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Commodification of Higher Education: Investigating the Application of Pragma Stylistic Framework on the Discourses of Pakistani University Prospectuses

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ABSTRACT

Pakistani universities, like most other global universities, are commoditising the discourse of prospectuses for commercial and marketisation purposes. This study examined how most higher education institutes in Pakistan employ marketing strategies through linguistic and discursal means to achieve their desired objectives. This study operationalised Black's pragma stylistic framework (2006) to analyse the language of the Pakistani prospectuses. The present study synthesised two different genres, such as pragmatics and stylistics, termed pragma stylistics. This study followed a qualitative interpretive paradigm to analyse linguistic characteristics and communication strategies embedded in the discourse of Pakistani university prospectuses in line with the pragma stylistics tenets. The analysis of this study reveals that the pragma stylistic framework is potentially a useful conceptual framework applicable to interpreting the promotional language of Pakistani universities.

Keywords: Commoditization, Higher education, Feasibility, Pragma Stylistic Framework, Pakistan and University prospectuses.

INTRODUCTION

The present study addresses how the pragmatic stylistic framework may be used as a theoretical foundation for interpreting the promotional language of university prospectuses in Pakistan. It highlights how the synthesization of pragmatics and stylistics can serve as an important analytical tool for exploring persuasive linguistic strategies on the prospectuses of private universities in the Pakistani context.

According to Yule (1996, p. 1), 'pragmatics deals with speaker's intended meaning and hearer's interpreted meanings', in which context plays a vital role between the two participants of the conversation. Although stylistics originated from poetics and categorically represented the classical world in the past, now it is considered a "field of study that confidently has one foot in language studies and the other in literary studies" (Routledge, 2014, pp. 1-2) argued that literature exists within a metaphorical context and critically comments to contribute to the domain of creativity. The rationale is how readers comprehended the style of text within the context and remained linguistically engrossed in the engrossed text

(Nosa, 2018).

In this regard, the combined genres of pragmatics and stylistics fall under the umbrella term of linguistic stylistics, which indicates the point of meeting between two different domains through pragmatic factors like speech acts, performatives, and many other resources that can be utilised for stylistic effects (Nosa, 2018). Many studies have explicated the notion of pragmatics and stylistics in different ways, traditionally linked with the "study of contextual meanings" and the "study of style" in the domain of linguistics (Nosa, 2018). Moreover, Verdonk (2002, p. 4) viewed stylistics as studying "distinctive expression" and demonstrating its objectives. The fusion of both genres investigates linguistic characteristics beyond the syntactic structures and the implementation of pragma stylistic theories on texts, which remains a contribution to modern linguistics. In other words, pragma stylistics stays in one theory, emphasising texts within contexts and their effects on the text analysis. Moreover, it also included elaborating pragma stylistic tenets collaborating to initiate new dimensions of analysis from the stance of marketisation.

Objectives

The following are the objectives of the current study;

- To investigate the linguistic characteristics, discourse patterns, and communication strategies that are exploited to frame the readers' minds for the desired dimension set by the private universities of Pakistan.
- To establish the practicality of Black's (2006) pragma stylistic framework in identifying the contribution of linguistic resources to interpret promotional language employed in the Pakistani universities' prospectuses.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical foundation is pivotal as it provides the lens through which research problems and questions are evaluated within the context of a study. Though it is usually incorporated in quantitative research and conceptual frameworks, the most essential part of qualitative studies is the theoretical foundation, which is a prerequisite for both qualitative and quantitative research. In other words, it is considered a proposed way of thinking to potentially and amicably relate events, guiding the entire research process. The qualitative research design can have a structured or less structured theoretical framework to avoid preconceptions about the research findings. The theoretical framework illustrates and conceptualises the problem statement, foundation and analysis (Weaver-Hart, 1988, cited in Leshem and Trafford, 2007).

The empirical research relies on the conceptual framework and its value contribution, so explaining the reason for its employment is essential. However, this thought goes on the farther side of the research scope of the study; it reveals the importance of the conceptual framework for the present research work. Many researchers provided different orientations of conceptual frameworks and their usefulness, which are required to shape the entire research process. In a general sense, Miles and Huberman (1984, p.33) stated that "the current version of the researcher's map of the territory being investigated" demonstrated the evoking nature of research, which may keep on emerging as the research progresses. Mahmood (2020) advocated this notion as a conceptual framework that acts like a 'unifying force' for the research process, i.e. planning, data collection and analysis. According to Maxwell (2010, p. 2), research work cannot be viewed as "theory-free," and the implicit notion is to consider historical, political and cultural factors to examine 'educational phenomenon' in the

broader social contexts.

Miles and Huberman's (1984) notion of referring to conceptual work as an 'evolutionary process' helped this study in the following ways: selecting pragma stylistics as a conceptual framework and providing a theoretical explanation of the current research. Secondly, it sheds light on the theoretical clarification of how the objectives of the present study would be achieved and what exactly the researcher intended to explore for a better understanding of Pakistani university prospectuses.

This study explored the persuasive features prevailing in the discourse of Pakistani private universities based on the pragma stylistic analysis and how language manipulation became part of educational discourse to convince potential applicants so that revenue could be generated to meet the financial constraints. In this regard, prospectuses are considered 'marketing tools' as these are the source of information for potential students, and their language beams the ideology of text producers, which are aligned with the discursive practices according to the needs of an hour and competitive market.

Recently, market practices have received a prominent position because of intense competition between private universities in Pakistan, so higher educational institutions are trying to create their unique identity for positive results. In this context, academic practices such as linguistic manipulation and ordering persuasive language became very common in educational discourse. Moreover, the language of prospectuses unpacked the ideology of text producers, and pragma stylistics analysis attempted to investigate their intention of using captivating words.

According to Fadhlurrahman (2021), the transformation and classification of texts can unearth the ideologies of writers through analysis of 'linguistic variations' and 'linguistic ordering' relevant to the aim of the study. He further mentioned that this language manipulation tried to deal with "readers' insight" through the discursive measures of "re-lexicalization" and "over-lexicalization" to transmit writers' ideology encoded with underlying motives. Accordingly, the present study beams the ideological perspective of the text producers and reveals how discursive marketization is embedded in academic discourse. Fairclough (2001, p. 91) stated, "Linguistic characteristics of vocabulary and grammar might reflect ideological persuasion and power relation in discourse within the circumstances of manipulating people's view". According to Leshem and Trafford (2007), a theoretical

framework is considered to be pivotal as it reflects the study's objectives and how these can be achieved. This study used pragma stylistics as a theoretical framework, guiding data collection and analysis procedures. Though the pragma stylistic field is "interdisciplinary" and "well-documented" (Edwards, 1996; Klein, 1990, 1996), comprehending the intricacies of language is considered a requirement of the information age and contributes to the fabric of modernisation.

Although stylistics and pragmatics are two different fields and lack comprehensiveness in a general sense for the interpretation of texts, therefore the collaboration of stylistics and pragmatics are considered adequate for the interpretation of literary and non-literary texts, i.e. identification of linguistic characteristics and so on (Mehreen et al., 2021). This combination of two fields introduced pragma stylistics. This term was first used by Hickey (1993), and he considered this a valuable framework for analysing texts irrespective of their literacy and non-literacy nature.

Later on, Black (2006) took up the idea and proposed a systematic framework for "pragmatic stylistic analysis" for both literary and non-literary texts as this framework explicates detailed elaboration for many enigmatic processes or events through the collaboration of two genres (Black, 2006). In the same tradition, Black's (2006) pragmatic stylistic framework was applied to analyse headlines of newspapers (non-literary text) to check their feasibility and reveal the influence of pragmatic and stylistic features on the interpretation of Dawn newspaper headlines (Mehreen et al., 2021).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The researcher employed Black's (2006) pragma stylistic framework on the prospectuses' discourse of Pakistani private universities, and this study contributed theoretically to advance the scope of the field. This study also underscores that pragma stylistics is an unexplored area in the Pakistani context and contributed practically by illustrating linguistic manipulation for ideological perspectives. Moreover, this study also unearths the hidden agenda through the exploitation of linguistic resources by the private universities of Pakistan. In other words, the present study is sensitised to demonstrate how discursive structures of marketisation are employed to acquire persuasive goals and ideological perspectives to direct readers' minds by the private universities in Pakistan.

Moreover, the process of employing linguistic and extralinguistic constituents includes decoding texts. There was a need to trace back the written discourse and its comprehension, implicature, and stylistics. In this regard, practical tools from both pragmatics and stylistics are required for the comprehensive elaboration (Missikova, 2007). Furthermore, modern stylistics deals with the functional analysis of linguistic structures or utterances through both fields, pragmatics and stylistics, which take language differently but tend toward comprehensive elaboration in modern text analysis (Galita, 2011).

The present study incorporated pragma stylistic theory, which originated from Van Dijk's (1972) recommendation about "reserving stylistics" with theoretical orientation as a branch of linguistics in correlation with the pragmatic theory of performance. The researcher found Black's (2006) pragmatic stylistic framework appropriate for analysing university prospectuses from the stance of marketisation. Black (2006) proposes that this framework elucidates how pragmatics contribute to interpreting important constituents of written discourse about stylistic analysis. Black (2006) states, "meaning-making is an interpretative process that varies from reader to reader and depends on the non-grammatical and non-semantic aspects of language besides the linguistic features."

The researcher has analysed the discourse of the Pakistani universities of the private sector through the selected dimensions of Black's systematic framework (2006), i.e. speech acts, deictic expressions, echoic and hybrid discourse, and cooperative principle as mentioned in figure 1.

Black's contribution to Pragmatic stylistics is magnificent. She proposed the pragmatic stylistic framework for text analysis without limiting it to literary or non-literary discourse. Moreover, this framework operates together under two different genres, pragmatics and stylistics, which remains a phenomenal contribution to the research body.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The prospectuses' data identify the following pragma stylistic features, and the analysis focused on how these communication strategies and linguistic patterns, relying on a pragma stylistic perspective, contributed to the desired interpretation of the academic discourse on potential students.

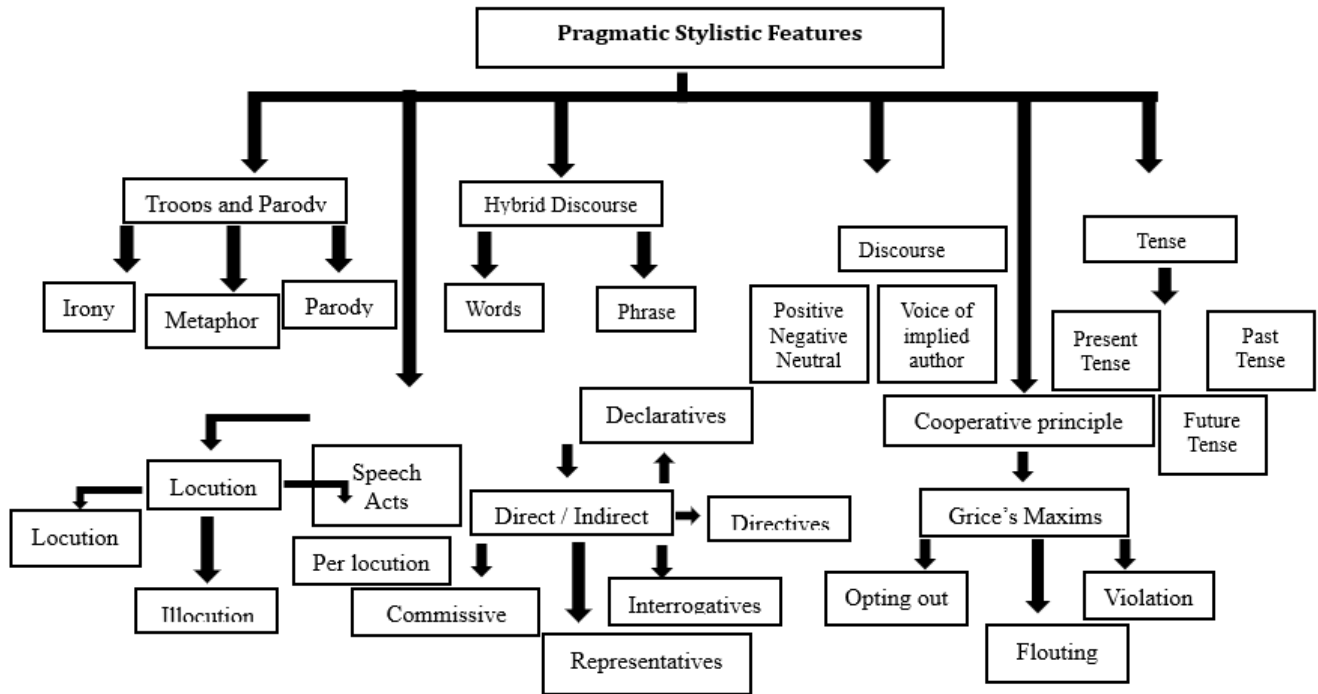


Figure 1. Analysis of Pakistani Private Universities' Discourse through Black's Systematic Framework (2006).

Conceptual metaphors

The researcher has found the language of prospectuses embedded with conceptual metaphors to convince the potential applicants with a sophisticated image of the respective university. It is one of the significant

persuasive strategies to leave a long-lasting impression, as these conceptual metaphors effectively impact the readers. The following extracts are taken from the prospectuses of the Pakistani private universities.

Table 1. Extracts of prospectuses highlighting conceptual metaphors.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I assure you that we are leaving no stone unturned in the process of imparting and ensuring the best possible higher education environment (UMT).” • “The one interested in you developing as a whole, a full person, capable of submerging macrocosm in the macrocosm of the self, defining excellence and redefining attributes to the extent that they mirror the pleasure, love, and blessing of Allah (UMT).” • “You walk in with the power of intention” (UMT).” • “It will lead to the advancement of mankind and society by maximising potential and changing mirrors into windows (GAUS).” • “I invite you to explore the corridors of GAUS, which will give you glimpses of a perfect future (GAUS).” • The university is the brainchild of Mr. Hunaid Lakhani, the Founding Chancellor and Chairman of Iqra University (IU). • Our faculty and staff are dedicated teachers driving cutting-edge research in their fields and looking to enrich the lives of our student body (IIUI). • “I hope that QU will one day revive our illustrious academic traditions of the past and will prove to be the cradle of knowledge and research for Pakistan in particular and Ummah in general (QU).” • “Enjoy a tour of our breathtaking campus with its outstanding scientific facilities and Islamic-style architectural building (QU).” • “Welcome to the University of Lahore, the epitome of excellence (UoL).”
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Analysis

The researcher has identified metaphorical expressions in the language of prospectuses as text producers aimed to create a compelling and dominant image of their respective universities. Although metaphors remained “challengingly enigmatic” (Black, 2006) as they originate and operate in the human mind (Paprotte & Driven, 1985; Lakoff & Johanson; Mey, 1994; Pilkington, 2000). Carter (2004) agreed with the previous notion of metaphor that they originate and function in the human mind, and these are prevalent in almost all discourses, including day-to-day conversation. The researcher highlighted that the interpretive effort of stakeholders is required to understand the metaphorical language as context plays a vital role in its comprehension.

The private universities have employed conceptual metaphors to enhance the impact of language as these expressions strongly influence the readers and create a unique identity for these educational bodies. Interestingly, the researcher has found metaphorical expressions in the prospectuses’ discourse of many private universities, as mentioned above. However, metaphorical language is another persuasive technique of convincing the potential applicants employed by the text producers of the private educational sector. For instance, UMT claims that they are putting efforts into providing many opportunities to help students in every possible way so that they can achieve academic excellence, as depicted through the metaphorical expression, “**leaving no stone unturned**”. Likewise, UMT employed the reference of the systematic personality model (Jones, 1986) to posit the resemblance between human beings and the cosmos, i.e., the grand universe; students can explore the great universe and absorb it for the revelation of their internal strength and power to relate with the

outer universe. In other words, they can identify their potential to achieve excellence in the educational field and reshape their capabilities by becoming part of UMT. Similarly, the other metaphorical expressions by GAUS also depicted the advancement of oneself, i.e. “changing mirrors into windows”, “the corridors of GAUS which will give you the glimpse of perfect future”. Moreover, IU refers to the university as a “brainchild” to illustrate the noble purpose behind the initiative of this educational endeavour. In addition, other private universities also employed conceptual metaphors, i.e. “cutting-edge research” by (IIUI); “the cradle of knowledge” and “breathtaking campus” by (QU) and “epitome of excellence” by UoL demonstrated the exaggerated language of universities to inculcate the concept behind the inception of universities. It is one of the essential persuasive strategies to create a strong influence on potential students so that they can differentiate among their available choices. The researcher found conceptual metaphors embedded in the discourse of prospectuses of the Pakistani universities as Lakoff (1987) argued that the rationale behind the employment of conceptual metaphors is reasoning and conceived thought to force the readers to grasp the concept in a practical way, i.e. metaphorical expressions.

Promising commitments for the future

The researcher has investigated the variation of linguistic choices made by the text producers of Pakistani private universities and found that the trend of promising future commitments is at its peak in the current scenario. Furthermore, the core objectives of private universities have been shifted from ‘what can be done in the present’ to ‘What will be done in future’ if the potential applicants become part of the respective university; a few instances are mentioned below;

Table 2. Extracts showing future commitments for students.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I would like to assure the parents and our prospective students who are thinking to become part of the UoL family that their decision to join will bear desired fruits in times ahead (UoL)”. • “We will be attracting and nurturing future generations of engineers, technologists, innovators and entrepreneurs to contribute to a prosperous and sustainable future for Pakistan (QU)”. • “By choosing to study at Iqra University, you will be investing in an education that will help you build a successful future and determine your role as an upstanding member of society (IU)”. • “We visualise a harmonious relationship with you over the years you will spend with us and look forward to sending out in the world a more confident, wiser and smarter ready to take on the challenges of the World (GAUS)” • “We are resilient and ready to shape the future (GAUS)”. |
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- “**As we look into the future**, one thing is certain – knowledge will be a highly sought-after key resource within Pakistan and worldwide (AUIC)”.
- “Our staff and faculty promote a holistic approach to academic advising, characterised by students’ active engagement, followed by the students’ deliberate decision-making about their **plans** (UMT)”.

Analysis

The above data showed that private universities are employing promising commitments to assure students of successful careers if they enrol with them. Moreover, the sense of ownership is also conveyed through the word “UoL family,” which created the impact that the university is looking for student affairs with sincerity and compassion, as their successful careers are the ultimate objective of the university.

Adding to the previous notion, the careful selection of text producers such as “times ahead”, “future generations”, “sustainable future for Pakistan”, “a successful future”, “wiser and smarter YOU”, and “ready to shape the future”, as “we look into the future” revealed the intentions of the private universities as the majority of these educational institutes are making imaginary future world for students through promising commitments for their successful and secured future. The research found this persuading strategy of attracting students beyond the reach of university officials in practical and real life; however, these captivating lines are mentioned only in the prospectuses; otherwise, students hardly get any chance to see these high officials in their tenure who are assuring, making commitments for the secured and bright future.

The researcher has analysed the extracts of the prospectuses from the linguistic orientation; stylistics deals with a variation of the linguistic choices from the acceptable linguistic constructions but pragma stylistics goes one step ahead of it as it considers the context, language variation, context and situational appropriateness into account; it can be observed from the example mentioned above, “**look forward to sending out in the world, a more confident, wiser and smarter YOU**”; the words “wise” (adverb/adjective) and smart are used as an adjective in everyday language but the researcher found language exploitation of text producer here by adding comparative degree to make **wiser** and **smarter** just to show language creativity by ignoring the grammatical constructions and this practice falls under creative stylistics which is used to acquire the willingness of the target readers.

Moreover, the deixis “You” is written in bold letters,

which shows the value provided by private universities in Pakistan. The researcher demonstrated that creative stylistics, in collaboration with pragmatics, explain the violation of rules by private universities for the sake of their distinctiveness from other educational institutes. The researcher has highlighted the persuasive linguistic measures through the transformation of discourse patterns, stylistic choices, and the context of marketisation dominating the prospectuses of Pakistan’s private universities.

Slogans

The researcher has identified the ideological perspective as slogans that seemed attractive to catch the attention of the readers or prospective students. These are the first points of contact which embarks a positive impression of the respective university on the applicants and text producers of an academic discourse aimed to sum up the crux of the vision-mission and agenda of the university in the fewest possible words. The researcher has taken a few instances from the prospectuses’ discourse of the Pakistani private universities as mentioned below;

- Where your future begins! (IU)
- Discover Yourself- Inspire Posterity (UoL)
- Epitome of Excellence (UoL)
- Knowledge-Honor-Excellence (GAUS)
- Passion to Design Futures (AUIC)
- Great Place-Great Learning-Great Future

Analysis

The university slogan is identified and appears with the university’s name (Shahnaz, 2020), while Barabas (2017) referred to the recognition of service by slogan or acronym as a fundamental or basic rule of marketing. The researcher has analysed that private universities are incorporating conventional marketing practices by creating bold and captivating slogans with intentions deeply rooted in the promotional genre, as these educational places aim to increase the number of enrollments. Aligned with the previous thought, Osman (2008) considered slogans as a “strong punch line” that can provide universities with a prominent position compared to other educational institutes, and the names of universities can be recalled by people in the long run.

Nowadays, private universities have started creating their mottos or slogans. For example, UoL asserts its prominent place in facilitating students by maximising their potential to discover themselves and excel in the right direction through its slogan "Discover Yourself-Inspire Posterity" and "Epitome of excellence". GAUS claims to lay out the opportunity where students can reach their academic excellence, honour and seek knowledge while raising the slogan "Knowledge-Honor-Excellence", while AUIC persuades students that they can make their future by realising their strengths articulated through its slogan "Passion to Design Future". Likewise, UMT raised its slogan, "Great Place-Great Learning Future", by convincing students that they can become extraordinary through the university's conducive environment.

The researcher has identified that universities' whole agenda or pledges are encapsulated in their slogans; they are mostly written in Bold letters to reveal their dominant position and convince students through captivating lines. These slogans are used to create a charismatic image of the university, which can help these educational bodies sustain good repute in the educational sector.

CONCLUSION

In light of the above discussion, the present study revealed that prospectuses' discourse of Pakistani universities contains pragmatic and stylistic features asserted for promotional purposes to attract the maximum number of students. These variational pragma stylistic factors contribute to convincing potential candidates and framing their minds for the appropriate action in the direction set by Pakistani private universities. Moreover, most Pakistani private universities modify educational discourse for promotional purposes to attain their target objectives. In this regard, these higher educational institutes invest a lot of money to advertise their academic discourse for promotional purposes and to compete in the academic environment.

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