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Speech Acts in Facebook Marketing of Private Universities in Sulaimani: A Case Study from Kurdistan Region

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RECEIVED :13 /08/2025
ACCEPTED :02/09/ 2025
PUBLISHED :15/12/ 2025

Abstract

Keywords:
speech acts,
directness,
Facebook Marketing,
private universities,
Kurdistan Region of Iraq

The marketization of higher education has experienced rapid growth not only in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, but worldwide. This study investigates the types of speech acts and their directness in Facebook Marketing from two private universities in Sulaimani City. The problem addressed is the lack of research on language use in higher education marketing in this region. The objectives are to identify the dominant speech acts and their directness. Searle's (1975) Speech Act Theory was applied to conduct a qualitative content analysis of 40 Facebook posts collected across two academic years, 2023–2024 and 2024–2025, complemented by descriptive quantitative analysis of frequencies and percentages to highlight patterns in the data. The findings show that Representative and Directive acts dominate, accounting for 90.16% of all acts, with direct speech acts accounting for 93.44%, in which Emerald Green University (EGU) exclusively used direct forms, while Navy Blue University (NBU) used occasional indirect forms for engagement. Therefore, direct language is common in this context to give information and encourage action.



About the Journal

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1. Introduction

The marketization of higher education has become a widespread phenomenon, especially in the competitive environment of private institutions. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq has experienced a significant rise in the establishment of private universities over the past decade. This increased number forced private universities to utilize various marketing strategies to establish a good reputation among their competitors.

The main tool for successful marketing strategies is language, spoken or written, verbal or nonverbal. Language plays a crucial role in shaping perceptions, influencing decisions, and ultimately persuading prospective audiences. Thus, understanding communicative elements employed in marketing is critical for these institutions. In general, social media platforms have become central to communication, and Facebook, in particular, has emerged as a dominant channel for institutions to promote their academic programs, achievements, and events. These online messages go beyond simply sharing information; they contribute to influencing potential students' decisions.

John Searle's Speech Act Theory (1975) provides a useful framework to examine how language performs action in communication. Speech acts, in the context of higher education marketing, can inform, promise, invite, congratulate, or even declare, with varying degrees of directness. Directness means how clearly the intended act is stated, and it strongly affects how the audience understand the message. As there is a huge literature on the language of marketing in various sectors like commercial advertising, political discourse, and institutional communication, there is limited research addressing how speech acts operate within higher education marketing, especially in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Therefore, to address this research gap, the current study examines the types of speech acts and their directness in Facebook marketing posts from two leading private universities in Sulaimani: Navy Blue University (NBU) and Emerald Green University (EGU).

The aim of this study is to investigate the types of speech acts and their level of directness in Facebook marketing posts of private universities in Sulaimani, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, using Searle's (1975) Speech Act Theory as the framework.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research question

What types of speech acts are predominantly used in Facebook marketing by private universities in Sulaimani, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, and to what extent are these realized through direct or indirect forms?

It is hypothesized that Representative and Directive acts are the two predominant speech acts used in marketing materials at private universities in Sulaimani. Representatives are expected to dominate because universities aim to provide information, while Directives are predicted to be frequent as they encourage prospective students to register. Also, direct speech acts are hypothesized to be more common than indirect ones, because institutions try to deliver messages clearly and efficiently, particularly during intensive marketing periods.

While much research has been conducted on the pragmatics of marketing discourse in commercial, political, and institutional contexts, there is little focus on higher education marketing, particularly in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. This study addresses this gap by examining how private universities employ speech acts in Facebook marketing to inform, persuade, and engage prospective students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Act Theory

Speech act theory is a main pragmatic concept that describes how language functions not merely as a tool for conveying information, but also as a means of performing actions within specific contexts. Despite being foreshadowed by the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's views regarding language games, speech act theory is usually credited to Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin (Huang, 2006). The collection of his lectures on Speech Act Theory was published posthumously as *How to Do Things with Words* in 1962. Speech act theory has been redefined and developed by many, but the most significant one has been by Austin's Oxford pupil, the American philosopher John R. Searle. In 1969, Searle published *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* in which

he explained his version of speech act theory. Searle's systematization and development of Austin's theory have been influential to the extent that his interpretation of the theory is occasionally accepted as the only valid perspective on speech acts (Collavin, 2011).

According to Searle's (1975a) taxonomy, the illocutionary force of speech acts are universally grouped into five types: Representative commits the speaker to the truth of expressed proposition, such as asserting, claiming, informing, and describing; Commissive commits the speaker to some future course of action, such as promising, offering, planning, and pledging; Directives represent the speaker's attempts to get the addressee to do something, for example, requesting, inviting, ordering, and advising; Expressive expresses the speaker's psychological state, such as thanking, congratulating, apologizing, and blaming; and Declaratives are used to make immediate changes in the world via utterances, cases such as officially opening a college, nominating a candidate, and firing an employment.

Speech acts are further classified by their level of directness. This is based on their general structures: declarative, interrogative, and imperative; and their three general functions or illocutionary forces: asserting/stating, asking/questioning, and ordering/ requesting (Huang, 2006). If there is a direct match between the structure and the illocutionary force, there is a direct speech act; for example, the declarative sentence 'the door is open' is used to describe the state of the door being open. However, whenever there is an indirect relationship between the form and the illocutionary force, there is an indirect speech act. If 'the door is open' is used to order the addressee to close the door, it is an indirect speech acts because it is not in the form of an imperative sentence

2.2 Higher Education Marketing and the Kurdistan Context

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines marketing as the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods, and services to generate transactions that meet the objectives of both individuals and organizations (Brassington & Pettitt, 2006). In the context of the educational sector, marketing is how senior managers of the institution use in-depth, ongoing knowledge of current and future markets to make sure that strategic planning effectively and economically meets the needs of the customer in terms of education and training (Further Education Funding Council., 1998 as cited in Al-Fattal, 2010).

The marketization of higher education has experienced mushrooming growth worldwide in the last decades. Similarly, private higher education in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has grown significantly over the past two decades. The first private university was founded in 2004. There are currently 19 private universities in KRI (MHESR, 2025), among them 7 in Sulaimani. The rapid growth of private higher education puts private universities in competition to attract the maximum number of students. To do this, they employ different marketing strategies in which language plays a crucial role in achieving their objectives.

Modern marketing uses social media marketing frequently due to the constant emergence of new technologies and virtual platforms. Andrews and Shimp (2013) discuss several advantages or key characteristics of social media marketing such as immediate posting, individualization, interactivity, and cost efficiency. Garg and Pahuja (2020) also mention similar reasons for social media marketing to become the most profitable kind of promotion such as reaching the target market, value for money, interactive, measurable, and responsive to consumer complaints. Despite having many new social platforms for marketing, such as Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and TikTok, private universities in KRI use Facebook as the main online channel for promotional activities.

2.3 Previous Studies

There is sufficient literature on pragmatically investigating the language of marketing in different sectors. The studies covered different pragmatic areas: implicature (Rahmawati et al., 2022); presuppositions (Pranita, 2020); deixis and presupposition (Kshenovskaya, 2021); and speech acts (Ali and Othman, 2020; Aziz and Othman, 2020; Chiluwa, 2007; Kanu, 2024; Mahmood, 2008; Nurhidayah et al., 2024; Prastio et al., 2024; Rababah, 2023; Satti and Saba, 2024; Sukarini, 2022; Syaputraa and Ningsiha, 2024; and Syukri and Humaerah, 2016). However, very few studies focused on higher education marketing from a pragmatic perspective.

One of those rare studies is conducted by Satti and Saba (2024). They analyzed speech acts of the

prospectuses' discourse in the Pakistani private universities to explain the linguistic components: lexical and syntactic choices, communicative functions and discourse patterns. They also investigated the persuasive language used to market their value propositions. The findings demonstrated that academic and business cultures are fully integrated as the universities implement corporate marketing strategies to persuade the maximum number of students.

The rest of the studies investigated the language of marketing from different fields. Syaputraa and Ningsiha (2024) studied the illocutionary speech acts of the marketing strategies in Panam Morning Market to reveal how the language used can attract customers. The study explored the direct speech acts used by traders and concluded that Commissive speech acts are the most common, namely promising and offering. In addition, such as Nurhidayah et al. (2024) and Kshenovskaya (2021), explored Expressive speech acts and broader pragmatic strategies in advertising. Rababah (2023) also explored Jordanian print advertising in fashion, food, and technology, finding that Directives, Commissives, and Expressives are the most common types of speech acts in Jordanian advertising. Other studies such as Sukarini (2022) investigated speech acts in written public service advertisements related to environmental issues. The analysis showed that there are three types of speech acts: Representatives, Directives, and Expressives, and they are used to perform seven acts of suggesting, putting forward, requesting, ordering, inviting, advising, and thanking. Moreover, Kshenovskaya (2021) studied various advertisements and explored the role of pragmatic strategies, such as speech acts, deixis, and presupposition, to produce the desired effect on the targeted audience.

In fitness and health marketing, Aziz and Othman (2020) investigated persuasion and deception, revealing the dominance of Representative and Directive acts and the use of vague, indirect promises. Also, Mahmood (2008) examined mass media marketing through a contrastive analysis of English and Kurdish televised advertisements, integrating syntactic and pragmatic perspectives to highlight cross-linguistic similarities and differences in persuasive strategies.

Despite these contributions, there remains a gap in studies applying speech act theory to higher education marketing in KRI. The rise in the number of private universities with declining enrollment underlines the need to examine the marketing language used to attract students. This current study addresses that need by investigating the types of speech acts and their directness in Facebook Marketing from two private universities in Sulaimani, Kurdistan Region of Iraq, aiming to provide insights into the effectiveness in persuading prospective students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

To investigate the speech acts and their directness in Facebook posts of the two selected private universities in Sulaimani, the study follows a qualitative content analysis approach, complemented by descriptive quantitative analysis of frequencies and percentages to highlight patterns across the data. For confidentiality purposes, the actual names of the two universities are replaced with pseudonyms throughout this paper: Navy Blue University (NBU) and Emerald Green University (EGU). These codes are applied consistently in tables, figures, and text. The study employs Searle's Speech Act Theory to classify the illocutionary forces into Representative, Commissive, Directive, Expressive, and Declarative, and to indicate the level of their directness, whether they are direct speech acts or indirect.

3.2 Data Collection

For collecting data, an Official Support Letter issued by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research and the University of Sulaimani is sent to the selected universities via email to get their permission. After their acceptance, the data were collected from the official Facebook pages of the universities in the intensive marketing period of the previous two academic years: 2023-2024 and 2024-2025. The intensive marketing period begins with the announcement of the 12th-grade examination results by the Ministry of Education and ends with the admission results of private universities issued by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research. This period

slightly varies for the selected two academic years. For the 2023-2024 academic year, the period starts from July 3, 2023, and ends on November 11, 2023; however, for 2024-2025, it extends from July 19, 2024, to December 16, 2024. To collect all the posts in the two academic years, the Apify platform was used to scrape the Facebook pages. Considering the intensive marketing period, in 2023-2024, NBU posted 92 posts, and EGU posted 86 posts. In 2024-2025, NBU posted 96 posts, and EGU posted 128 posts. For each year, 10 most engaged posts are analyzed per university, 40 posts in total.

3.3 Sampling Rationale

There are some reasons behind choosing NBU and EGU as case studies. First, the two universities are prominent in the region and serve higher education for many years. Second, they are active in social media marketing, Facebook in particular. Third, their marketing promotions include various speech acts, making them good exemplars for studying speech act use in higher education marketing. Although the scope of the study is very limited to two universities, and the findings cannot be generalized to private universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, it allows for a deeper, more context-specific analysis.

3.4 Data Coding and Analysis

The coding process was conducted manually by the researcher, ensuring close reading and interpretation of each post. All the posts were analyzed, and speech acts were extracted. A post could include more than one speech act. Each speech act was classified according to Searle's (1975) Speech Act Theory into: Representative, Commissive, Directive, Expressive, and Declarative. Also, their level of directness was identified whether they were direct or indirect speech acts. Descriptive statistics: frequencies and percentages were calculated for each speech act type and directness category, both per university and for the combined dataset. The results were then compared to identify similarities and differences between the two universities.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Speech Act Types in Facebook Marketing

In the selected 20 Facebook posts for each university, 42 speech acts for NBU and 122 speech acts for EGU were identified and classified according to Searle's taxonomy. Let us see the samples in Table 1, statistics in Table 2 and Figure 1 below.

Table 1: *NBU and EGU Facebook Speech Act Classification*

Speech Act Text	Speech Act Type	Subtype	Direct/ Indirect	Marketing Function
<i>Navy Blue University has been ranked No. 1 among private universities in Iraq.</i>	Representative	Announcing	Direct	Building credibility and prestige
<i>Apply now and be part of a leading academic community.</i>	Directive	Call to Action	Direct	Encouraging immediate engagement and application
<i>Your future awaits!</i>	Expressive	Encouraging	Indirect	Inspiring ambition and action through emotional tone
<i>Navy Blue University is committed to providing high-quality education aligned with international standards.</i>	Commissive	Committing	Direct	Assurance of educational quality and international credibility
<i>Hurry up and take advantage of this great offer — only today and tomorrow! (EGU)</i>	Directive	Call to Action	Direct	Creating urgency to motivate immediate enrollment

Speech Act Text	Speech Act Type	Subtype	Direct/ Indirect	Marketing Function
<i>The University Presidency (of EGU) congratulates the participating students and teachers of the College of Science and Technology.</i>	Expressive	Congratulating	Direct	Creating a sense of pride and connection within the university community
<i>EGU is accredited by both the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research of the KRG and the Federal Government.</i>	Representative	Asserting	Direct	Building trust by highlighting official accreditation

Table 2: Statistics of Speech Act Types per University

Speech Act Type	NBU		EGU		Total	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Representative	21	50.00%	42	52.50%	63	51.64%
Commissive	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Directive	14	33.33%	33	41.25%	47	38.52%
Expressive	7	16.67%	5	6.25%	12	9.84%
Declarative	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Total	42	100%	80	100%	122	100%

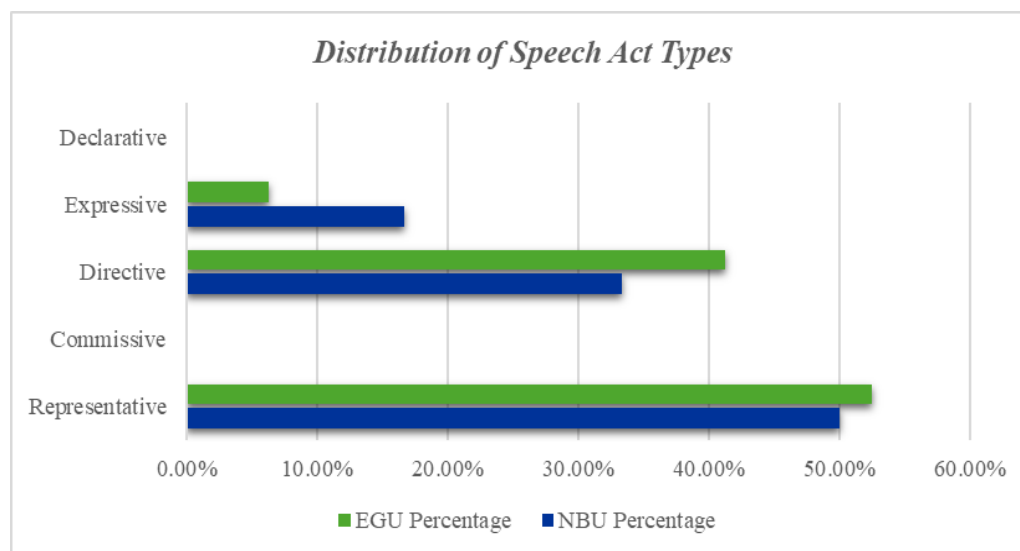


Figure 1 Distribution of speech act types in Facebook posts of EDU and NBU

In both universities, the most frequently employed speech act is Representative (51.64%). These acts are used to present factual information about programs, rankings, opportunities, events, and to reinforce the universities' credibility and academic reputation. It is followed by Directive acts (38.52%), functioning mainly as calls to action, such as encouraging applications, website visits, or event attendance. Expressive acts are less common (9.84%). They are used to congratulate, thank, or inspire audiences. No Commissive or Declarative acts are identified, indicating that the universities' Facebook marketing favours information-sharing and prompting immediate action

over making commitments or formal declarations.

These dominant uses of Representative and Directives speech acts are consistent with the previous studies (e.g., Aziz & Othman, 2020; Satti & Saba, 2024). Along with using these two major speech acts, the subtle presence of Expressives also aligns with the works of Aziz and Othman (2020) and Sukarini (2020). The absence of Commissive and Declarative speech acts and the emphasis on directness are also reported in Sukarini's (2020) study on written advertisements.

The results answer the first part of the research question that Facebook marketing of NBU and EGU is dominated by Representative and Directive speech acts, which together accounted for over 90% of all identified acts. Universities use Representatives to highlight credibility and reputation with posts on institutional rankings, achievements, program offerings, and events. Directives, on the other hand, are used to engage potential students by attending events, visiting the campus, or applying for admission. This aligns with Searle's (1975) view that Representatives are fundamental for conveying information, while Directives serve to call for action. And these two are essential in marketing practices, especially in the intensive period of higher education marketing.

Expressives play a second role in Facebook marketing of these universities, as the total percentage of both institutions is only 9.84%. They are used to build relationships by praising achievements, congratulating students, or giving good news to prospective students. All these together contribute to creating a positive institutional image. The absence of Commissives and Declaratives implies that the universities rarely make formal commitments or declarations through Facebook marketing, perhaps reserving such acts for more formal communication channels.

4.2 Directness in Facebook Marketing

The identified speech acts are further classified based on their level of directness. Table 3 and Figure 2 present the distribution of direct and indirect speech acts in the dataset.

Table 3: *Statistics of Direct vs. Indirect Speech Acts*

Directness	NBU	NBU	EGU	EGU	Total	Total
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Direct	34	80.95%	80	100.00%	114	93.44%
Indirect	8	19.05%	0	0.00%	8	6.56%
Total	42	100%	80	100%	122	100%

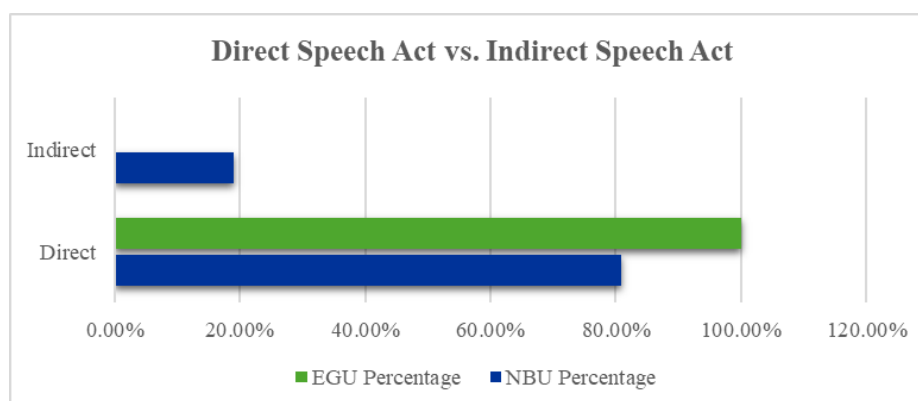


Figure 2 *Directness of speech acts in Facebook posts of EBU and NBU*

The findings show that direct speech acts dominate Facebook marketing content, covering 93.44% of all acts across both universities. However, there is a difference between the two universities. EGU exclusively used direct forms (100%), reflecting a clear and unambiguous communication style. Although NBU also favoured directness (80.95%), it made use of indirect forms (19.05%), primarily within Expressive acts and rhetorical questions, which served to engage audiences or create a conversational tone. Using direct language more reflects the fast-paced nature of social media, and suggests that clarity, efficiency, and immediacy are prioritized in the competitive higher education marketing in Sulaimani.

The results of directness indicate that direct speech acts are preferred in Facebook marketing of the two universities, EGU (100%) and NBU (80.95%); hence, the second part of the research question is answered. This suggests that clarity and explicitness are favoured to leave little room for ambiguity, ensuring prospective students receive clear information and guidance during competitive admissions periods. NBU's small portion of indirect acts (19.05%) is due to its occasional use of rhetorical questions and softer invitations, which may be intended to create a more conversational or engaging tone.

5. Conclusion

From a practical perspective, the results show that Facebook Marketing in NBU and EGU mainly aims to give information and encourage action through Representatives and Directives, with little use of emotional appeals, Expressives. No Commissive and Declaratives were identified, indicating that universities might choose other formal marketing channels to make commitments and formal decisions.

In terms of directness, the major speech act types, Representatives and Directives, are direct. EGU exclusively uses direct speech acts; however, NBU also employs indirect Representatives and Directives. This is to soften the delivery or frame the message as a rhetorical invitation. This matches audience expectations to receive clear information and guidance, and helps universities show credibility, opportunity, and accessibility in a competitive higher education market. All Expressive acts are delivered directly, highlighting a tendency toward clear statements even in congratulatory or motivational messages.

This study fills an important gap by offering a pragmatic analysis of Facebook Marketing in Kurdistan's higher education sector. The findings support Searle's (1975) idea that Representatives and Directives are central in institutional communication. They also show that higher education marketing values clarity more than emotional appeal. This is mostly because students need explicit guidance.

Practical Recommendation for universities:

- Keeping prioritizing direct speech acts to ensure explicit guidance and information to prospective students.
- Using more Expressives to create emotional connections, as this is a critical period to decide on their field of study. They need care and motivation.
- Commissive acts more to build trust through promises of support and opportunities.
- Employing occasional indirect speech acts (e.g., soft invitations, rhetorical questions) to create a more engaging and conversational tone without losing clarity.
- Including more student success stories and community involvement posts to foster connection and institutional image.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Investigating more private universities across the Kurdistan Region to enable broader generalizations.
- Studying various marketing strategies, such as websites, promotional videos, and print advertising, to compare and contrast the higher education marketing language among universities.
- Exploring the perlocutionary effect of the speech acts on students to perceive how these affect their university decision-making.

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كرده قسه بيه كان له بازار گه ربي فيسبوك له زانكو تايبه ته كانى شارى سليمانى: تويزينه وهى كه يسي له هه ريمى كردستان

مژده عادل حه مه صالح

رؤوف كريم محمود

به شى زمان و ئه ده بى ئينگليزى، كوليزى زمان، زانكوى سليمانى، به شى زمان و ئه ده بى ئينگليزى، كوليزى زمان، زانكوى سليمانى،

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پوخته

بازار گه ربي خویندنى بالا گه شه بيه كى خیرای به خویه وه بینه وه نهك ته نها له هه ريمى كردستانى عيراق، به لكو له سه رانسهرى جيهاندا. ئامانج له م تويزينه وه بيه پشكيني جوره كانى كرده قسه بيه كان و راسته وخویى ئه وانه له بازار گه ربي فيسبوك له دوو زانكوى تايبه ته له شارى سليمانى. كيشه ي تويزينه وه كه كه باس كراوه كه مى ليكولينه وه بيه له سه ر به كار هيتانى زمان له بازار گه ربي خویندنى بالا له م هه ريمه دا. ئامانجى تويزينه وه كه ديارى كردنى كرده قسه بيه سه ره كيه كان و راسته وخویى ئه وانه. تيورى كرده قسه كردنى سيرلى (1975) به كار ده هيتريت بۆ شيكر دنه وه بيه كى كواليتاتى ناوه رو كى بۆ ديارى كردن و پۆلين كردنى كرده قسه بيه كان له 40 پۆستى دوو سالى خویندنى 2023-2024 و 2024-2025. دۆزينه وه كان پيشانى دهن كه كرده كانى نوينه رايه تى و رينمايى زالن، كه 90.16% ي هه موو كرده كان بيكده هين، له گه ل كرده كانى قسه كردنى راسته وخۆ كه 93.44% بيكده هين، كه تيدا EGU به ته واولى شيوه ي راسته وخۆى به كار هيتاوه، له كاتيكدا NBU هه نديكجار شيوه ناراسته وخۆكانى بۆ به شداري بيكر دن به كار هيتاوه. دهره نجامى تويزينه وه كه ئه وه دهره خات كه زمانى راسته وخۆ باوه له م چوار چيوه بيه دا بۆ بيدانى زانيارى و هاندانى كردار.

وشه سه ره كيه كان: كرده قسه بيه كان، ره سه ته وخۆى، بازار گه ربي فيسبوك، زانكو تايبه ته كان، هه ريمى كردستانى عيراق

الأفعال الكلامية في تسويق الجامعات الخاصة عبر الفيسبوك في السليمانية: دراسة حالة من إقليم كردستان

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الملخص

لقد شهدت تسويق التعليم العالي نموًا سريعًا ليس فقط في إقليم كردستان العراق، بل على مستوى العالم. تبحث هذه الدراسة في أنواع الأفعال الكلامية ومباشرتها في التسويق عبر الفيسبوك من جامعتين خاصتين في مدينة السليمانية. تتمثل المشكلة المعالجة في نقص البحوث حول استخدام اللغة في تسويق التعليم العالي في هذه المنطقة. تهدف الدراسة إلى تحديد الأفعال الكلامية المهيمنة ومباشرتها. تم استخدام نظرية الأفعال الكلامية لسيرل (1975) لإجراء تحليل نوعي للمحتوى لتحليل الأفعال الكلامية في 40 منشورًا خلال عامين أكاديميين، 2023-2024 و 2024-2025. تظهر النتائج أن الأفعال التمثيلية والتوجيهية تهيمن، حيث تشكل 90.16% من جميع الأفعال، مع الأفعال الكلامية المباشرة التي تشكل 93.44% حيث استخدمت الجامعة الأولى (EGU) الأشكال المباشرة حصريًا، بينما استخدمت الجامعة الثانية (NBU) أشكالًا غير مباشرة أحيانًا للتفاعل. لذلك، اللغة المباشرة شائعة في هذا السياق لتقديم المعلومات وتشجيع العمل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأفعال الكلامية، المباشرة، التسويق عبر الفيسبوك، الجامعات الخاصة، إقليم كردستان العراق