

A corpus-based genre analysis of letters of regularization: The case of land institutions in Ghana

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Abstract

Genre studies have tended to focus on academic contexts, with little attention to professional settings. Against this backdrop, this study set out to conduct a corpus-based genre analysis of letters of regularization written to land institutions in Ghana. The study adopted a textual analysis, informed by the ESP approach to genres, and supplemented it with a corpus-based analysis to examine 40 letters of regularization. The analyses revealed that the most frequent move in the letters of regularization was the ‘Purpose of the letter’. Although the ‘Reason for the application’ move was not obligatory, it took up considerable textual space in the letters. As regards lexico-grammatical features, politeness was embedded and expressed in if-clauses to mitigate direct impositions on the reader. Additionally, gratitude was mainly construed as a quality and as a process in the letters. Based on these findings, the study offers implications for further research and practice.

Keywords: corpus-based analysis, ESP, genre, gratitude, letters of regularization, politeness.

Resumen

Análisis basado en corpus del género de las cartas de regularización: el caso de las instituciones de la propiedad de la tierra en Ghana

Los estudios de género se han centrado en contextos académicos y apenas han prestado atención a los entornos profesionales. Con este trasfondo, el presente estudio se propuso llevar a cabo un análisis de género basado en corpus de cartas

de regularización escritas a instituciones de la propiedad en Ghana. El estudio llevó a cabo un análisis textual basado en el enfoque adoptado para el análisis de los géneros desde el inglés para fines específicos, el cual se complementó con un estudio basado en corpus que implicó el análisis de 40 cartas de regularización. Los resultados obtenidos revelaron que la sección que más frecuentemente aparecía en las cartas de regularización era el “Objetivo de la carta”. Aunque la sección de “Motivo de la solicitud” no era obligatoria, ocupaba un espacio textual considerable en las cartas. En cuanto a los rasgos lexicográficos, la cortesía se integraba y expresaba en cláusulas condicionales para mitigar las imposiciones directas al lector. Además, en las cartas la gratitud se interpretó principalmente como una cualidad y como un proceso. A partir de estos resultados, el estudio ofrece implicaciones para la investigación y la práctica.

Palabras clave: análisis basado en corpus, inglés para fines específicos, género, gratitud, cartas de regularización, cortesía.

1. Introduction

Following Swales’s (1981) seminal work, genre studies now play an essential role in research on specialized discourse. Generally, genre analysis enables us to understand how genres are crucial in discourse communities that share communicative goals and conventions. A large number of genre studies have focused on academic contexts (Hyland, 2003, 2005; Lin et al., 2020; Swales, 2009). Over the past three decades, scholars have investigated academic genres such as research articles (Fryer, 2012; Pho, 2008), academic letters (Ding, 2007; Flowerdew & Dudley-Evans, 2002), academic weblogs (Kjellberg, 2009; Tiainen, 2012), theses and dissertations (Afful & Mwinlaaru, 2012; Yang, 2013), presentations (Carter-Thomas & Rowley-Jolivet, 2003; Hu & Liu, 2018), and lectures (Lee, 2016; Thompson, 1994; Yaakob, 2014). However, a survey of the literature reveals the neglect of genres in professional contexts, with only a few studies focusing on medical, business and legal genres (Bhatia, 2016; Breeze, 2014; Dos Santos, 2002; Mehrpour & Mehrzad, 2013; Sarfo, 2011). Based on a comprehensive search in the genre literature, we found no study that has investigated letters of regularization as a professional genre. This study, conducted in the professional context of Ghana, is an attempt to address the gap. As regards the professional context, the present study covers land institutions in Ghana. In land institutions, genres that are operative include letters for lease (indenture), letters of regularization, letters for registration of title, letters for deed registration, and letters to sublet state land. The focus of this study is

letters of regularization as a genre conventionalized by the land institutions in Ghana because such letters serve as precursors for writing other kinds of letters within the institution.

In this genre, the term ‘regularization’ refers to “the process which applies selected planning approaches and techniques to legalize or lease the rights over a land” (Kessy, 2005, p. 36). A letter of regularization is written to a lawful land institution in most parts of the world (specifically in Ghana, such as the State Housing Company or Lands Commission) to show an interest in land or to acquire a regularization certificate for land. Land ownership varies across countries in the world. In Ghana, (customary) lands are technically owned by indigenes (Antwi & Adams, 2003). However, the State under statutory powers (National Land Policy (NLP) of 1999) can acquire these customary lands as public lands. The public lands take two forms: State Lands (lands compulsorily acquired for public use such as schools and hospitals which entitles customary owners to compensation payments) and Vested Lands (lands taken over by the State from the customary landowners for management purposes because of disputes) (Quan et al., 2008). The Lands Commission by its legal framework is mandated to manage public lands, which constitute about 20% of the total lands (Abdulai & Ndekugri, 2007). The commission manages the acquisition, holding and disposition phases of such public lands to alleviate impending challenges such as delays in compensation payments, and impractical use of lands for their intended purpose between the State and customary owners. Such challenges and other economically related motives often lead customary landowners to dispose of lands to grantees rather than the State, without the knowledge or permission of the commission. As such land transactions are illegal (Akaateba, 2019), there is a need to regularize illegally acquired lands. This becomes the only window of opportunity for the grantees, leading to the writing of a letter of regularization. Thus, the letter is an important step to correcting illegality in land acquisition.

Grantees resort to such letters to have their acquired land regularized through the Lands Commission. Usually, a letter of regularization is used to acknowledge a possible oversight on the acquisition of land and to obtain a legal document to ‘regularize’ an interest. Its dominant communicative purpose notwithstanding, the letter can be influenced by several factors, such as fear of eviction, prosecution, surveying works, and the need for land. The letter is usually accompanied by an approved site plan, and a copy of evidence of legal existence if the land is to be acquired or has already been

acquired. In this regard, we envisage possible references to such documents within the letter of regularization. Also, the letter is constructed in a way that recognizes the authority of the land institutions, expresses politeness, and provides other information that validates their ownership of the land or property on the land. Given the overarching communicative purpose of the letter, words such as *land*, *plot*, *thank*, *co-operation*, and *plan* are likely to characterize the letter. Such linguistic resources may influence the internal organization of the letter.

Our focus on letters of regularization in this study is motivated by three considerations. First, the study represents a first effort to explore an important yet little-researched professional genre and, consequently, is likely to instigate further research in other land institutions or agencies in other countries. As introduced above, the importance of this genre stems from the prominence attached to land acquisition and management in Ghana and other similar contexts. The constant litigation and other legalities around land acquisition and related processes make such a genre a crucial communicative artefact. This is because the legal pluralism (statutory and customary) (Kasanga & Kotey, 2001) underlying the legal framework for land management in Ghana makes the land tenure system highly susceptible to land disputes. Thus, this genre helps to achieve greater stability of activities concerning land. For instance, land title deeds are legitimately given to individuals through this genre. Second, the effort to explore letters of regularization from a linguistic perspective contributes to bridging the gap between industry and academia, which have largely remained two parallel worlds. To explore a professional genre in industry from an academic perspective can build meaningful connections and facilitate communication between the two worlds. Third, we believe that traditional genre analysis needs to be expanded and complemented by corpus-based analysis of relevant linguistic resources to develop a fuller understanding of a genre. Thus, aside from revealing the rhetorical structure of the genre, our study is also intended to achieve a comprehensive understanding of the genre by analyzing its lexico-grammatical features as typical resources that reflect the genre and its context of use. As we identify and define the moves and their lexico-grammatical features, the results can inform further research in similar fields. Given these considerations, our study was guided by two main research questions:

1. What is the generic structure of letters of regularization written by applicants to land institutions in Ghana?

2. What lexico-grammatical features characterize the letters of regularization written by applicants to land institutions in Ghana?

2. Previous research on professional letters

As pointed out earlier, professional genres have been under-researched, and our comprehensive search of the literature did not lead to published work on letters of regularization. However, we did locate a few studies on professional letters that are relevant to our study. One such study is Flowerdew and Wan (2010), which examined company audit reports in Hong Kong, focusing on the linguistic and contextual features of the genre. Innovatively, they combined a genre analysis to identify the schematic structure and the linguistic realization of the genre with an ethnographic analysis to examine the context of the production of the genre. They reported that while the letters were conventionalized to follow a specific template, there were variations in the writing which addressed inconsistencies in accounting reviews. Based on their findings, the researchers advocated the complementarity of different approaches in a single study to explore genres. Their advice was taken up in the present study as we combined two different approaches – textual and corpus analyses – in our inquiry into letters of regularization.

In the same professional setting, Flowerdew and Wan (2006) studied tax computation letters as an important genre of tax accountants. They emphasized the social context of the construction of the genre in addition to the functional, structural and lexico-grammatical analyses. They identified lexical items typical of tax computation letters such as *tax* and *financial*. These words add to the effectiveness of tax computation letters and reiterate a letter's purpose within its context. In view of this finding, we expected the words characteristic of letters of regularization to further affirm the overall purpose of these letters within the land institutions. Notably, Flowerdew and Wan (2006) observed that tax computation letters are linked to audit reports by accountants. Thus, we anticipated similar connections between letters of regularization and other relevant documents.

In their study on a genre in the corporate world, Jalilifar and Beitsayyah (2011) analyzed the rhetorical structure of 200 English and Persian enquiry letters. Adopting Santos's (2002) model of negotiation, they examined the schematic structure, lexico-grammatical features, and politeness strategies.

They reported that the two sets of letters varied in terms of their politeness strategies but shared the same schematic structure. Inspired by this study, we examined politeness strategies used in letters of regularization in the present study. Politeness strategies are important in a letter of regularization because they can facilitate the writer's goal to have the letter and the documents authorized. The use of such strategies can influence the choice of lexicogrammatical resources such as modal verbs used in a particular move.

Letters of regularization can be characterized as a type of application letter. In this regard, Gillaerts's (2003) study was relevant. Gillaerts identified a direct relationship between the rhetorical structure of an application letter and the evaluation of the application letter by the officials who received it. The study revealed that application letters that were better structured and followed regular rhetorical moves were appreciated and favorably attended to than those that lacked some expected elements of the letter. Also relevant to our study was a study by Al-Ali (2004) that examined communication strategies in Arabic and English job application letters. The study found that Arabian authors of application letters to institutions frequently used strategies such as "glorifying the institution of the prospective employer" and "invoking compassion" (p. 18). These strategies were, however, not adopted by native English authors, who engaged in an extended discussion to promote themselves and highlight their suitability for the positions concerned. Similar findings were also reported by Bhatia (1993) in his study of application letters. Informed by these previous studies, we focused on politeness and construal of gratitude as strategies in letters of regularization.

3. The ESP approach to genre studies

In the genre scholarship, three approaches have traditionally dominated genre studies: New Rhetoric (Bazerman, 1994; Miller, 1984), Systemic Functional Linguistics (Christie, 2013; Martin, 1992), and English for Specific Purposes (Bhatia, 1993; Swales, 1990). Recently, Lin et al. (2020) have introduced three additional approaches (Cognitive Genre Analysis, Critical Genre Analysis, and Corpus-based Genre Analysis) from the extant literature on genre analysis. While these approaches are acknowledged, the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach grounds this study. The ESP approach focuses on specific-purpose genres and non-native speakers' use of language, which makes it appropriate for the present study. Being the best-

known champion and the chief architect of the ESP approach to genre analysis, Swales (1990, 2004) notes that growing genre research within the ESP approach transcends the mere identification and labelling of moves to constitute the communicative purpose and effects. Swales's (1990) definition of genre has been influential in genre scholarship. He defines a genre as "a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes" (Swales, 1990, p. 58). In other words, the communicative purpose of a genre (e.g., the purpose of writing a letter of regularization) is recognized by members of the discourse community concerned. Furthermore, a genre exhibits "various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content, and intended audience" (Swales, 1990, p. 58). Central to realizing the communicative purpose of a genre is the concept of 'move', which is indicative of the communicative purpose which motivates and shapes a genre (Hu & Liu, 2018). A move is a purposeful sub-rhetorical unit of a genre that aids in realizing the genre's communicative purpose (Afful, 2005; Swales, 1990). Collectively, each move contributes to achieving the overall purpose of a genre. While the concept of move appears abstract, it is identified by its communicative purpose (Bonsu & Afful, 2022), cognitive-semantic boundaries, or the structure of the text (Tseng, 2011). Another key term is 'step', which is a rhetorical strategy embedded within a move to realize the communicative purpose (Afful & Gyasi, 2020). Summarily, Biber et al. (2007) identify rhetorical and linguistic strategies as means of determining moves. We argue that a genre evolves and develops from and through actors' responses to recurrent situations, and is shaped around characteristics such as form, content, purpose and other functionalities (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 2016).

While the foregoing theoretical formulations characterize the traditional ESP approach, recent developments highlight the contributions of corpus-based analyses to genre studies. Such analyses aim at accounting for the lexicogrammatical features characteristic of a genre. Thus, the expanded ESP approach attends to both the generic structure of a text and the lexicogrammatical resources used in service of the communicative goal. In other words, apart from generic affordances, lexicogrammatical resources constitute another dimension for understanding a genre. Interestingly, Bhatia (1996, p. 48) noted that communicative purposes impose "constraints on allowable contributions in the use of lexicogrammatical and discursal forms". This means that through lexicogrammatical features, we come to understand why language is used differently in a specific instance of a genre.

Bhatia (2002) confirms that one important aim of analyzing lexico-grammatical resources is to investigate how language is used in and shaped by context. This allows a discussion of thematic topics that are typically overlooked in the traditional ESP approach. Lin et al. (2020) pointed out the effectiveness of corpus linguistics in exploring the lexico-grammatical features of genres. Amongst other scholars, Hyland and Tse (2012), Hyland (2005), Goźdz-Roszkowski (2020) adopted corpus-based procedures to examine lexico-grammatical intricacies in genres. While the ESP move analysis is conducted to reveal the schematic structure of a genre, the corpus-based procedure is used to identify conventionalized use of lexical words (which are thematized). In this light, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of letters of regularization as a genre, we drew on the ESP and corpus-based frameworks to design and conduct the present study. The combined approaches add to the innovativeness of this study and provide a “more complete view of the elephant” (Bhatia, 2012, p. 19).

4. Methodology

4.1. Methodological approach

We adopted a predominantly qualitative research design (i.e., in-depth textual analysis) as the method of inquiry. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative design, while providing room for innovativeness, helps researchers explore and understand social organizations. The affordances of textual analysis as a method of qualitative inquiry are well demonstrated in previous studies of academic and professional genres (e.g., Bazerman, 1994; Bhatia, 1993, 2008; Flowerdew & Wan, 2006, 2010; Jalilifar & Beitsayyah, 2011). Such analysis, when well conducted, facilitates the development of an in-depth and contextualized understanding of the genre under investigation as a staged, goal-oriented social process. Our qualitative design enabled us to conduct a fine-grained analysis of the letters of regularization to understand the language and communication strategies used in them. We supplemented the textual analysis with a corpus-based analysis to identify frequently occurring lexical items (i.e., single words with content meaning) in the data. The corpus-based approach was adapted to focus on the frequent lexical words in the letters. As Biber et al. (1994) pointed out, ESP research is one of those areas where corpus methods can be fruitfully applied. In line with the ESP approach to genre analysis adopted in our study, the corpus-based

analysis would offer insights into the textual analysis by capturing important lexico-grammatical features and identifying themes and patterns associated with the most frequently occurring content words. Biber et al. (1994) clarified that depending on the kinds of linguistic resources of the genre, even a 1000-word corpus is representative enough for corpus-based analysis. As Bhatia (2002) noted, corpus procedures reveal patterns of form and use in a particular genre which are difficult to perceive in other ways. In view of the inherent relationships among communicative purpose, generic structure and lexico-grammatical resources discussed in the preceding section, our corpus-based frequency analysis of key lexico-grammatical features in the letters of regularization was expected to identify conventionalized use of lexical words in the letters to yield insights into how the genre is used in and shaped by the Ghanaian context of landownership.

4.2. Data collection

The data for this study comprised 50 letters of regularization written to the State House Company office in the Ashanti Region. These were all the letters available at the institution at the time of data collection. Given that this written genre is occluded (i.e., not publicly accessible), we made a special effort to access the letters of regularization. First, we liaised with an official from a technical university who led us to acquire the data from the aforementioned institution. Second, because of their confidentiality, we took pictures of the letters without having a hardcopy. We excluded the demographic information of the letter writers from the pictures. To assess how representative these 50 letters were of letters submitted in other regions, we wrote to the Lands Commission offices in the Central and Western Region of Ghana to collect samples. We found negligible differences in structure and content between the letters provided by the different institutions. Therefore, we concluded that our data was representative of land institutions in Ghana, given the communicative purpose of the letter. Figure 1 reproduces a typical letter of regularization. The number of letters in our data set was adequate to reach the saturation of coding, where additional letters did not yield new codes and, consequently, were redundant (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Notably, Hyland (2005) supported the use of a small corpus for a specific and detailed analysis of the texts contained therein.

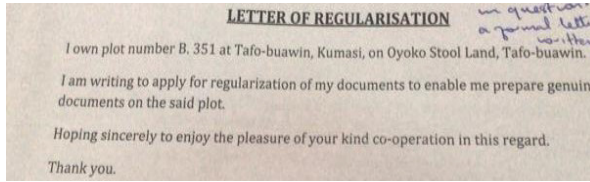


Figure 1. A sample letter of regularization.

4.3. Data analysis

We adopted Bhatia’s (2002) conceptualization of genre analysis that covers both the rhetorical structure and lexico-grammatical features of the chosen genre. The analysis of the rhetorical structure focused on the identification of moves, their frequency, the sequencing of the identified moves, and the textual space taken by the individual moves. Specifically, we first conducted a preliminary analysis of seven letters randomly selected from the data set to flesh out the moves and their purposes. We used cognitive-semantic boundaries to identify the moves in the letters, as suggested by Afful (2016). Next, we used the identified moves to analyze 40 letters numbered from RIL1 to RIL40 (‘RIL’ standing for Regularization of Interest Letters). We ended up with 40 letters because three of the 50 letters were incomplete due to age and fading and seven letters were used in the pilot analysis. When the preliminary list of moves was used to code the 40 letters, it was revised where necessary. We created a table (see Table 1) to facilitate the identification and labelling of the moves. The main challenge that we encountered in the move analysis was determining the move boundaries. We contacted an expert in Land Policy who helped us resolve the uncertainties. We calculated and achieved an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability (i.e., 81% agreement). All the disagreements were resolved through discussions. To determine the status of the identified moves, we followed Hüttner’s (2010) criteria, as summarized in Table 2. These criteria are widely adopted in the literature.

Move	Label	Communicative purpose
Move 1	Purpose of the letter	Stating the sole motive of the letter.
Move 2	Reason for the application	Providing reasons to support the application to acquire land.
Move 3	Attachment of documents	Referencing documents attached to the letter.
Move 4	Closure	Creating a positive impression and relationship.
Move 5	Expression of gratitude	Acknowledging the reader or institution.

Table 1. Identification and labelling of moves.

Percentage of occurrence	Status
90%–100%	Obligatory
50%–89%	Core
30%–49%	Ambiguous
1%–29%	Optional

Table 2. Status of Moves.

After the move analysis was completed, we conducted a corpus-based analysis of the lexico-grammatical features related to each move because the moves drew on different linguistic resources in their realization (Bonsu & Afful, 2022). The lexico-grammatical analysis focused primarily on politeness strategies involving the use of modal verbs and the construal of gratitude. Informed by Agbaglo's (2022) construal of gratitude analysis, we adapted Hyland and Tse's (2004) approach to identifying expressions or linguistic items indicating thanking. To analyze the data via the AntConc (2020) software, we typed the letters in MS Word and converted the .doc versions to .txt versions. The files were then loaded into the software for frequency analysis. We generated the word list of the entire data set. We excluded all the functional words from the frequency count because of our focus on meaningful (content) words. We checked for the frequency and ranking of the content words (see Table 7). Aside from this, we used words such as *thank** (with other forms), *grateful*, and *pleased* to search for expressions of gratitude in the letters. With our background knowledge of politeness strategies in Ghanaian English, we used the past forms of modal verbs such as *would* and *could* to identify expressions of politeness in the data.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Moves in the letters of regularization

Table 3 presents the identified moves and their names. A total of five distinct moves were identified in the letters. There were no sub-moves (steps) identified in the data mainly because the letters were generally short and not complex.

Move	Name
Move 1	Purpose of the letter
Move 2	Reason for the application
Move 3	Attachment of documents
Move 4	Closure
Move 5	Expression of gratitude

Table 3. Moves Identified in the Data Set.

5.1.1. Move 1: Purpose of the letter

We identified and labelled Move 1 as the ‘Purpose of the letter’. This move states the author’s communicative intention of writing the letter and establishes the application for the regularization of land. The following examples illustrate this move:

- (1) I humbly wish to apply for a government plot of land in respect of the above mentioned plot. (RIL 8)
- (2) I wish to apply for regularization of the above mentioned plot at Medoma which falls within your jurisdiction. (RIL 12)
- (3) I wish to apply for regularization of documents on the above mentioned plot at Pankronu Estate, which falls within your jurisdiction. (RIL 14)

As can be seen in Examples 1-3, the applicants began their letters with expressions such as *I wish to apply for* and *I humbly wish to apply for* to clearly indicate the purpose of their letters. Evidently, *regularization of documents*, *plot*, and *jurisdiction* are content words that are directly related to land as a property. Unsurprisingly, this move had the highest frequency among all the moves. The Land Policy expert we consulted affirmed that without this move, the letters of regularization would be flawed and serve no communicative purpose in the land institutions.

5.1.2. Move 2: Reason for the application

Another frequent move is ‘Reason for the application’. Out of the 40 letters analyzed, it occurred in 36 of them. As illustrated by Examples 4-6, the authors of the letters used this move to explain why they needed to apply for the regularization of documents for a plot or land. Among other things, commercial, residential and developmental reasons predominated in the letters. Most instances of this move were embedded in other moves.

- (4) ... to develop the plot earmarked to the Ghana Revenue Authority, Dunkwa for an office (RIL 4)
- (5) ... commercial purposes. (RIL 6)
- (6) ... for residential use. (RIL 7)

5.1.3. Move 3: Attachment of documents

This move occurred in more than half of the letters and was used by the authors to draw the reader's attention to the documents attached to the letters, as exemplified by Examples 7-9. The attached documents were usually the plan of the site (land), search letter/reports and statutory declarations, namely documents that verified the ownership or interest of the individual party applying to the land institution. Similar to Flowerdew and Wan's (2006) findings, this move was used to reference or link other documents to the letter of regularization.

- (7) Attached is the Allocation note, Statutory Declaration, cadastral plan and a copy of the search report from Lands Commission. (RIL 15)
- (8) Attached are copies of site plan edged pink and search letter conducted in your outfit for your easy reference. (RIL 6)
- (9) A photocopy of the site plan is attached. (RIL 3)

5.1.4. Move 4: Closure

The closure move, appearing in most letters, prepares the reader for the end of the letter and subtly expresses the author's hope of success in the application (see Examples 11-13). The first-person pronoun *I* dominated the closure move and often co-occurred with the second-person possessive pronoun *your*, conveying a collaborative relationship between the author and the reader. This relationship was further strengthened by expressions such as *abide by your regulations*, *co-operation*, and *trust*.

- (10) I count on your co-operation. (RIL 5)
- (11) I will abide by your regulations and rules governing it. (RIL 17)
- (12) I trust I can count on your co-operation in this matter. (RIL 13)

5.1.5. Move 5: *Expression of gratitude*

The final move, illustrated by Examples 13-15, expresses the author's gratitude. Most applicants concluded their letters with an expression of gratitude and on a polite note in anticipation of the results from the land institution.

(13) I shall be grateful if you would advise me.... (RIL 1)

(14) Thank you. (RIL 18)

(15) Thanks in advance. (RIL 20)

5.2. Frequency of the moves

The frequencies of the moves in the letters are summarized in Table 4. Move 1 was the most frequent move and was present in 95% of the letters, which evidenced its centrality in the genre. The second most frequent move, Move 4, occurred in 90% of the letters, making it an obligatory move. Move 2, Move 3 and Move 5 were core moves as they were found in 80%, 65% and 65% of the letters, respectively. According to Hüttner (2010), obligatory moves form the nucleus of a genre, and an instance of the genre would be flawed without these moves. Core moves are typical of a genre and render instances of the genre acceptable within the discourse community. No ambiguous or optional moves were identified in our data set.

Move	Frequency (%)	Status of Move
M1: Purpose of the letter	38 (95%)	Obligatory
M2: Reason for the application	32 (80%)	Core
M3: Attachment of documents	26 (65%)	Core
M4: Closure	36 (90%)	Obligatory
M5: Expression of gratitude	26 (65%)	Core

Table 4. Frequency of the Moves.

5.3. Sequencing of the moves

Move sequencing is an important rhetorical strategy that users of a genre can draw on. It is the arrangement of the moves in a particular order. Table 5 presents the various sequences of the moves present in our data set. We found one 6-move sequence, seven 5-move sequences, four 4-move

sequences, three 3-move sequences, and one 2-move sequence. Clearly, the 5-move sequences as a group were the most common as they occurred in 18 (45%) of the letters. Of these sequences, the most frequent one was 1>2>5>3>4. The 3-move sequences as a group were the second most common, occurring in one-quarter of the letters. Of these sequences, 1>2>5 was the most frequent. Both the 6-move and 2-move sequences were rare, occurring in only two letters, respectively.

Pattern	Frequency	Total	%
6-move sequence		2	5%
2>1>2>3>4>5	2		
5-move sequence		18	45%
1>2>3>4>5	2		
1>3>2>4>5	2		
1>3>1>2>4	2		
1>2>5>3>4	6		
1>2>4>3>4	2		
1>3>2>4>5	2		
2>1>2>4>5	2		
4-move sequence		8	20%
2>1>3>4	2		
2>5>4>5	2		
1>2>3>4	2		
2>1>4>5	2		
3-move sequence		10	25%
1>2>5	6		
1>4>5	2		
5>4>5	2		
2-move sequence		2	5%
1>3	2		
Total	40	40	100%

Table 5. Sequences of the Moves.

As can be seen in Table 5, Move 1 was used to introduce most of the letters, with only a few exceptions in some sequences. This is because the first move announces the purpose of the letter, which makes it mandatory. The 2>5>4>5 and 5>4>5 sequences can be considered flawed due to the absence of the Purpose move as an obligatory move. In other words, the generic structure and the intended purpose of the letter may not be actualized because of the absence of the first move. Only one move sequence, 1>2>3>4>5, was completely linear (Bonsu & Afful, 2022). Instead of exhibiting linearity in the sequences, most of the moves were recycled (Swales, 1990). For instance, 1>3>1>2>4, 2>1>2>4>5, and 2>1>2>3>4>5 were sequences where Move 1 or Move 2 were recycled. The

recycling of these two moves was clearly due to their importance in letters of regularization.

5.4. Textual space

In genre studies, the space allocated to a move reflects its significance in the genre. Table 6 presents the total number and percentage of words allocated to each move as well as the mean number of words per move. The most frequent move (i.e., Purpose of the letter) had the second most textual space, averaging 17 words per instance. Interestingly, Move 2 (i.e., Reason for the application) was not an obligatory move but had the greatest textual space, averaging 24 words per instance. This could be explained by the fact that to ensure the acceptance and processing of their letters, the authors would need to flesh out their reasons for applying for the regularization documents. Move 3 (i.e., Attachment of documents), together with Move 4 (i.e., Closure), the second most frequent move in the data set, had the least space allocated, averaging 13 words per instance of each move. Finally, Move 5 (i.e., Expression of gratitude) averaged 17 words per instance and had the second greatest textual space (tied with Move 1). This could be explained by the importance of the move in leaving a good impression on the reader (i.e., the officer in charge of processing the letter) and securing their approval.

Move	Textual space in words	Average number of words
M1: Purpose of the letter	626 (23.70%)	626/38 = 17
M2: Reason for application	760 (28.77%)	760/32 = 24
M3: Attachment of documents	342 (12.94%)	342/26 = 13
M4: Closure	478 (18.09%)	478/36 = 13
M5: Expression of gratitude	436 (16.50%)	436/26 = 17
Total	2642 (100%)	84

Table 6. Textual Space Taken by the Moves.

5.5. Politeness strategies: Lexico-grammatical features

Politeness strategies are indispensable to communication, offering interactants the opportunity to use language “in a socially appropriate manner” (Taguchi, 2008, p. 424). In Ghana, English is the official language used in all institutions for official functions. However, the pluralization of English across the world (Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2008) has given rise to many variants, including a Ghanaian variety of English. Socio-culturally, politeness is expressed through Ghanaian English in all formal contexts, especially in

formal requests or applications (Thompson & Anderson, 2019). This appears to concur with the claim that conceptualizations of English form part of the discourses surrounding its use (Kuteeva, 2020). While politeness can be achieved with different lexico-grammatical resources, we focused on modal verbs in the letters of regularization. This lexico-grammatical analysis of modal verbs is novel because although modal verbs have been studied in language acquisition (e.g., Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Hyland & Milton, 1997) and discourse analysis (e.g., Boicu, 2008; Nartey & Yankson, 2014), they have scarcely been examined in genre studies investigating politeness in Ghanaian English.

Examples 16-18 illustrate the use of modal verbs to express politeness in the letters. In this connection, there was reader, rather than writer, dominance in the letters. The expressions of politeness embedded in the *if*-clauses (e.g., *if you could regularize*, *if you could assist*, and *if you would advise*) followed structures that construed gratitude. The *if*-clauses mitigated the direct imposition of the requests; hence, making the letters more polite and acknowledging the power relations. The modal verbs marking politeness were *could* and *would*, which function as hedging devices (Hu & Cao, 2011) to reduce the force of expression. Such politeness strategies took a largely reader-oriented perspective, where the authority in charge of processing the letter was revered. As Anderson (2014) points out, in Ghanaian English, the hearer (e.g., the recipient of the letter in this study) is higher in status than the speaker (e.g., the author of the letter); hence, the speaker expresses politeness to acknowledge the social status or distance of the hearer.

- (16) I would therefore be very pleased if you could regularise my title to the subject property.... (RIL 26)
- (17) I would therefore be most grateful if you could assist me to acquire it through the proper way. (RIL 31)
- (18) I shall be grateful if you would advise me as to whether or not the above named applicant is in a sound financial position to undertake the project. (RIL 25)

Letters of regularization are essentially request letters and, consequently, are potentially face-threatening and imposing (Blum-Kulka, House & Kasper, 1989). By using modal verbs such as those found in Examples 16-18, the authors of the letters avoided direct imposition implied in the letters. The modal verbs were used mostly as a negative politeness strategy (Brown &

Levinson, 1987), where there was minimal imposition of requests to demonstrate the distance between the participants (Yule, 1996). Our finding about the use of modal verbs to express politeness contradicts Anderson's (2014) contention that users of Ghanaian English barely use modal verbs in polite requests.

5.6. Construal of gratitude: Lexico-grammatical features

Gratitude is expressed as a positive response to a benefactor (Cownie, 2017), and we show gratitude to construct our social identities (Hyland & Tse, 2004). As Agbaglo (2022) pointed out, gratitude is one of the social constructs that promote cohesion in society and connect individuals. In our data set, gratitude took the form of expressed indebtedness for a desired generosity of the land institution. Our analysis of the Expression of Gratitude move revealed that gratitude was construed mainly as a quality and as a process.

5.6.1. *Gratitude as a quality*

When gratitude is construed as a quality, it is mostly realized by adjectival groups where the writer/speaker, using the first-person singular pronoun *I*, is presented as a carrier of that gratitude attribute. As Agbaglo (2022) noted, *grateful* and *thankful* commonly head the adjectival groups expressing gratitude. These patterns were also found in our data set, as illustrated by Examples 19-21:

- (19) I would therefore be most grateful if you could assist me to acquire it through the proper way. (RIL 22)
- (20) I shall be very thankful if you would advise me as to whether or not the above-named applicant is in a sound position to undertake the project estimated about €3.5 Million. (RIL 34)
- (21) I would therefore be very pleased if you could regularise my title to the subject property and furnish me with all necessary documents pertaining to ownership specifically the sub-lease. (RIL 39)

As can be seen in the examples above, the carrier realized by the pronoun *I* is the individual expressing gratitude. In the adjectival groups construing gratitude, the head adjectives are *grateful*, *thankful* and *pleased*. While *grateful* is premodified by the adverb *most*, *thankful* and *pleased* are pre-modified by *very*.

The adverbs heighten the degree of gratitude. Similar findings were reported by Agbaglo (2022). Notably, while Afful (2016), Agbaglo (2022) and Hyland (2003) found *grateful* and *thankful* indicating that the beneficiary is pleased with the assistance, the expression of gratitude in our data set was constructed with a future reference making it appear conditional.

5.6.2. *Gratitude as a process*

Gratitude was also construed as a process in our data set. This happened when the process, realized by a verb, represented the expression of gratitude. Examples 22 and 23 illustrate the construal of gratitude as a process. In these examples, gratitude was construed predominantly as a process through operatives (i.e., [I] *thank you*). Another process verb that was used was *appreciate*. The processes indicated were used to credit a recipient or show appreciation as a form of response to something given or done. While previous studies on the expression of gratitude (e.g., Gesuato, 2004; Hyland & Tse, 2004) found *Thank* or *Thanks* modified by adverbs, the processes were presented without adverbial modifications in our corpus of letters. This pattern might have to do with the direct and specific nature of the letters to the land institution, as compared to acknowledgements in academic discourse investigated in the previous studies.

(22) Thank you. (RIL 40)

(23) I appreciate your efforts. (RIL 32)

5.7. Frequency of content words and related themes

Following Mwinlaaru and Nartey (2021), we conducted a corpus-based frequency analysis to identify the most frequent content words and group them to reveal the related themes. The 10 most frequently used content words across the letters are presented in Table 7. These words conveyed the ‘aboutness’ (Scott, 1999) of the letters (i.e., their thematic content). Given the communicative purpose of the letters of regularization, it is unsurprising that *land* was the most frequently used content word. The words included in Table 7 were sorted into two groups corresponding to the themes of “Claiming Ownership of the Land” and “Evidencing the Land’s Allocation”, respectively.

Rank	Concordance Hit	Word
9	83	land
14	79	plot
15	64	attached
18	61	apply
19	60	site
21	56	plan
24	48	wish
26	40	search
28	38	named
29	36	mentioned

Table 7. Frequency of Content Words.

5.7.1. *Claiming ownership of the land*

Under this theme, the applicants expressed either their rightful ownership of the land or the property on it. Aside from wanting to regularize their interest, they demonstrated that they were the authorized owners of the land. As illustrated by Examples 24–28, the keywords related to this theme are *land*, *plot*, *site*, *apply*, and *search*. These words share similarities in meaning and visually imaging land. While a plot is usually interchangeable with land, it could be a portion of land in general. The words *search* and *site* relate to development on a plot or land. The use of *apply* further solidifies the claim of land. *Land*, *plot*, and *apply* were found in Move 1, where the purpose of the letter was announced.

- (24) I wish to apply for Plot of Land edged pink on (RIL 2)
- (25) I wish to apply for the regularization of the above mentioned plot (RIL 33)
- (26) I attach herewith a site for your ease of reference. (RIL 19)
- (27) Attached is the search for your perusal. (RIL 1)
- (28) I therefore wish to apply and regularize my interest in the said land. (RIL 28)

Plot was used to claim only a portion of the land concerned in Example 24 but referred to the whole piece of land concerned in Example 25. *Site* in Example 26 referred to an overview of a piece of land planned for development. Finally, *search* in Example 27 is synonymous with *land*, referring

to an allocation of land intended to be owned and regularized. From this analysis, it is evident that the lexical items are indispensable to letters of regularization and must be present in all instances of this genre to achieve its intended purposes.

5.7.2. *Evidencing the land's allocation*

Words such as *attached*, *plan*, *wish*, *named*, and *mentioned* as used in our data set indicated that the land in question was available and needed to be developed for residential, commercial or governmental purposes (see Examples 29-33). Providing evidence of land allocation is a starting point for regularizing interest in it.

- (29) ... two copies of the Site Plan to the area in question are attached (RIL 10)
- (30) The original site plan was attached to my earlier application ... (RIL 4)
- (31) I wish to apply for regularization of documents (RIL 14)
- (32) I own the property with the above named plot number at Kumasi (RIL 18)
- (33) I humbly wish to apply for a government plot of land of the above mentioned plot. (RIL 9)

In the examples presented above, words such as *named* and *mentioned* are adjectives specifying the plots concerned, and *attached* points to other documents evidencing the allocation of the land. Related to *attached* is *plan*, part of the documents as evidence for the allocation of the land. *Wish* in Example 31 politely expresses the desire of the applicant to acquire land through the evidence provided. This word was frequently used in Move 1 to reflect its communicative purpose. The corpus-based frequency analysis corroborated Halliday's (1978) observation that "given that we know the situation, the social context of language use, we can predict a great deal about the language that will occur" (p. 32).

6. Conclusion

This study set out to conduct a genre analysis of letters of regularization written to land institutions in Ghana. Motivated by the dearth of research on

genres in non-academic contexts, this study innovatively integrated the ESP approach to genre analysis and corpus-based analyses to answer the research questions. The study revealed that the most frequent and obligatory move in the letters of regularization analyzed was the ‘Purpose of the letter’. Expectedly, the ‘Closure’ move also achieved an obligatory status. Two move sequences (i.e., 1>2>5 and 1>2>5>3>5) were markedly more frequent than the other move sequences. Although the ‘Reason for the application’ move was not obligatory, it was allocated much textual space in the letters, evidencing its centrality in the letters. Modal verbs were frequently used to express politeness in the letters, especially in *if*-clauses, and mitigate direct imposition on the reader. Additionally, gratitude was mainly construed as a quality and a process in the letters. In line with the communicative purpose of the letters, the corpus-based analyses revealed *land* as the most frequent keyword in the letters, occurring mostly in the “Purpose of the letter” move.

Several implications can be derived from these findings for further research and practice. First, a comparative study could be conducted to investigate lease letters and letters of regularization to identify intertextual features shared by these two genres. This recommendation is motivated by the close resemblance between the two genres. The comparative study could identify the differences and similarities between the genres and how they complement each other to achieve the purpose of land institutions. In addition, our study can be replicated in other contexts outside Ghana to affirm or modify our findings as a way of contributing to genre scholarship. For instance, given that politeness is construed differently across cultures, a study could investigate how lexico-grammatical features are used to achieve politeness in different cultural contexts. Also, the provisions and references in the letters of regularization in Ghana may be different from those in other contexts and consequently merit further cross-context inquiry. Finally, given the relatively small data set examined in this study, another study could increase the number of letters and, with respect to lexico-grammatical features, focus on hedging strategies in letters of regularization. This is because hedging strategies can offset the risk of facing legal actions through the letter if the required documents evidencing the land are not provided. The practical implication of the present study is for Ghanaian land institutions to provide guidelines on writing letters of regularization so that all the necessary elements are included to realize the communicative purpose of such letters. Pedagogically, through the analysis of this professional genre, teaching and learning resources could be provided to scaffold the learning of

Ghanaian students in the field of Land Policy and Institution. Through this, such professionals can be equipped to evaluate the appropriacy and effectiveness of the letters against the communicative purpose of the genre.

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