowledgements of Unceded Territory

Samples 1, 2, and 3 do not situate their respective institutions by name, instead using the first person plural pronoun we to reference their location (Appendix B). Contrastively, Sample 4 situates Mount Allison University by name in the second sentence. Furthermore, all four land acknowledgements use would, which not only distances the narrator from their audience, but also creates an imbalance between the two participants. That is, the construction demands consent from the audience, asserting the speaker’s power over their audience.

Regarding the acknowledgement of territory not included in the Numbered Treaties, all four statements use either “ancestral unceded lands” or “traditional and unceded territory,” which are discursively quite similar (Appendix B). Additionally, the groups they reference are fairly universal: Mi’kmaq and Beothuk communities are mentioned throughout. However, their ability to communicate respect differs. Indeed, Samples 1 and 4 use terms like respect and honour alongside the promotion of correct information to show their responsible attentiveness. In fact, the former intelligently and respectfully distinguishes between the land on which Memorial University resides and the greater territory of Newfoundland. Sample 4 performs a similar action by recognizing the Indigenous name for the territory of Mount Allison University, known as Mi’kma’ki. While Samples 2 and 3 do promote precise information about Indigenous communities, neither statement uses respectful language to honour those groups. As a matter of fact, Sample 3 provides in-depth information about the

dates, names, and locations of Indigenous communities in Nova Scotia which creates a technical, distanced tone. Thus, while a commitment to correct information is important, there is a limit to the amount of particular details necessary in a land acknowledgement.

Conclusion

This project outlined discursive choices that impede a land acknowledgement's ability to recognize traditional territory, honour Indigenous histories, and promote accountability. Despite the location of the territory to which a land acknowledgement pays tribute, it appears that these ineffective rhetorical devices are quite ubiquitous. Indeed, an overly-formal register distances the narrator from their subject matter and their audience. Similarly, failure to directly locate an institution removes a sense of ownership from their poorly-structured statement. Moreover, the omission of respectful words and phrases creates a careless, authoritative statement. Additionally, land acknowledgements that demand consent without seeking a response relegate Indigenous communities to an inferior position. Moreover, statements that recognize a single Indigenous community promote misinformation and exclusivity, while statements that identify many groups seed problems like the ordering of names and inclusion criteria. Land acknowledgements that find an inclusive term to reference Indigenous communities take the strongest discursive approach.

Future projects will benefit from a global set of land acknowledgements from countries such as New Zealand and Australia, where the practice of issuing recognition of land is common. This will yield potentially interesting results pointing to regional, national, and international variation within the genre of land acknowledgements. Finally, comparisons between territorial acknowledgements produced by Indigenous communities versus non-Indigenous groups are currently uninvestigated; variations regarding register, structure, and lexical choices may produce significant results. Overall, the question of whether a land acknowledgement functions to promote reconciliation, accountability, and respect or is simply an act of obligation must be continually asked; indeed, "in Canada, hypocrisy is a uniquely potent force - saying sorry and not meaning it is what we are best at" (Marche, 2017).

Appendix A: Treaty 6 Land Acknowledgements

Sample 1: University of Alberta

"The University of Alberta acknowledges that we are located on Treaty 6 territory, and respects the histories, languages, and cultures of First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and all First Peoples of Canada, whose presence continues to enrich our vibrant community" ("Acknowledgement of traditional territory," 2019).

Sample 2: Alberta Teachers' Association

"The Alberta Teachers' Association acknowledges Treaty 6 territory—the ancestral and traditional territory of the Cree, Dene, Blackfoot, Saulteaux, Nakota Sioux, as well as the Métis. We acknowledge the many First Nations, Métis and Inuit whose footsteps have marked these lands for generations. We are grateful for the traditional Knowledge Keepers and Elders who are still with us today and those who have gone before us" ("Walking together: Education for reconciliation," 2018).

Sample 3: Norquest College

"We would like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional lands, referred to as Treaty 6 Territory, and that the City of Edmonton and all the people here are beneficiaries of this peace and friendship treaty. Treaty 6 encompasses the traditional territories of numerous western Canadian First Nations as well as the Métis people who have called this area home since time immemorial. NorQuest College is dedicated to ensuring that the spirit of Treaty 6 is honoured and respected" ("Treaty 6 territory acknowledgement procedure," 2019).

Sample 4: Elk Island Public School Board

"We acknowledge that we are on Treaty 6 territory, a traditional meeting grounds, gathering place, and travelling route to the Cree, Saulteaux, Blackfoot, Métis, Dene and Nakota Sioux. We acknowledge all the many First Nations, Métis, and Inuit whose footsteps have marked these lands for centuries" (Sorel, 2019).

Sample 5: Saskatchewan School Boards

"We would like to acknowledge that we are on the traditional lands, referred to as Treaty 6 Territory and that the City of Saskatoon/Prince Albert/North Battleford/Meadow Lake and all the people here are beneficiaries of this peace and

friendship treaty. Treaty 6 encompasses the traditional territories of numerous First Nations, including Cree, Dene (DEN-Ē), Nakota, Saulteaux (SO-TO), and Ojibwe (OJIB-WĒ) and the homeland of the Métis Nation. We are dedicated to ensuring that the spirit of Reconciliation and Treaty 6 is honoured and respected. This acknowledgement also reaffirms our relationship with one another" ("Territory 6 acknowledgement," 2018).

Sample 6: Lloydminster Public School Board

"We acknowledge that the ancestral and traditional lands on which we gather are Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis" ("Administrative procedure: Treaty 6 acknowledgement," 2019).

Sample 7: MacEwan University

"We acknowledge that the land on which we gather in Treaty Six Territory is the traditional gathering place for many Indigenous people. We honour and respect the history, languages, ceremonies and culture of the First Nations, Métis and Inuit who call this territory home. The First People's connection to the land teaches us about our inherent responsibility to protect and respect Mother Earth. With this acknowledgement, we honour the ancestors who have been buried here, missing and murdered Indigenous women and men, and the process of ongoing collective healing for all human beings." ("Land recognition statements," 2019).

Sample 8: Northern Alberta Institute of Technology

"We honour and acknowledge this is traditional Treaty 6 territory and an important trading centre for the Métis Nation" (Kendrick, 2016).

Appendix B: Land Acknowledgments of Unceded Territory

Sample 1: Memorial University

“We would like to respectfully acknowledge the territory in which we gather as the ancestral unceded homelands of the Beothuk and the island of Newfoundland as the unceded homelands of the Mi’kmaq and Beothuk” (“Aboriginal affairs: Land acknowledgement,” 2017).

Sample 2: University of Prince Edward Island

“We would like to acknowledge that the land on which we gather is the traditional and unceded territory of the Abegweit Mi’kmaq First Nation” (“Guide to acknowledging First Peoples and traditional territory,” 2019).

Sample 3: Dalhousie University

“We would like to acknowledge that we are in Mi’kma’ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi’kmaq People. This territory is covered by the “Treaties of Peace and Friendship” which Mi’kmaq Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet), and Passamaquoddy Peoples first signed with the British Crown in 1726. The treaties did not deal with the surrender of lands and resources but in fact recognized Mi’kmaq and Wəlastəkwiyik (Maliseet) title and established the rules for what was to be an ongoing relationship between nations” (“Diversity and inclusiveness,” 2018).

Sample 4: Mount Allison University

We would like to acknowledge, honour, and pay respect to the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we gather. It is upon the ancestral unceded lands of the Mi’kmaq people that Mount Allison University is built. While this area is known as Sackville, NB, the territory is part of the greater territory of Mi’kma’ki (“Indigenous student support,” 2016).

References

- Aboriginal affairs: Land acknowledgement. (2017). Retrieved from https://www.mun.ca/aboriginal_affairs/
- Administrative procedure: Treaty 6 acknowledgement. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.lpsd.ca/download/194395>
- Acknowledgment of traditional territory. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.ualberta.ca/toolkit/communications/acknowledgment-of-traditional-territory>
- Dion, S. (2019). About us: First People's House. Retrieved from <https://www.ualberta.ca/current-students/first-peoples-house/about>
- Diversity and inclusiveness. (2018). Retrieved from http://www.dags.ca/uploads/1/1/5/5/11555167/program-draft_2.pdf
- Filice, M. (2016). Treaty 6. Retrieved from <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/treaty-6>
- Guide to acknowledging First Peoples and traditional territory. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.caut.ca/content/guide-acknowledging-first-peoples-traditional-territory>
- Indigenous student support. (2016). Retrieved from <https://www.mta.ca/indigenous/>
- Kenrick, N. (2016). NAIT honours and recognizes Treaty 6. Retrieved from <https://www.techlifetoday.ca/articles/2016/nait-honours-and-recognizes-treaty-6>
- Land recognition statements. (2019). Retrieved from <http://sites.macewan.ca/macewantoday/files/2018/01/Treaty6-land-statementsFINAL-January16-2018.pdf>
- Marche, S. (2017). Canada's impossible acknowledgement. The New Yorker: Culture Desk. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/canadas-impossible-acknowledgment>
- McGraw-Hill (2018). Text types and purposes: Personal narrative. Retrieved from https://macmillanmh.com/ccsreading/imagineit/grade5/ccslh_g5_wr_4_1c_tl1.htm
- Nordquist, R. (2019). What is register in linguistics? Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/register-language-style-1692038>
- Questioning the usefulness of land acknowledgements. (2019). Retrieved from <https://aptnnews.ca/2019/02/27/questioning-the-usefulness-of-land-acknowledgements/>
- Rice, S. (2019). Week 3 lecture. In LING 314: Discourse Analysis. Lecture conducted at the University of Alberta.

- Shahzad, R. (2017). What is the significance of acknowledging the Indigenous land we stand on? Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/territorial-acknowledgements-indigenous-1.4175136>
- Sorel, K. (2019). Treaty 6 acknowledgement [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://www.eips.ca/download/100671>
- Sulkunen, P., & Torronen, J. (1997). The production of values: The concept of modality in textual discourse analysis. *Semiotica*, 113(1), 43-69.
- Territory 6 acknowledgement. (2018). Retrieved from <https://saskschoolboards.ca/wp-content/uploads/Treaty-6-Territory.pdf>
- Treaty 6 territory acknowledgement procedure. (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.norquest.ca/about-us/policies-procedures/operations/college-communications-policy/treaty-6-territory-acknowledgment-procedure.aspx>
- Walking together: Education for reconciliation. (2018). Retrieved from <https://www.teachers.ab.ca/SiteCollectionDocuments/ATA/For%20Members/ProfessionalDevelopment/Walking%20Together/PD-WT-24%20Land%20Acknowledgement.pdf>
- Wardle, E., & Downs, D. (2014). *Writing about writing* (2nd ed.). Boston: New York.