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Meaningful Rituals: A Linguistic Analysis of Acknowledgements of Country

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a linguistic analysis of Australian Acknowledgements of Country, an ancient Indigenous practice now increasingly prevalent in Australian public life. Acknowledgements of Country are typically spoken at the beginning of events by either Indigenous or non-Indigenous people. While celebrated as a practice that gives voice and primacy to Country, Indigenous peoples and their cultural practices, they have also attracted criticism for being tokenistic and minimising the severity of the genocide and continuing exploitation of Indigenous peoples. Supporting a body of work that critically engages with the values and structure of Acknowledgements of Country, we deploy a variety of tools from systemic functional linguistics to analyse 20 examples (both spoken and written), using the lexicogrammatical and discourse semantic systems of agency, transitivity and appraisal. Our findings show that there are both obligatory and optional parts in the Acknowledgments of Country, and that these linguistic choices can illuminate contemporary power dynamics and political stances. Our intention here is to the highlight the language choices that place obligations and duties on speakers in delivering their Acknowledgements of Country.

KEYWORDS

Acknowledgements of Country; systemic functional linguistics; agency; appraisal analysis

Introduction

We, the researchers writing this article, would like to acknowledge that we are both non-Indigenous Australian scholars; however, in the process of this research, we have consulted Indigenous scholarship and drawn upon the work of prominent Indigenous thinkers such as Yorta Yorta scholar Tiriki Onus, Cobble Cobble scholar Professor Megan Davis, Dharawal Scholar Bronwyn Carlson, Yawuru senator Pat Dodson, Gangulu public servant Mick Gooda, Wiradjuri Member of Parliament Linda Burney, Nyunggai politician Warren Mundine, Worimi council chairperson Bev Manton, Gooreng Gooreng Commissioner Justin Mohamed, Gamilaraay and Yawalaraay journalist

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Lorena Allam, Birri Gubba and Mer radio producer Emily Nicol, Yolngu and Balanggarra reporter Molly Hunt, and Barrungam Gunggari communications lead Adam Phelan. We also acknowledge the invaluable support and guidance of Budimia, Yamatji and Noongar educator Rhys Paddick and non-Indigenous change strategist Emma Gibbens, whose two workshops on Acknowledgements of Country we attended and found invaluable. Our thinking was also guided by our presence at other informative events, such as the University of Sydney Ideas talk by Wiradjuri and Wailwan lawyer Teela Reid on reconciliation and the cultural training run by Mirri Mirri, an Aboriginal-owned and -operated company.

We felt compelled to undertake this research because Acknowledgements of Country are "a very ancient tradition which we have brought back", a practice that was once performed only by Indigenous Australians, but now "everyone can do".[1] Indeed, they are often mandated by certain institutions and corporations, who require their staff to write and perform Acknowledgements of Country on a regular basis, which can lead to concerns that in the performance of Acknowledgements of Country, non-Indigenous Australians might "appropriate Aboriginal primordial links to the land"[2] or succumb to well-intentioned guilt, worry and pity, which Slater terms "settler anxiety", and can work to "neutralise the politics of sovereignty".[3] It is our belief that the field of linguistics has something to offer here in understanding different kinds of Acknowledgements of Country and the various meanings they make so that we move beyond a "set and forget" mindset. We do, however, acknowledge that the combination of "linguistics" and "Indigenous culture" may animate concern and discomfort, connoting associations between linguistics and the violent missionary literacy projects in Australia and the Pacific during the 19th century, which Lévi Strauss has termed a sort of "organised tyranny".[4] Even so, linguistics, and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) in particular, can offer a pragmatic and sensitive approach to analysing Acknowledgements of Country. We argue that by using some of the tools of SFL in the analysis and composition of Acknowledgements of Country, non-Indigenous Australians can pay respects to an ancient cultural authority, advocate for contemporary cultural transformation, and contribute to an emerging cultural imaginary.[5]

Background

The destructive effects of colonisation are not confined to the past; First Nations people experience much higher socioeconomic disadvantage and health inequality than non-Indigenous people,[6] and Indigenous adults are 12.5 times more likely to be incarcerated.[7]

[1]Linda Burney, "Acknowledgement of Country by the Hon Linda Turney MP, Member for Barton," *mETAphor: English Teachers Association of NSW* 4 (2020): 4.
[2]Kristina Everett, "Welcome to Country … Not," *Oceania* 79, no. 1 (2009): 55.
[3]Lisa Slater, *Anxieties of Belonging in Settler Colonialism: Australia, Race and Place* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 8.
[4]Claude Lévi Strauss, cited in Jane Samson, "Translation Teams: Missionaries, Islanders, and the Reduction of Language in the Pacific," *Critical Readings in the History of Christian Mission* (Brill: Leiden, 2021), 704.
[5]Elizabeth Dempster, "Welcome to Country: Performing Rights and the Pedagogy of Place," *About Performance* 7 (2007): 96.
[6]AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare), *Australia's Health 2020 in Brief* (Canberra: AIHW, 2020).
[7]Australian Law Reform Commission, "Disproportionate Incarceration Rate," in *Pathways to Justice—An Inquiry into the Incarceration Rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples* (Canberra: Australian Government, 2017), 21–25, https://www.alrc.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/final_report_133_amended1.pdf.

Although Indigenous issues have persisted in the public consciousness as "unfinished business" for decades,[8] national concern with how to redress these and other injustices to "heal Country"[9] has been gaining momentum. A 2020 poll by Reconciliation Australia found that 90 per cent of Australians feel the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider Australian community is "important", and recent initiatives to address historical injustice include changing the national anthem and adding Indigenous place names to a variety of actual and virtual spaces such as on mail and in social media posts.[10] However, two of the most ubiquitous attempts at recognising and honouring Indigeneity are the Indigenous rituals of Welcome to Country and the Acknowledgement of Country.

Both these Indigenous rituals are ancient practices. What distinguishes the two is that a Welcome to Country can be delivered only by an Indigenous person who is welcoming others onto the lands to which they belong and are custodians over, whereas an Acknowledgement of Country can be delivered by either an Indigenous or non-Indigenous person. Thus continues the Indigenous ritual of recognising being on someone else's Country and acknowledging the Traditional Custodians.[11] These are practices that respect the importance of Country and the central role it plays in Indigenous life. They are also political acts, which, at their best, can invoke "pride that Australians are learning the name of the First Nation lands upon which they were born or arrived, or live and work".[12]

Sometimes accompanied by a Welcome to Country, Acknowledgements of Country are regularly delivered by the non-Indigenous host at public and private events or found in written form in a variety of texts. They are also very often delivered to non-Indigenous audiences, and that means "Indigenous presence is sometimes only named in its absence".[13] Acknowledgements of Country can be heard, for example, at sporting events, school assemblies, festivals, citizenship ceremonies, religious gatherings and ordinary meetings, whether face-to-face or virtual. They can also be read in the front matter of books, on websites and on signs in shopping malls, and in cinemas. They began to be used more widely in Australia around the time of the Mabo decision in 1992,[14] garnering widespread attention in February 2008, when the prime minister at the time, Kevin Rudd, included one in his Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples. They were formally

[8]Francesca Merlan, "Recent Rituals of Indigenous Recognition in Australia: Welcome to Country," *American Anthropologist* 116, no. 2 (2014): 2.

[9]National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC), "2021 Theme: Heal Country," https://www.naidoc.org.au/get-involved/2021-theme (accessed 13 June 2023).

[10]Joey Watson, "How the Acknowledgment of Country Became a Core National Custom—and Why It Matters," *ABC Radio National*, 18 March 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-18/history-indigenous-acknowledgment-of-country-national-custom/12029886; from 1 January 2021, the second line of the Australian National Anthem was changed from "For we are young and free" to "For we are one and free"; Sarah Norris, "Australia Post Releases Mail Packaging with a Dedicated Space to Add First Nations Place Names," *Broadsheet*, 5 July 2021, https://www.broadsheet.com.au/national/city-file/article/australia-post-releases-mail-packaging-dedicated-space-add-first-nations-place-names; "Public Land Is Native Land," Indigenous Geotags, https://www.indigenousgeotags.com/ (accessed 11 November 2021).

[11]Megan Davis, cited in Adam Phelan, "Press Play and Repeat? Why You Should Avoid Making a Welcome to Country Video," *UNSW Newsroom*, https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/general/press-play-and-repeat-why-you-should-avoid-making-welcome-country-video (accessed 26 October 2021).

[12]Megan Davis, "Reconciliation and the Promise of an Australian Homecoming," *The Monthly*, July 2020, https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2020/july/1593525600/megan-davis/reconciliation-and-promise-australian-homecoming#mtr.

[13]Merlan, "Recent Rituals," 306.

[14]Em Nicol, "Acknowledging Country: A Modern History," *SBS NITV*, 9 June 2020, https://www.sbs.com.au/nitv/article/2017/05/31/acknowledging-country-modern-history.

included in parliamentary practice in September 2010 by the Julia Gillard government. Since then, an Acknowledgement of Country is read by the Speaker at the start of each parliamentary sitting day before "the usual prayers".[15] Written Acknowledgements of Country began to appear around the same time, becoming more prevalent in 2012, when the broadcasting service SBS began to include them in the closing credits of the news.[16] All levels of government in Australia now perform Acknowledgements of Country, and a great number of corporations also include them in their Reconciliation Action Plans, documents aimed at developing and improving relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.[17] So prevalent are they in broader public life that they can be seen on television programs as diverse as ABC's *Playschool*, Channel 10's *The Bachelorette* and streaming services such as Binge.

Acknowledgements of Country have, however, been met with some resistance, mostly from non-Indigenous people. In early 2010, the federal opposition leader, Tony Abbott, argued that they were little more than a "genuflection to political correctness",[18] while ousted Liberal Party seat holder Tim Wilson argued that "obsessive acknowledgement can only belittle and undermine the intent of such statements".[19] People on the Left have also found them problematic, with anthropologist David Trigger seeing Acknowledgements of Country as hypocritical because they enable "whitefellas to publicly position themselves in relation to the 'idea' of recognising Aboriginal interests".[20] Further, scholar Sara Ahmed sees Acknowledgements of Country as "non-performative" speech acts that can paradoxically strengthen white privilege by rendering it invisible, and former ALP president and Nyunggai Indigenous leader Warren Mundine suggests that Acknowledgements of Country have less to do with First Nations Peoples and more to do with "white, middle-class guilt". It is apparent, then, that some current Acknowledgements of Country might be considered as failing to achieve their desired purpose.

It has been argued that non-Indigenous attempts at Acknowledgements should be examined and possibly transformed if they are to represent a meaningful part of the longer Indigenous tradition.[21] Further, Indigenous perspectives on this practice need to be better understood. New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council chairperson and Worimi woman Bev Manton sees in them an "essential symbolism",[22] and Gooreng Gooreng man Justin Mohamed, former CEO of Reconciliation Australia, argues that the consciousness-raising that emerges from Acknowledgements of Country is real and important.[23] In light of this debate, Dharawal Scholar Bronwyn Carlson and settler researcher Terri Farrelly argue that non-Indigenous attempts at

[15]Joy McCann and Anna Hough, "The 30th Anniversary of Australia's Parliament House: The Third Decade, 2008–18," *Parliament of Australia*, https://www.aph.gov.au/25th_Anniversary_Chronology/The_third_decade (accessed 30 June 2023).
[16]Email communication, Tristan Ireland, manager Audience Relations Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), 17 August 2021.
[17]"What Is a RAP?" *Reconciliation Australia*, https://www.reconciliation.org.au/reconciliation-action-plans/ (accessed 13 September 2021).
[18]Mark McKenna, "Tokenism or Belated Recognition? Welcome to Country and the Emergence of Indigenous Protocol in Australia, 1991–2014," *Journal of Australian Studies* 38, no. 4 (2014): 486.
[19]Cited in Emma Kowal, "Welcome to Country: Acknowledgement, Belonging and White Anti-racism," *Cultural Studies Review* 21, no. 2 (September 2015): 187.
[20]Cited in Kowal, "Welcome to Country," 187.
[21]Bronwyn Carlson and Terri Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions: Aboriginal People and Colonial Commemorations in So-called Australia* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2023), 262.
[22]Cited in McKenna, "Tokenism or Belated Recognition?," 487.
[23]Nicol, "Acknowledging Country".

Acknowledgements should be examined and possibly transformed if they are to represent a meaningful part of the longer Indigenous tradition.[24]

Perhaps one of the problems with the non-Indigenous adoption of this Indigenous practice is the often perfunctory manner with which Acknowledgements are delivered, amounting to a kind of "lip service".[25] While Yorta Yorta scholar Tiriki Onus argues for the importance of being able to speak as a visitor, claiming the practice "is something that has existed for thousands of generations",[26] scholar Michael Murphy suggests that a "mumbled" or "rushed" Acknowledgement "may form an insult to Indigenous people".[27] Other scholars suggest that Acknowledgements of Country need to incorporate more than respect, also involving "supporting Indigenous people in caring for Country … [and] fully respecting Indigenous knowledge, and ways of knowing".[28] Such reflective and solemn practice can make the difference between a meaningful "ritual" and a bureaucratic "spectacle".[29]

It is not surprising, then, that in a study of the implementation of Acknowledgements of Country across six early learning centres, most of the participants reported "fearing offending Aboriginal people … feelings of uncertainty and underconfidence".[30] However, the researchers involved in that study, who were both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, found it is important for non-Indigenous Australians to continue the practice "even in the face of the possibility of getting it wrong or offending Aboriginal people".[31] Anthropologist Emma Kowal concurs, preferring non-Indigenous Acknowledgements of Country to silence, self-erasure, or what Dreher terms "eavesdropping with permission", which refers to listening from the margins rather than "dominating the space of conversation".[32] Kowal proposes instead that "settler anxieties" can be addressed by Acknowledgements of Country, providing a paradoxical sense of belonging, while Mark McKenna suggests they have the potential to provide a "more sacred secular space" for all Australians.[33] Gangulu public servant Mick Gooda, who at the time was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, suggests further that Acknowledgements of Country perform an important social role by reinforcing the High Court's Mabo decision and Indigenous authority over the land.[34] As Carlson and Farrelly state, "Acknowledging Country—the homelands of Aboriginal peoples—is a political act, and a linguistic act, that recognises and acknowledges their sovereignty."[35]

There seems at least to be agreement that if Acknowledgements of Country are to continue, they should be authentic. The advice on the Reconciliation Australia website for

[24]McKenna, "Tokenism or Belated Recognition?," 486.
[25]Michael Murphy, "The Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country in Australian Parliament," *Literature & Aesthetics* 29, no. 2 (2019): 129; Carlson and Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions*, 262.
[26]Watson, "How the Acknowledgment of Country Became a Core National Custom".
[27]Murphy, "The Welcome to and Acknowledgement of Country in Australian Parliament," 135.
[28]Helen Ross and Melissa Nursey-Bray, "Acknowledging Country Properly," *Australasian Journal of Environmental Management* 27, no. 3 (2020): 245.
[29]Don Handelman, "Rituals/Spectacles," *International Social Science Journal* 49, no. 153 (1997): 387–99.
[30]Cris Townley et al., "Educator Perspectives on Embedding Acknowledgement to Country Practices in Early Learning Centres in Australia," *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood* 48, no. 2 (2023): 1.
[31]Towney et al., "Educator Perspectives," 11.
[32]Kowal, "Welcome to Country," 2; Tanja Dreher, "Eavesdropping with Permission: The Politics of Listening for Safer Speaking Spaces," *Borderlands* 8, no. 1 (2009): 2.
[33]Slater, *Anxieties of Belonging in Settler Colonialism*; Kowal, "Welcome to Country"; McKenna "Tokenism or Belated Recognition?," 489.
[34]Everett, "Welcome to Country … Not," 56.
[35]Carlson and Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions*, 262.

generating them is broad, saying, "There are no set protocols or wording for an Acknowledgement of Country", before providing a general example: "I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I would also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present."[36]

A more extended example of this was in Yawuru Senator Pat Dodson's address to the National Press Club in April 1996: "We acknowledge that we are meeting on Country for which they and their forbears have been custodians for many centuries and on which Aboriginal people have performed age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal. We acknowledge their living culture and unique role in the life of this region."[37] This formulation of acknowledging both the land and the people remains one of the most frequently used templates today.

Theoretical Framework

In systemic functional linguistics (SFL), language is conceived as a resource for making meaning, and meaning is conceived as choice. Choice relates to the other available options in the same and relevant language systems. This openness means we are always choosing, both consciously and unconsciously, from the range of available choices to make our meanings in and with language. Meaning therefore also exists in relation to other meanings: what could have been chosen but was not, rather than meaning being contained within only a word itself. As James Martin, Yaegan Doran and Giacomo Figueredo argue, words make meaning in relation to other words, phrases make meaning in relation to other phrases, clauses to other clauses and thus texts to other texts.[38] If we view Acknowledgements of Country from this standpoint, we can see that the words we choose make meaning in relation to what else we could have chosen but did not. SFL also posits that language not only reflects our experiences in and of life, but it also constructs them—that is, words do not just have meanings, but meanings have words.[39] As such, in our exploration of Acknowledgements of Country, we look at the kinds of meanings that are realised in the particular wordings that are chosen.

SFL provides a rich array of tools for analysing of language, which the linguist selects from so they can answer their research questions. To explore the patterns of meaning in our Acknowledgements of Country, we deployed the tools of *agency*—including the *cline of responsibility*, *transitivity* and *appraisal*[40]—to ascertain whether we can call Acknowledgements of Country a genre in their own right, or a part of a larger genre. As we detail below, these analyses led us to find other significant linguistic features and patterns of

[36]"Acknowledgement of Country and Welcome to Country," *Reconciliation Australia*, https://www.reconciliation.org.au/acknowledgement-of-country-and-welcome-to-country/ (accessed 13 September 2021).
[37]Pat Dodson, *Reconciliation at the Crossroads: Address to the National Press Club* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996).
[38]James Martin, Yaegan Doran, and Giacomo Figueredo, *Systemic Functional Language Description: Making Meaning Matter* (London: Routledge, 2020).
[39]Ruqaiya Hasan, Carmel Cloran, and David G. Butt, eds. *Functional Descriptions: Theory in Practice, Vol. 121* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 1996).
[40]Halliday and Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*; J. R. Martin and David Rose, *Working with Discourse: Meaning beyond the Clause* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007); Shoshana Dreyfus, "'Mum, the Pot Broke': Taking Responsibility (or Not) in Language," *Discourse & Society* 28, no. 4 (2017); James R. Martin and Peter R. R. White, *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

meaning within the Acknowledgements of Country, such as triplets, couplings, time values and field specificity, which we explain in turn.

Genre, Macrogenre, Stages and Phases

Within SFL, genre is understood as a staged, goal-oriented social process.[41] It is staged because it takes a number of stages to work through the genre from beginning to end; it is goal-oriented because genres are always working towards some social goal, whether it is telling a story, arguing a case, or instructing someone how to make or do something, to name only a few. Genre is also inherently social because it is a process that happens as part of human exchanges in life. We perform genres for others and with others for different purposes. Within the stages of a genre, smaller structural units can exist called phases, which make up the stages. Phases constitute different configurations of interpersonal, ideational and textual meanings, and when there is a shift in any one or more of these meaning types, a shift in phase occurs.[42] Additionally, genres can chain together to form genre-complexes and be embedded in one another to form a macrogenre.[43]

It is unclear whether Acknowledgements of Country form a genre in a larger macrogenre, a stage in a genre, or a phase in a stage. If they were a genre in their own right, they would comprise stable stages unfolding in a predictable pattern,[44] but we have found that Acknowledgements of Country comprise a variety of optional and obligatory elements that pattern differently across the dataset. If they were a stage in a genre, they would consistently occur at the same point in proceedings. Spoken Acknowledgements of Country reliably occur in the introductory section of an event across all the data; however, written Acknowledgements of Country can be found at both the beginning and end of written texts: upon entry to some websites and at the bottom of others, for example, or in the front and end matter of books. As such, they appear to sit outside the larger social purpose of these discourses, whether that is an explanatory book on architecture, a sporting event or a shopping experience. Perhaps this is because Acknowledgements of Country are an emerging, interpersonally driven practice and have not yet settled into stable patternings of meaning. Perhaps this is also because they occur in multimodal settings: Kmart's Acknowledgement of Country, for instance, is located on a sign at the entrance of the store, a store that could itself be considered a spatial text made up of genres.[45] For the purposes of this article, then, we suggest that Acknowledgements of Country are a phase within the introductory stage of a number of different genres, and that the Acknowledgement phase comprises obligatory and optional sub-phases.

To help us identify these sub-phases, we have employed four linguistic tools of analysis: *agency*, the *cline of responsibility*, *transitivity* and *appraisal*. In using these analytical

[41]Martin and Rose, *Working with Discourse*.
[42]Michael Gregory, "Towards 'Communication' Linguistics: A Framework," in *Systemic Perspectives on Discourse Volume 1*, ed. J. D. Benson and W. S. Greaves (New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1985); Michael Gregory, "Generic Situation and Register: A Functional View," in *Linguistics in a Systemic Perspective*, ed. J. D. Benson, M. J. Cummings, and W. S. Greaves (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1988).
[43]Eszter Szenes, "Revisiting the Role of Embedding in Systemic Functional Linguistics: Construing Depth in 'Big Texts'," *Finnish Journal of Linguistics* 34 (2021): 179–219.
[44]James Martin and David Rose, *Genre Relations: Mapping Culture* (London: Equinox, 2008).
[45]Louise Ravelli and Robert McMurtrie, *Multimodality in the Built Environment: Spatial Discourse Analysis* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

tools, we identified four additional language patterns: triplets, couplings, time values and field specificity. We explain each below.

Agency

The system of *agency* refers to how language is structured into clauses, with participants who do things and participants who have things done to them. Within this system, the doer is called the agent, and in clauses where there is an agent, the recipient of an action is called the medium. The action between them is called the process. For example, in "Colonists stole Indigenous people's land", colonists are the agent because they do the stealing, and Indigenous people's land is the medium because that is what was stolen; it is the thing affected by the action of stealing. This clause structure is called active voice. An additional element is a circumstance, which provides information about where, when, why and how things happen: "Colonists stole Indigenous people's land *all around Australia*."

An agency analysis makes visible who does what to whom and who takes responsibility for different kinds of events, activities and processes. For example, the above clause —"Colonists stole Indigenous people's land"—could be reframed in passive voice, where the agent is put at the end: "Indigenous people's land was stolen *by colonists*." Importantly, in a passive sentence, the agent can be omitted: "Indigenous people's land was stolen." Or further, as is the case with many Acknowledgements of Country, the feature of agency can be completely removed from the meaning, and the stealing becomes a qualifier that describes the land (*stolen* land). These syntactic variants have an effect on what meanings are present and which ones get foregrounded—or, in this case, backgrounded.

Together these options form the *voice* system, though English offers another voice option in addition to active and passive: middle voice. Middle voice refers to the clause structure that frames things as happening all by themselves and without causation: "The land *changed*." In a clause with an intransitive verb such as "changed", no one is doing anything to anyone or anything else; the event seemingly happens all by itself.

The Cline of Responsibility

Dreyfus has developed a cline of responsibility to map these choices,[46] which enables us to analyse the extent to which people take responsibility for their actions (see Figure 1).

As Figure 1 shows, active voice is the clause structure that takes the most responsibility for a given action because the front of the clause explicitly says who performed the action. Passive voice with agent is the next most responsible because it still makes clear who performed the action, only it backgrounds the agent by putting them at the end of the clause. The third most responsible clause structure is the agentless passive, which removes the agent altogether. The least responsible clause structure is called middle voice, where there is no feature of agency at all. The example Dreyfus provides for this is "the pot broke" (as opposed to something like "I broke the pot", which is active).[47] We cannot, however, use middle voice with a verb such as "stolen". Someone or something always has to steal; it cannot be done by itself, the way breaking can. In these ways, the

[46]Dreyfus, "'Mum, the Pot Broke'".
[47]Dreyfus, "'Mum, the Pot Broke'".

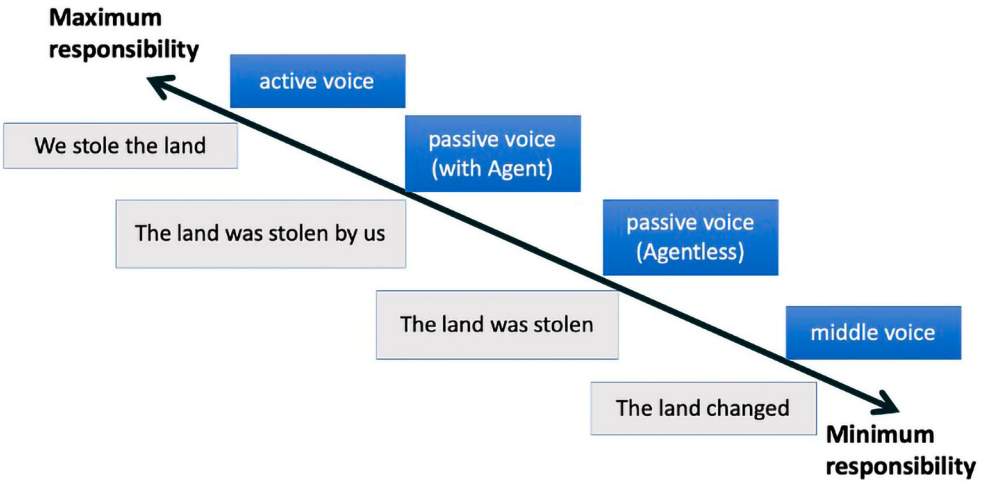

Figure 1. The cline of responsibility.

systems of agency and voice enable us to see whether those who are writing or speaking the Acknowledgements of Country take responsibility for actions and, if so, which kinds of actions and to what extent they take responsibility for them.

Transitivity

The *transitivity* system covers the different types of processes we undertake and participate in, and the attendant participants involved in those processes. It separates processes into two broad types: those that can project another clause and those that cannot. Both cognitive processes (for thinking, feeling and perceiving, e.g. *thought, felt, perceived, understood*, etc.) and verbal processes (for saying, e.g. *said, acknowledged, told, asked*, etc.) can project another clause as follows (where // signifies a clause boundary):

I *thought* // that you were coming over to my house (cognitive)

I *said* // that I was coming over to your house (verbal)

The second type of process is one that cannot project another clause. It includes material processes (for actions, e.g. *stole*); behavioural processes (for behaviours of sentient beings such as *cough, sneeze, laugh*, and processes that are *like* cognitive and behavioural processes but cannot project another clause, e.g. *speak, listen*, etc.); and relational processes (about being and having, e.g. *is, was, has, have*, and their synonyms). A transitivity analysis makes visible the types of actions, behaviours, relations and activities that are construed in a text and shows us the kinds of activities that are present in Acknowledgements of Country and how these are represented.

Appraisal

The *appraisal* framework covers how we share our positive and negative emotions and opinions, as well as how we engage with others and their thoughts and feelings in texts.

It is a complex framework with three systems: *attitude* (resources for expressing emotions and opinions about people's behaviour and aesthetic evaluations of phenomena), *engagement* (resources for negotiating dialogic space), and *graduation* (resources for strengthening and weakening evaluations). It is attitude that we are mainly concerned with in this article because we are interested in what gets evaluated positively and negatively in Acknowledgements of Country. However, we also touch on graduation because a number of language resources in the Acknowledgements of Country can serve to strengthen evaluative meanings.

Further, it is important to note that attitudinal meanings in texts can either be explicit or left implicit. For example, we could say that stealing Aboriginal land is *wrong*, and thus the stealing of land is explicitly evaluated in a negative way. We call these explicit evaluations "inscribed". In contrast, however, we can say the land was *never ceded*, where there is nothing explicitly negative in those words themselves, but the context of colonialism and its repercussions for Indigenous peoples elicit a negative evaluation. We call these more implicit negative evaluations "invoked". This is an important distinction to make when examining Acknowledgements of Country because it allows us to see what positive and negative things are explicitly evaluated and thus foregrounded and what are more implicitly evaluated and thus backgrounded.

Triplets and Couplings

Triplets are language patterns that occur in triplicate (sometimes also called tricolons). They are a typical feature of persuasive writing, allowing users to express concepts with emphasis and memorability.[48] Famous examples include "Veni, vidi, vici" ("I came, I saw, I conquered"), attributed to Julius Caesar, and "government of the people, by the people, for the people", from Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address.[49] Within SFL, triplets are captured within the *appraisal* system of graduation because they function to amplify meaning.

Couplings refer to the pairing of two different linguistic resources to create meaning; often, an ideational (or content) meaning is coupled with an interpersonal (or evaluative) meaning. Broadly speaking, ideational resources allow us to express what is happening, while interpersonal resources are used to express our attitudes. When these two types of meanings co-occur as a coupling, they form a kind of bond around which people can rally.[50] Developed by Naomi Knight,[51] who studied casual conversations, the concept of couplings captures the way people propose and share evaluations of different phenomena, around which others can affiliate.[52] In the following example from the University of Wollongong's Acknowledgement of Country, the positive evaluation of "sacred" is coupled with the ideational meaning of "landscape": "The University of Wollongong

[48]Andrew Dlugan, "How to Use the Rule of Three in Your Speeches," *Six Minutes: Speaking and Presentation Skills*, 27 May 2009, http://sixminutes.dlugan.com/rule-of-three-speeches-public-speaking/.
[49]Abraham Lincoln, "The Gettysburg Address," 1863, republished 2013 by Cornell University, https://rmc.library.cornell.edu/gettysburg/good_cause/transcript.htm.
[50]Maree Kristen Stenglin, "Packaging Curiosities: Towards a Grammar of Three-dimensional Space" (PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2004), http://setis.library.usyd.edu.au/adt/public_html/adt-NU/public/adt-NU20050909.161343/.
[51]Naomi K. Knight, "Evaluating Experience in Funny Ways: How Friends Bond through Conversational Hum," *Text & Talk* 33, no. 4/5 (2013): 553–74.
[52]Michele Zappavigna and James Martin, "#Communing Affiliation: Social Tagging as a Resource for Aligning around Values in Social Media," *Discourse, Context and Media* 22 (2018): 4–12.

spreads across many interrelated Aboriginal Countries that are bound by this *sacred landscape*."[53] This coupling proposes that we affiliate around the idea that the landscape is sacred.

Time Values

Time values refer to the way time is presented as a coupling of ideational and interpersonal meanings. For example, in the frequently used Acknowledgement phrase of "Elders past, present and emerging", a temporal meaning is encoding twice: first, in the naming of older Indigenous people as Elders, and second, in the triplet of "past, present and emerging". What we will argue here is that time is being used to attribute value to Indigenous people, relying on the fact that age is to be respected and that time—past, present and future—expresses the human values of longevity, continuous connection and ancientness.

Field Specificity

Finally, field specificity refers to the way some Acknowledgements of Country contain meanings that are tailored to their particular context and the nature of the social actions taking place. In other words, they are not just a generalist Acknowledgement; they specifically refer to their own context, as can be seen in the following example from Transport NSW, which mentions routes: "Many of the *transport routes* we use today from *rail lines, to roads and water crossings* follow the traditional Songlines, trade routes and ceremonial paths in Country that our nation's First Peoples have followed for tens of thousands of years."[54] The Australian Society for Intellectual Disability (ASID) likewise mentions their own community: "We appreciate the unique contribution Indigenous people have made to *ASID and the disability community*."[55] The linguistic tools we explore above have helped us to unpack some of the meanings made in the data and show some notable recurrent language patterns.

Data and Methodology

To identify the typical patterns of the sub-phases in Acknowledgements of Country, we began by analysing a corpus of 20 texts. We selected 10 spoken and 10 written Acknowledgements of Country to reflect the Australian context as broadly as possible. These were drawn from a diverse range of current and publicly available sources as we came upon them in the course of our lives, including government agencies (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority; Transport NSW), non-government foundations (Reconciliation Australia), corporations (Kmart; Thames & Hudson), think tanks (OFFICE), educational institutions (University of Wollongong, The Australian National University, University of Newcastle), cultural organisations (Carriageworks,

[53]"UOW Acknowledgement of Country," University of Wollongong, https://www.uow.edu.au/about/our-vision-strategy/our-aboriginal-torres-strait-islander-strategy/ (accessed 30 June 2023).
[54]"Acknowledgement of Country," in *Future Transport 2056*: *Illawarra-Shoalhaven Regional Transport Plan* (Sydney: NSW Government, 2020), 2, https://future.transport.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/media/documents/2020/Illawarra-Shoalhaven-RTP-201130.pdf.
[55]"Acknowledgement of Country," Australasian Society for Intellectual Disability, members' online meeting, 2021.

Table 1. Acknowledgements of Country analysed in this study

Type	Source
Spoken	1. Primary English Teachers Association
	2. Mehreen Faruqi, The Greens Party
	3. University of Wollongong
	4. Australian Society for Intellectual Disability
	5. The Australian Society of Archivists
	6. Bindi Bosses Performing Arts Company
	7. The Redfern Shanty Club
	8. University of Newcastle—Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Committee
	9. Ashfield Greens
	10. University of New South Wales—Arts, Design and Architecture
Written	11. OFFICE (2020) "The Politics of Public Space, Vol. 2"
	12. Kmart sign
	13. Reconciliation Australia website
	14. Thames & Hudson Publishers
	15. School of Arts and Design Australian National University website
	16. Performance Space
	17. The Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital website
	18. Illawarra Transport Plan
	19. Get Up (n.d.) "Who Controls the Media" pamphlet
	20. The North Central Catchment Management Authority (2014) "Lake Elizabeth Environmental Water Management Plan" pamphlet

Performance Space), health providers (Royal Victorian Ear and Eye Hospital) and charities (Australasian Society for Intellectual Disability). These Acknowledgements of Country appeared in a variety of media, such as leaflets, websites, books and signs, or were presented in webinars or public talks in academic, professional and political contexts. Table 1 lists all the sources of the Acknowledgements of Country in this dataset.

Obligatory Opening Sub-phase

As we have already explained, we suggest that Acknowledgements of Country are a phase typically inserted in the introductory stage of different genres. The Acknowledgement phase is made up of sub-phases. The first sub-phase, termed the opening sub-phase, is obligatory. It functions to acknowledge and pay respect, and it is realised linguistically with the verbal processes of *acknowledge* and/or *pay respect*. One or both of these are present in all Acknowledgements of Country, and 19 out of 20 (95%) had the process *acknowledge* in them, for example: "I *acknowledge* the Traditional Owners of the land I am on, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri People."[56]

The main target of the acknowledgement is people: Traditional Owners or Custodians of the land (in 15 of the 20); other targets include the land or the custodianship of land itself. Specifically, Elders were acknowledged in eight Acknowledgements of Country (40%), Indigenous ownership in six (30%), and custodianship in four (25%). Further, the opening sub-phase demonstrates particular language features: it is always structured as an active clause with the first participant, the person acknowledging, being the doer: "I [participant—doer] acknowledge [process—verbal] the Traditional Owners of the land I am on, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people [participant—recipient of action]."

The process of paying respect also occurs frequently in the opening sub-phase. It occurred either separately from acknowledgement in fourteen (70%) or was mapped onto the

[56]Mehreen Faruqi, "Acknowledgement of Country," union meeting, Wollongong, 2020.

acknowledgement in the other six (30%). For example, in "I *acknowledge* the Traditional Owners of the land I am on, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and *pay my respects* to their Elders past and present", the acknowledging and paying respect are separate. But in "I would like to *acknowledge* and *pay respect* to the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet; the Wadi Wadi people of Dharawal Country", the processes are combined.[57]

Both acknowledgement and paying respect have a similar focus on people. However, respect was less frequently paid to "custodianship" or "land", and more often directed towards Elders, frequently framed as "past, present and emerging". The instances where explicit reference to paying respect was not made often occurred in Acknowledgements of Country with elaborated or repeated acknowledgements of other elements (e.g. people, culture, connection to Country, etc.) in the non-obligatory sub-phases that followed (which we discuss below).

The obligatory opening sub-phase typically features an active clause with non-Indigenous speakers/writers in theme position, that is, in the clause-initial element (e.g. "*We*, *the authors*, respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we work and live").[58] Whatever is placed in theme position is given elevated importance, construing the speaker/writer's stance.[59] As such, it foregrounds the non-Indigenous person and what *they* are doing. Regarding these evaluative choices, our analysis shows that while positive appraisal is extended to the target of their acknowledgement (e.g. Indigenous people and their culture), the acknowledgers also extend positive appraisal to themselves, such as in this example from the Redfern Shanty Club: "Now before we go any further, *it's good* that *we* acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of this land which we are on, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation."[60] The combination of active voice with the acknowledgers in theme or sentence-initial position and the positive appraisal of the acknowledgers confers value on this practice and its speakers/writers.

To show this obligatory sub-phase more explicitly, it is worth examining a typical Acknowledgement of Country. This example appeared on a plaque in a shopping mall: "Team Kmart *acknowledges* the Traditional Landowners throughout Australia and their continuing spiritual relationships and connection to Country. We *pay our respect* to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, their cultures and their Elders past and present."[61] As we mention above, implicit/invoked positive appraisal is visible in terms such as "traditional", "continuing", "spiritual", "cultures" and "Elders". The appraisal is invoked because although there is nothing explicitly positive about these terms, there is a shared understanding within the discourse community that these are broadly positive things. In terms of language choice, however, the word "landowner" sits uncomfortably with many Indigenous Australians because land "ownership" is situated very firmly in the Western capitalist tradition.[62] The preferred alternative, seen frequently throughout our data, is "custodians of the land" (University of Wollongong, Reconciliation Australia, Performance Space, etc.), which better

[57]"UOW Acknowledgement of Country".
[58]Benedetta Brevini and Michael Ward, *Who Controls our Media: Exposing the Impact of Media Concentration on our Democracy* (Surry Hills: GetUp!, 2021).
[59]J. R. Martin, "Beyond Exchange: Appraisal System in English," in *Evaluation in Text: Authorial Stance and the Construction of Discourse*, ed. Susan Hunston and Geoffrey Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
[60]"Acknowledgement of Country," Redfern Shanty Club, club meeting, Redfern, 2021.
[61]Kmart store signage, 2021.
[62]Rhys Paddick and Emma Gibbens, "Acknowledge This!: Feel Connected to Each Other, Country and Culture," online workshop, 2021.

expresses caring for Country as it moves through consecutive generations. Our aim, however, is not to undermine these attempts at reconciliation through minute criticisms, but rather to describe what we find. It could be argued that we, as a nation, are in the early stages of developing a new discourse practice—a national ritual, as it were—and a fear of misspeaking should not prevent us from trying. Perhaps even because of its incongruity in a shopping mall, and perhaps especially because it comes from a major corporate conglomerate, an Acknowledgement of Country such as this one speaks to a national cultural shift.

Three Optional Sub-phases

Following on from the obligatory opening sub-phase are the optional ones. These show much greater variation than the opening sub-phase, yet we were still able to identify three different types based on their particular language features: celebrate, condemn, particularise.

Celebrate

The first type of optional sub-phase emerges where there is explicit positive appraisal of Indigenous people and/or their abilities. Thus, we call it *celebrate*, as can be seen in this example (Table 2):

In this celebrate sub-phase, we discovered three instances of inscribed positive appraisal and four instances of invoked positive appraisal with Indigenous Australians as the target, as well fourteen examples of positive appraisal of land and Indigenous connections to Country, and nine instances of positive appraisal directed at Indigenous culture, traditions and practices.

Table 2. An example of obligatory and optional sub-phases

Sub-phase type	Sub-phase name	Example
Obligatory	Acknowledge	*Performance Space acknowledges the Gadigal people of the land we work on as the Traditional Custodians of this place we now call Sydney.*
	Pay respect	*We pay respect to all First Peoples Elders*
Optional	**Positively appraise Indigenous people, the land and Indigenous culture**	***and recognise their strength, wisdom and creativity.***

Condemn

The second kind of optional phase is one that features more negative appraisal, mostly around the treatment of Indigenous people. This phenomenon can be seen in the spoken Acknowledgement of Country from Greens Senator Mehreen Faruqi (see Table 3; negative appraisal italicised).

Table 3. An example of the condemn sub-phase

Sub-phase type	Sub-phase name	Example
Obligatory	Acknowledge Pay respect	*I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people, and pay my respects to their Elders past and present.*
Optional		*This land was **never ceded.** It is, always was, and always will be Aboriginal land. Let's also acknowledge that **there can be no social or environmental justice without racial justice.***

While many meanings are present in this optional sub-phase, for the moment we are paying attention to the negative ones: "This land was *never ceded* and there can be *no social or environmental justice without racial justice*." What we are highlighting here is that these instances of negative appraisal tend to be couched in nominalisations (where activities are turned into abstract nouns, such as "racial justice") or formal language (such as "ceded"). While these are common features of written, scientific and bureaucratic language,[63] we argue that they also serve to dilute the effect of the negativity because they obviate the doers/perpetrators of the actions and do not name the activities.[64] We suggest that a more authentic way to communicate these realities would be to include people and name actions, for example, "Aboriginal people *fought* to keep their land." Other examples of more explicitly inscribed negative appraisal in the optional sub-phases include "The University acknowledges the *real and devastating impact of colonisation* on Aboriginal Countries and peoples",[65] or "As non-Indigenous Australians, we benefit every day from the *theft of Country* and *continuing persecution of First Nations people*".[66] These examples could be reformulated to demonstrate even more accountability and authenticity by "unpacking" the nominalisations (for further detail, see the discussion section below) and shifting voice to take more responsibility.

Particularise

The third kind of optional phase is one that *particularises* the language choices. There were two ways this typically occurred. The first is when the Acknowledgement of Country is tailored to suit its context and the nature of the social actions taking place, which can often be seen in references to specific, shared experiences. We have earlier called this *field specificity*.[67] We discovered examples of this in 10 (50%) of the Acknowledgements of Country we analysed, with references made to the legacies of teaching and learning, storytelling and caring for archives,[68] and so on. The second type of particularisation sub-phase includes biographical data, which we found in five Acknowledgements of Country. The inclusion of personal information is also a way of creating an authentic and meaningful Acknowledgement.[69] For example, the Sydney dance troupe the Bindi Bosses states: "*As South Asian migrants*, we are forever indebted to First Nations Peoples and Elders past, present and emerging for their ongoing custodianship and resistance."[70] It seems that the function of the optional stages is to add further meanings, as we detail below.

Salient Language Patterns and Features That Occur across the Sub-phases: Triplets, Couplings, Time Values

In addition to the language patterns and features specific to different sub-phases, we identified salient language patterns and features that occur in both the obligatory and

[63]M. A. K Halliday and J. R. Martin, *Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2003).
[64]Annabelle Lukin, David Butt, and Christian Matthiessen, "Reporting War: Grammar as Covert Operation," *Pacific Journalism Review* 10 (2004): 1.
[65]"UOW Acknowledgement of Country".
[66]Georgiou et al., *The Politics of Public Space, Vol. 2* (Melbourne: OFFICE, 2020).
[67]Martin and Rose, *Working with Discourse*.
[68]"Acknowledgement of Country," Primary English Teaching Association Australia, members' online meeting, 2021; Thames & Hudson Publishers, copyright information, 2019; "Acknowledgement of Country," Australian Society of Archivists, members' online meeting, 2021.
[69]Paddick and Gibbens, "Acknowledge This!".
[70]Bindi Bosses, "MEDITJIN I BINDI BOSSES I Baker Boy ft. JessB," YouTube video, 3:58, 8 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqUS9AxUGrU.

optional sub-phases. The first of these is triplets, patterns in language that occur in groups of three.

Triplets occur 35 times in our dataset. They can be seen at different levels, or "strata", of language: at the stratum of "phonology (graphology in writing), which involves repetition of sounds; at the stratum of lexicogrammar (which involves repetition of words and grammatical structures such as phrases); and at the stratum of discourse semantics (which involves repetition of a variety of units of meaning in texts)".[71] Most of the triplets occur at the stratum of the lexicogrammar (27 instances), that is, in patterns of words or grammatical structures. One triplet of this kind was so common that it was shared across seven Acknowledgements of Country in one of two variants: "Elders *past, present* and *emerging*" (five times), or "Elders *past*, *present* and *future*" (twice). Many other examples of lexical triplets could also be found, including "From *fresh* water to *bitter* water to *salt*"[72] and "the region's *coastline*, *hinterland* and *escarpment*".[73]

The triplets in grammatical structures included different types of verbal groups representing different timeframes, such as "It *is*, always *was*, and always *will be* Aboriginal land".[74] There were fewer triplets at the level of phonology (five instances), but they were still present. In the following example, the repetition is of the "s" sound in the first part—"from *Sydney* to the *Southern* Highlands to the *South* Coast"[75]—and the "al" sound in the second—"there can be no soci*al* or environmenta*l* justice without raci*al* justice".[76]

Triplets can also be found at the level of discourse semantics through both *attitude* and *graduation* resources and in "couplings"[77] of ideational and interpersonal resources. This can be seen in the coupling within this recurring triplet: "It is, *always* was, and *always* will be *Aboriginal land*".[78] In this example, the ideational meaning of "Aboriginal land" is coupled with the invoked positive appraisal in the adverb "always" (see below on time values). This pattern is reflected across all three systems[79] in the *appraisal* framework: there is positive appreciation (valuation) from the *attitude* system ("always" is considered to be a positive attribute, and its force is intensified in the *graduation* system (quantification/extent/proximity) by strengthening or "upscaling" time ("forever" instead of, for example, "for 60,000 years")).

Through this coupling of ideational ("Aboriginal land") and interpersonal resources ("always"), the valued meanings in this Acknowledgement of Country are elevated and presented as a bond around which Australians can rally. Indeed, the triplet is itself borrowed from the language of protest and grassroots activism. It could be said that one of

[71] J. R. Martin, "Semantic Variation: Modelling Realisation, Instantiation and Individuation in Social Semiosis," in *New Discourse on Language: Functional Perspectives on Multimodality, Identity, and Affiliation*, ed. Monica Bednarek and J. R. Martin (Sydney: Bloomsbury, 2011).
[72] "UOW Acknowledgement of Country".
[73] NSW Government, "Acknowledgement of Country," 2.
[74] Faruqi's Acknowledgement of Country.
[75] "UOW Acknowledgement of Country".
[76] Faruqi's Acknowledgement of Country.
[77] J. R. Martin et al., "Users in Uses of Language: Embodied Identity in Youth Justice Conferencing," *Text & Talk* 33 (2013): 4–5.
[78] Faruqi's Acknowledgement of Country.
[79] The position is also "monoglossic" in the *engagement* system, i.e. it is construed as having no alternatives, which strengthens its claim to truth.

the social purposes of the more widely used Acknowledgements of Country is to encourage Australians to commune around bonds of this kind.

Time Values

Time values, meanings that use time as a positive value-laden meaning, occurred across all the sub-phases of the Acknowledgements of Country in our dataset. These are realised in different language structures a total of 88 times. Most frequent were references to "traditional" or "traditions", occurring in 80 per cent of the Acknowledgements of Country. Other popular temporal language choices include "past and present" or "past, present and emerging/future" (55%), "continuing", "continuation" or "continue" (35%), and "first" (25%), to name a few. In particular, the three timeframes of past, present and future were present simultaneously in different ways (50%), showing that within Acknowledgements of Country, a long history that connects to the present and continues into the future is a highly valued meaning around which we should all rally. Specifically, we found that these time values were coupled with people, places, cultures, relationships and activities.

Beginning with people, we found that the three timeframes of past, present and future were coupled with people in the opening sub-phase. They refer to the past alone in adjectives/qualities such as "traditional": "I would like to acknowledge and pay respect to *the Traditional Owners* of the land on which we meet".[80] Or they refer to the past and the present with those exact qualities: "pay my respects to their Elders *past* and *present*".[81] Or they even refer to all three timeframes of past, present and future (if "emerging" can be read as "not yet fully realised"): "we pay our respects to their Elders *past*, *present* and *emerging*."

Regarding place, the slogan "Always *was*, always *will be* Aboriginal land"[82] couples the time values of the past and the future with the place "Aboriginal land" via the past-tense verb "was" and future "will be", evoking this critically important sense of unbroken connection to land.

We also found that "cultures" was coupled with an unbounded[83] and ubiquitous time value in "whose cultures are among the oldest continuing cultures in human history",[84] which references all three timeframes, linking the past (*oldest*) to the present and future (*continuing*). Likewise, relationships are coupled with the time value of oldness (among other values) in "Country for Aboriginal peoples is an interconnected set of *ancient* and sophisticated relationships",[85] highlighting the importance, once again, of longstanding connections between Indigenous people and Country. Finally, we found different kinds of activities coupled together with time values across all three timeframes: "This publication *was developed, printed and published* on the stolen land of the Woiwurrung and Boonwurung people of the Kulin nation",[86] referencing the immediate past;

[80]"UOW Acknowledgement of Country".
[81]Faruqi's Acknowledgement of Country.
[82]Faruqi's Acknowledgement of Country; Georgiou et al., *The Politics of Public Space*.
[83]Isabelle Bennett, "Contextual Meanings: An Investigation of their Persuasive Power in Research Article Introductions" (Master's thesis, University of Sydney, 2016).
[84]"AIS Acknowledgement of Country," Australian National University, updated 27 November 202, https://cass.anu.edu.au/acknowledgement-country.
[85]"UOW Acknowledgement of Country".
[86]Georgiou et al., *The Politics of Public Space*.

"We acknowledge that *these lands were stolen* and that sovereignty *was never ceded*",[87] referencing the distant past; "*We benefit every day* from the theft of Country and *continuing* persecution of First Nations people",[88] referencing the present; and "further *commit* ourselves to truth-telling, healing and education",[89] referencing the future.

What Do Acknowledgements of Country Leave Out?

After exploring the themes and patterns that emerge from our analysis of 20 Acknowledgements of Country, it is also worthwhile examining what we argue are notable absences. Half the Acknowledgements of Country, for example, avoid actively assigning responsibility for the suffering caused by colonists and settlers, or Indigenous agency in resisting it. It is laudable that other Acknowledgements of Country address this dispossession and loss, and it is worth repeating that our aim is not to criticise these well-intentioned moves towards reconciliation. We hope instead to harness the power of linguistics to strengthen and hopefully improve their intended meaning. As we introduced earlier, one of the ways to identify how much responsibility (or agency) is taken or assigned is by identifying the voice in which an Acknowledgement is expressed. The choice of active voice indicates maximum responsibility, and passive voice with an identified agent indicates some responsibility; however, the agentless passive and middle voices abrogate responsibility.[90] The agentless passive structure in the phrase "sovereignty *was* never *ceded*",[91] for example, conceals the past wars and ongoing legal battles fought by Indigenous Australians to keep their lands. A sentence attributing more agency would look something like: "First Nations people did not cede their land." To attribute yet more agency, a possible choice could be something like: "First Nations people fought to keep their land."

Similarly, expressions such as "these lands *were stolen*" (agentless passive),[92] or even "stolen lands" (noun phrase with "stolen" as adjective), although powerful statements of an uncomfortable truth,[93] stop short of assigning blame in the way that an active construction such as "colonisers/settlers *stole* the land" would. An even more powerful way to take responsibility is to speak on behalf of other non-Indigenous Australians, as former Prime Minister Paul Keating did in his momentous Redfern Address: "The starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with ***us non-Aboriginal Australians***. It begins, I think, with that act of recognition. Recognition that it was ***we*** who ***did*** the dispossessing [active]. ***We took*** [active] the traditional lands. ***We brought*** the diseases. The alcohol. ***We committed*** the murders. ***We took*** the children from their mothers. ***We practised*** discrimination and exclusion and ***smashed*** the traditional way of life. It was our ignorance and our prejudice."[94]

[87]Georgiou et al., *The Politics of Public Space*.
[88]Georgiou et al., *The Politics of Public Space*.
[89]"UOW Acknowledgement of Country".
[90]Dreyfus, "'Mum, the Pot Broke'".
[91]Brevini and Ward, *Who Controls our Media*; Bindi Bosses, "MEDITJIN"; Georgiou et al., *The Politics of Public Space*.
[92]Georgiou et al., *The Politics of Public Space*.
[93]Carlson and Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions*.
[94]Paul Keating, "Speech by the Hon Prime Minister, P J Keating MP, at the Australian Launch of the International Year for the World's Indigenous People, Redfern, 10 December 1992," PM Transcripts, https://pmtranscripts.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/original/00008765.pdf (accessed 8 July 2023).

In this speech, Keating openly declares the taking of responsibility for past atrocities in active voice, pointing the finger squarely at himself and his antecedents,[95] something that has rarely been done since. (Politicians are often reluctant to take individual or collective responsibility for negative actions.[96])

Making more active choices around voice is not the only way to increase the accountability and authenticity of Acknowledgements of Country, however. Another way is to avoid nominalisations, which reframe complex activities, or processes, as things (abstract concepts), and by so doing partially conceal what actually happened,[97] such as in "this history of *dislocation* and *disenfranchisement* has contributed to the *inequality* we observe in modern society".[98] "Dislocation" (from the verb "dislocate") is a nominalisation at some distance from the horrendous meanings it connotes, such as the actions of non-Indigenous people forcibly separating Indigenous children from their families and Country and being sent to missions far from home—dislocating them—while "disenfranchisement" includes colonisers punishing Indigenous people for speaking in language and denying them the right to own land—disenfranchising them. Similarly, "inequality" is an abstract noun derived from the adjective "unequal". Although it is not always possible to elaborate on the many horrors and injustices inflicted on First Australians, speaking plainly and identifying who did what can add authenticity to Acknowledgements of Country by increasing their locutionary force.[99]

Authenticity is essential to all acknowledgments of wrongdoing,[100] and if they are to function authentically, Acknowledgements of Country might also need to include a commitment to change. However, references to returning the land to Indigenous Australians were notably absent from our data. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that the Australian government and people have little intention of returning certain lands to Indigenous people; however, rather than ignoring this reality, it may be better to acknowledge it by saying something like: "We also feel uncomfortable about the fact that we cannot say we will give this land back", if this is the case. This gesture would reinforce the personal connection of the speaker/writer to their Acknowledgement, which can prevent it from sounding perfunctory—a mere "protocol to blindly pay lip service"[101]—and help it to be "earnest".[102]

Elizabeth Dempster argues that Acknowledgements of Country are "engines, albeit subtle, playful and ironic, but engines nonetheless, of cultural change … supplying force and energy to a movement of change, producing a different imaginary".[103] The performance of these "ancient modern" ceremonies keeps the issue of Indigenous rights audible and visible and their claim upon the present vibrantly alive. Most significantly, these

[95]Dreyfus, "'Mum, the Pot Broke'".
[96]Dreyfus, "'Mum, the Pot Broke'"; Michael J. Crant and Thomas S. Bateman, "Assignment of Credit and Blame for Performance Outcomes," *Academy of Management Journal* 36 (1993): 1; Kathleen McGraw, "Avoiding Blame: An Experimental Investigation of Political Excuses and Justifications," *British Journal of Political Science* 20 (1990): 1; Barry R. Schlenker, Beth A. Pontari, and Andrew N. Christopher, "Excuses and Character: Personal and Social Implications of Excuses," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 5 (2001): 1.
[97]Lukin, Butt, and Matthiessen, "Reporting War," 1.
[98]Ashfield Greens, "Acknowledgement of Country," members' meeting, Ashfield, 2021.
[99]J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Eastford: Martino Fine Books, 1955, republished 2018).
[100]Molly Howes, *A Good Apology: Four Steps to Make Things Right* (London: Piatkus, 2020).
[101]Carlson and Farrelly, *Monumental Disruptions*, 262.
[102]Molly Hunt, "Why an Acknowledgement of Country Is Important (and Advice on How to Give One)," *ABC Everyday*, 23 January 2020, https://www.abc.net.au/everyday/why-acknowledgement-of-country-is-important-and-how-to-give-one/11881902.
[103]Dempster, "Welcome to Country," 96.

ceremonies engage non-Indigenous Australians, who are drawn into and included within an Indigenous conceptual system, so that they might begin to learn to "care for Country".

The Social Purpose of Acknowledgements of Country

In light of these arguments, we suggest that while their social purpose among Indigenous people is well defined, it is also worth locating these emergent practices within broader Australian public life, where they are forging new discursive territory. They could be seen as fulfilling multiple purposes, somehow both spiritual and political, both personal and public. Our analysis has led us to think that current Acknowledgements of Country could also be seen as a type of ritual performance developed after a period of what Victor Turner terms "social drama", or transgressive social disorder.[104] He suggests that ritual is one of the most effective forms of redress, and Acknowledgements of Country could be seen as a ritual aimed at atoning for colonisation and continued racism in Australia. Building on the work of Turner, Lewis seeks to define ritual by proposing five criteria.[105] An Acknowledgement of Country, according to this model, could be classified as a ritual according to three of these five criteria, and "ritual-like" according to two. Acknowledgements of Country might be considered rituals because they are a matter of "ultimate importance" (that is, they deal with matters of life and death, not only in a historical context but also in pushing for awareness and reform to prevent a continuance of the disproportionately high numbers of Indigenous deaths in custody); they involve "social consensus" in that they concern all of Australian society and many Australians would have, by now, performed or witnessed one; and there is a "radical thematisation of the past", in that Acknowledgements of Country date back "thousands of generations".[106] Acknowledgements of Country could also be considered "ritual-like" because the "mode of participation" does not involve "a high degree of participation by everyone co-present";[107] rather, there is the possibility of detached observation. Likewise, the "encompassment" is only moderately high. Put more simply, Acknowledgements of Country are important events, but they could be seen as secondary to more fundamental concerns, such as shifts in policy and law concerning Indigenous agency and wellbeing. However, Lewis argues that ritual is "the most important kind of special event performed by the members of any given human social group".[108] As such, regardless of whether they are rituals or are more ritual-like, Lewis's criteria help illuminate the fundamental importance of Acknowledgements of Country as a developing ritual more broadly in Australian society.

Conclusion

In this article, we have used a systemic functional linguistics framework to explore Acknowledgements of Country and the kinds of meanings they convey, as well as

[104]Cited in Michele Zappavigna and J. R. Martin, *Discourse and Diversionary Justice an Analysis of Youth Justice Conferencing* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
[105]Lowell Lewis, *The Anthropology of Cultural Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
[106]Onus, cited in Watson, "How the Acknowledgment of Country Became a Core National Custom".
[107]Lewis, "The Anthropology of Cultural Performance," 56.
[108]Lewis, "The Anthropology of Cultural Performance," 43.

their corresponding structure and social purpose. We found that the Acknowledgements of Country in our dataset are a positive discourse practice that serve to value Indigenous people and Country, drawing on shared cultural values of connection, continuity and longevity. We discovered that all Acknowledgements of Country include some version of the traditional obligatory opening sub-phase of acknowledging Country or land/s and paying respects to Indigenous Elders. They also drew upon time values, in some cases with triplets and in some cases without.

While some Acknowledgements of Country comprised only the obligatory sub-phase, many included optional sub-phases, which we were able to classify into three types: celebrate, condemn and particularise. The *celebrate* sub-phase expands the positive appraisal of Indigeneity, people and cultural practices in particular, while the *condemn* sub-phase decries colonial practices such as the stealing of land and the negative impacts of colonisation on Indigenous peoples. However, one notable point is that in the *condemn* sub-phase, these negative actions and impacts are not referred to in ways that give agency to either colonial settlers or Indigenous people. For possibly political but more likely contextual pressures and discursive reasons, these are mostly abstracted (for example, dispossession, colonisation, stolen land). Only once did an Acknowledgement refer to Indigenous people's actions, in the Bindi Bosses' reference to Indigenous people's resistance. The *particularise* sub-phase was where Acknowledgements of Country referred to the specific contexts from which they arose, such as postal services, or the different kinds of waters mentioned in the University of Wollongong's version. These seemed to be more authentic because they were less generic and more specific. Based on the workshop we attended on how to write an authentic Acknowledgement of Country, with Budimia, Yamatji and Noongar educator Rhys Paddick, making Acknowledgements of Country specific to your own context could be one way of making them more "authentic" rather than tokenistic. In sum, we hope this work contributes in some small way to better understanding and perhaps improving the discourse practice that we non-Indigenous people are being called on more and more to enact so that we may do justice to the task.

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We acknowledge that Country for Aboriginal peoples is an interconnected set of ancient and sophisticated relationships. We would like to pay our respect and acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Dharawal Country, the land on which the University of Wollongong is situated. We recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of the Aboriginal community and pay our respects to the Elders past and present, and extend that respect to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people who are reading this article.

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