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**METAPRAGMATIC STRATEGIES AND EPISTEMIC POSITIONING IN
NIGERIAN FACT-CHECKING REPORTS ON THE 2023 ELECTORAL CLAIMS
ON X**

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Abstract

Fact-checking organisations that correct election-related misinformation are typically viewed as political or informational entities, and their language is seldom studied on its own. This paper explores the metapragmatic strategies used by Africa Check, Dubawa, and the Centre for Democracy and Development on X during the 2023 Nigerian general election. The analysis focuses on a set of posts, selected from a larger collection of 120, and combines Verschueren's metapragmatic theory with Davies and Harré's positioning theory, as expanded by Bamberg's three-level model. Each device is read first as a metapragmatic indicator and then as a positioning act at Bamberg's narrative, interactional, and identity levels. The study examines how these fact-checkers build corrective authority through five recurring linguistic devices: epistemic modality, evidential attribution, evaluative verdicts, hedging and boosting, and reported speech framing. The findings reveal that authority in this context is not directly claimed but drawn from external sources. Fact-checkers minimise their own voice, rely on named institutional sources, and position claim producers along a scale of delegitimation, most notably through a marked preference for the term "claimed" over "said." Authority is maintained not through direct responses to critics but through anticipatory and thorough evidentiary support tailored to the nature of each claim. These insights extend Verschueren's framework to short-form, platform-based, and multi-organisational communication, offering an African-centred perspective on how corrective legitimacy is established, one word at a time, across a politically contested electoral timeline.

Keywords: metapragmatics, positioning theory, fact-checking, epistemic authority,

Nigerian electoral discourse, X

1. Introduction

Elections are administrative processes, and they are also communication events. Campaigns involve a continuous and often contentious effort to create political meaning. Candidates, parties, and their representatives use language to shape how the public views institutions, opponents, and past government actions (Blumler & Kavanagh, 1999; Norris, 2004). At issue is the right to be treated as a credible source on disputed facts, as well as the ability to persuade through words (Schudson, 2008). The 2023 Nigerian general election showed clearly how language bears on democratic legitimacy. Voting took place on 25 February 2023 for the presidential and National Assembly elections and on 18 March 2023 for the governorship and state assembly elections, and the presidential contest was dominated by Bola Tinubu, Atiku Abubakar, and Peter Obi. It unfolded against deep ethnic and religious divisions and public concern over two new voting technologies, the Bimodal Voter Accreditation System (BVAS) and the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) Result Viewing Portal, or IReV (Orji, 2023). During the election period, many claims about technical failures, manipulated vote counts, and corrupt officials circulated on X (formerly Twitter). Campaigns of this sort can weaken the information environment that supports democratic participation without persuading anyone of a specific lie, an effect this article calls epistemic erosion.

Three organisations, Africa Check, Dubawa, and the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD), worked to counter these claims on X, and each published corrections throughout the election. Existing studies examine fact-checking from several angles, including the structure of fact-checking organisations (Graves, 2016), the philosophical assumptions behind it (Amazeen, 2015), and its effects on public beliefs (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). They have not looked closely at the language of the reports themselves. That omission matters. When a fact-checker calls a claim misleading, unverified, or unsupported, the label is not neutral. It

signals how the information should be read and positions the fact-checker as a knowledge authority, the claim maker as lacking knowledge, and the audience as rational recipients of accurate information (Silverstein, 1976). These positions are created through specific language choices, and the choices affect how corrective messages are received in a polarised political climate.

This article addresses that gap through four questions. First, what metapragmatic strategies do Nigerian fact-checkers use in their reports on election-related claims on X? Second, how do these strategies build authority and assign roles to the fact-checker, the claim maker, and the audience? Third, how do fact-checkers maintain authority when it is questioned? Fourth, what institutional and societal consequences follow from these patterns? In answering them, the article argues for combining metapragmatic and positioning frameworks. It also makes an empirical case for treating Nigerian digital political conversation on its own terms rather than applying frameworks taken directly from Western media (Chiluwa & Samoilenko, 2019; Wasserman, 2020). Section 2 reviews the literature, Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework, Section 4 describes the data and method, Section 5 presents the analysis, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Fact-Checking as an Epistemic Practice

Scholarship on political fact-checking began as an argument about whether the practice deserves epistemic trust. Graves (2016) traces the rise of American fact-checking as a reform movement within journalism whose practitioners claim authority by making their procedures visible: selecting claims, consulting sources, and issuing a verdict. Uscinski and Butler (2013) challenge those procedures, arguing that the selection of claims, the weighing of evidence, and the rating of statements do not withstand scientific scrutiny. Amazeen (2015) replies with a study of consistency across fact-checking agencies, and Uscinski (2015) answers that the

underlying epistemology remains naive. Ekström et al. (2020) urge misinformation research to attend to the epistemologies behind journalism's knowledge claims. These contributions concentrate on procedures and institutions. Little attention goes to how fact-checkers' choices are voiced in the published text, which is where their authority becomes visible to an audience.

A second strand measures effects. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) found that corrections can fail to dislodge political misperceptions and, under some conditions, strengthen them. Later evidence is more encouraging. Walter et al. (2020) report in a meta-analysis that fact-checking has a positive overall influence on political beliefs, although the size of the effect varies with features of the message and the audience. Porter and Wood (2021) found in experiments across Argentina, Nigeria, South Africa, and the United Kingdom that fact-checks reduced belief in misinformation, with most effects lasting beyond two weeks. These studies establish that fact-checks can work but say little about their wording.

2.2 Fact-Checking and Electoral Misinformation in Africa and Nigeria

Research on African fact-checking is smaller and leans towards the organisational. Cheruiyot and Ferrer-Conill (2018) interviewed fourteen practitioners at Code for Africa, Open Up, and Africa Check and concluded that these actors sit at the periphery of news media as institutions while operating at the centre of journalistic discourse, chiefly as advocates of data-driven verification. Wasserman (2020) argues that the international moral panic about “fake news” formed the backdrop for South African debates about the political effects of fabrication, and that news, whether false or genuine, cannot be understood in isolation from its context. Wasserman and Madrid-Morales (2019) surveyed respondents in Kenya, Nigeria, and South Africa ($N = 1,847$) and found high perceived exposure to disinformation alongside low trust in social and national media.

Two studies of the 2023 election in the *Journal of African Elections* illustrate the emphasis on the electoral process: Fasakin (2023) raises concerns about the legitimacy of the

presidential outcome, and Thompson et al. (2023) examine the preparations of INEC and the outcome of the general elections. Accounts of the corrective response come mainly from practitioners. Egwu (2023) reports that CDD Fact-check, Dubawa, Africa Check, and other organisations worked through the Nigeria Fact-checkers' Coalition, an alliance of twelve organisations, and that live-checks during debates and town halls formed part of that work. Such accounts document what the organisations did, not the texts they published.

2.3 Nigerian Political Discourse Online

Linguistic research on Nigerian online political talk is better developed. Chilwa (2012) offers a sociolinguistic critical discourse analysis of blogs and forums run by Biafra online campaign groups, examining identity and ideology in the discourse of resistance. Adegoju and Oyebode (2015) analyse humour in internet memes during the 2015 presidential campaign. Taiwo et al. (2021) study impoliteness and interpersonal positioning on two political discussion sites, Nairaland Forum and Gistmania, drawing on Hyland's (2005) model of stance and engagement. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) supply the cross-national context in which Nigerian electoral misinformation can be read. These studies share an orientation. They examine the people who produce and circulate contested political content, or the platforms on which they do so. The organisations that answer that content have received far less linguistic attention.

2.4 Epistemic Stance, Evidentiality, and Reported Speech

The five devices analysed in this article come from linguistic traditions that rarely meet fact-checking research. Biber and Finegan (1989) treat the marking of evidentiality and affect as parts of a single system of stance. Chafe and Nichols (1986) and, later, Aikhenvald (2004) describe evidentiality as the linguistic marking of the source of information, and Palmer (2001) describes epistemic modality as the speaker's judgement about the factual status of a proposition. Hyland's (1998, 2005) work on hedging, and on stance and engagement, shows

that hedges withhold full commitment to a claim while boosters express certainty, and that both regulate the relationship between writer and reader.

Work on reported speech and evaluation supplies the remaining categories. Lucy's (1993) collection on reflexive language, which includes Silverstein's (1993) account of metapragmatic function, treats reported speech as a central site at which language comments on itself. Thompson and Ye (1991) show that reporting verbs in academic writing carry evaluation, both of the author reported and of the writer's stance towards the reported claim. Martin and White (2005) place attribution within their engagement system, where a verb such as "claim" distances the writer from a proposition. Most of this evidence comes from academic prose and news reporting. Fact-checks combine features of both genres, and their compressed platform versions have received little systematic attention.

2.5 The Research Gap

Taken together, these strands leave a gap. Fact-checking scholarship explains why correction matters and whether it works, but it seldom analyses the wording of corrections. Research on African fact-checking is largely organisational, and linguistic studies of Nigerian political discourse concentrate on the producers of contested content. To the authors' knowledge, no published study combines these strands to ask how Nigerian fact-checkers construct epistemic authority in electoral posts on X. This article does so by pairing a metapragmatic reading of five linguistic devices with an analysis of the positions those devices assign.

3. Theoretical Framework

The analysis draws on two complementary frameworks. Verschueren's (1999) theory of pragmatics treats language use as a continuous process of making choices, in which speakers adapt their communication to contextual needs. Central to it is the reflexive character of language use. An utterance carries indications of how it should be understood, what kind of

action it performs, and what epistemic authority its speaker claims. Verschueren (2000) calls this reflexive dimension metapragmatic awareness and stresses that it varies in salience, from choices made almost automatically to choices that speakers foreground. The concept has an anthropological lineage in Silverstein's (1993) account of metapragmatic function, according to which signs comment on the pragmatic frame in which they occur.

Positioning theory, developed by Davies and Harré (1990) and systematised by Harré and van Langenhove (1999), supplies the relational vocabulary needed to move from individual devices to the social structures they help construct. The distinction between reflexive positioning, in which speakers position themselves, and interactive positioning, in which speakers position others, maps directly onto fact-checking discourse, where the fact-checker assumes an authoritative position and assigns an epistemically questionable one to the originator of the claim. Central to the theory is the storyline, the implicit narrative that assigns roles to participants. Fact-checking discourse has a recognisable master storyline: a claim has been made, the fact-checker holds the means to evaluate it, and the audience benefits from that evaluation. Harré and van Langenhove (1999) also distinguish first-order positioning, which occurs in the ordinary flow of talk, from second-order positioning, which occurs when a position is challenged and has to be defended or renegotiated. That distinction gives the third research question a precise target. Bamberg's (1997) three-level model, which examines positioning at the levels of narrative, interaction, and constructed identity, shows how an organisation's identity builds gradually over many short, formulaic posts rather than within any single one.

Together, the frameworks form one instrument: metapragmatic awareness identifies the elements through which authority is expressed and how salient each is, and positioning theory explains what they achieve socially. Applying this integrated approach to short-form, platform-based, multi-organisational discourse is the article's main theoretical contribution.

The five categories used in the analysis (epistemic modality, evidential attribution, evaluative verdicts, hedging and boosting, and reported speech framing) are this study's working scheme. They draw on Verschueren's notion of metapragmatic awareness and on the traditions reviewed in Section 2.4, and they should not be read as a taxonomy proposed by Verschueren himself. Three questions are put to every indicator. The first is metapragmatic: what the indicator tells the reader about how the post should be taken, and how salient that signal is, according to whether it appears as a formal label or is embedded in the syntax. The second concerns positioning: which position the indicator assigns to the fact-checker, the claim producer, and the audience, and whether the positioning is reflexive or interactive. The third concerns Bamberg's levels: whether the indicator works within the events the post reports (Level 1), within the exchange between fact-checker and audience (Level 2), or through the identity that accumulates across posts (Level 3). Sections 5.1 and 5.2 report the findings under these questions, and Section 5.3 applies second-order positioning to the third research question.

4. Methodology

The study uses a mixed-methods design, with qualitative textual analysis as the main tool and frequency analysis in a supporting role. Frequency alone cannot show what a feature achieves within a post, and qualitative reading alone struggles to reveal patterns across three organisations and three election phases. The data were gathered from English-language posts published on X by Africa Check, Dubawa, and CDD between May 2022 and October 2023, covering the pre-election, election, and post-election periods. Posts were retrieved by systematic search of the organisations' official accounts using terms related to the candidates, the election, and the two voting technologies. After exclusion criteria were applied, a working corpus of 120 posts was formed, and 46 were purposefully selected for detailed analysis. Purposive sampling was chosen over random selection because the aim is theoretical representativeness, capturing the range of strategies across organisations, claim types, and

election phases, rather than statistical representativeness. Posts are cited in the text by organisation and date as primary data and are not repeated in the reference list.

Each selected post was examined for five categories of metapragmatic indicators: epistemic modality, evidential attribution, evaluative verdicts, hedging and boosting, and reported speech framing. The features analysed included epistemic modal constructions such as “can,” “may,” and “appears to”; evidential phrases such as “according to” and “as confirmed by”; evaluative verdict formulae, ranging from standalone terms such as “False” or “Correct” to fuller expressions such as “lacks evidence”; and reported speech verbs such as “claimed,” “said,” “stated,” and “alleged.” The analysis went beyond listing these features to examine their role in each post: how they help establish the fact-checker’s authority, portray the claim maker, and guide the audience. A positioning analysis followed, using Davies and Harré’s (1990) position assignment and storyline identification and Bamberg’s (1997) three-level model to examine how each category also works as a positioning tool. Frequency counts across the full corpus of 120 posts were recorded to support the qualitative findings rather than replace them, and to limit the interpretive selection bias that excerpt-based analysis can introduce. Because the data consist of posts alone, claims about organisational identity at Bamberg’s third level are claims about the identity performed in the posts. The study draws on neither staff interviews nor internal editorial guidelines.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Metapragmatic Strategies in the Fact-Checking Reports

Each device is read first as a metapragmatic indicator, that is, as a point at which the post comments on how it should be taken. Two aspects matter: the kind of guidance given (evidential attribution tells the reader whose knowledge stands behind a statement, a verdict formula names the act performed, a reporting verb characterises the utterance answered) and

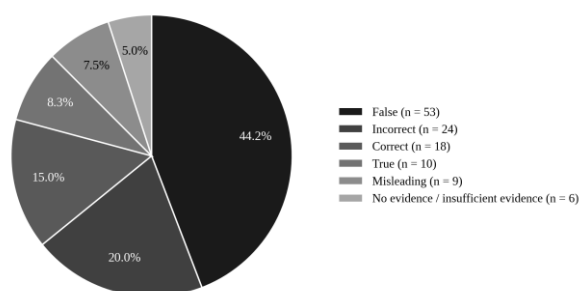
salience, the degree to which the commentary is foregrounded. A capitalised VERDICT line is highly salient, whereas a judgement folded into a verb phrase is not.

Evidential attribution is the strategy through which the corpus most directly grounds its verdicts, and it appears in 52.5% of posts (see Figure 2). Fact-checkers often support their findings by citing named, institutionally respected sources rather than stating conclusions directly. A CDD post on the size of Niger State shows the pattern: “Data from the office of the surveyor general of the federation, as published by the National Bureau of Statistics, shows that the size of [Niger] state is 68,925 square kilometres of land” (CDD, 2023, January 24). Grammatically, it is the National Bureau of Statistics that “shows” the figure, not the fact-checker. This transfer of responsibility recurs throughout the corpus: authority is borrowed rather than claimed, and the borrowing increases with the seriousness of the claim. A Dubawa post challenging a contested export figure draws on two independent sources at different institutional levels: “The Israeli government and the World Bank show the country made about \$143 billion in exports” (Dubawa, 2022, November 21). In the vocabulary of evidentiality, the fact-checker marks its information as reported from named sources rather than directly known (Aikhenvald, 2004; Chafe & Nichols, 1986). In the vocabulary of positioning, that casts the fact-checker as a mediator of institutional knowledge rather than its originator.

Evaluative verdict formulae are the most clearly marked device and vary by organisation and format. Africa Check and Dubawa usually apply a standardised, capitalised VERDICT line, separate from the claim being assessed, as in a post on the disputed export figure: “VERDICT: INCORRECT” (Africa Check & Dubawa, 2022, November 21). CDD, in contrast, often builds its judgement into an explanatory sentence: “War Room confirms that Tinubu did not mention a specific amount, as he only pledged to lower the cost of [fuel] if elected as Nigeria’s president” (CDD, 2023, July 25). Here the assessment is carried by the verb phrase “did not mention” without a standalone label. The standardised line foregrounds

the evaluative act and the embedded verdict backgrounds it, so a reader scanning for a VERDICT line may overlook an embedded judgement. CDD adopts the standardised format when publishing through a joint coalition town-hall series with the other two organisations, so verdict format depends on the publishing context rather than being fixed to organisational identity. Negative verdicts dominate: “False,” “Incorrect,” and “No evidence” account for 69.2% of posts, against 23.3% labelled “Correct” or “True” and 7.5% marked “Misleading” (see Figure 1). This skew is best read as a property of claim selection rather than editorial bias, since fact-checkers’ attention is drawn disproportionately to claims already suspected of inaccuracy (Uscinski & Butler, 2013), and the high share of “False” verdicts reflects CDD’s heavy volume of debunking posts on manipulated images and fabricated video.

Figure 1
Distribution of Posts by Verdict Category



Note. $N = 120$ posts. Data compiled from the study corpus.

Reported speech framing marks the boundary between the fact-checker’s voice and the voice of the claim under examination. The reporting verb also characterises the utterance it reports, which is why reported speech has long been a central case in the study of metapragmatics (Lucy, 1993; Silverstein, 1993). In Martin and White’s (2005) terms, “claimed” distances the writer from the proposition, whereas “said” or “stated” merely acknowledges it. The corpus shows a clear preference for the epistemically charged “claimed.” A CDD post on a disputed economic ranking states, “Bola Tinubu repeated claims about Lagos State being the third largest economy in Africa” (CDD, 2023, April 6), and the verdict marked

the claim false. “Repeated claims” distances twice over, suggesting a contested position that the speaker keeps reasserting. A similar construction from the same organisation, “Peter Obi, in his post-election interview, stated that some states did not have the Labour Party’s logo and acronym on the ballot paper” (CDD, 2023, February 27), was marked true. The contrast is striking. The reporting verb seems to anticipate the verdict before any evidence appears, functioning as an implicit evaluative signal that parallels, and often precedes, the formal judgement.

Epistemic modality is among the least used strategies, and hedging is rarer still. Where hedging occurs, it sits in claim-framing language rather than in the verdict. One CDD post opens with “You may have seen a video circulating along with claims that there will be no election in the southeastern part of Nigeria” and then moves, without further hedging, to the categorical conclusion that the fact-checkers “found it to be an old video” (CDD, 2023, February 14). The hedge manages the audience’s assumed familiarity and never softens the corrective conclusion. Another post uses modality for evidential work: “The claim is not supported by any evidence. Such a major development would have been widely reported by local and international media” (Dubawa, 2023, February 25). The counterfactual conditional stands in for direct evidence, blurring the line between epistemic modality and evidential attribution. Verschueren’s categories are analytically distinct, but in this compressed text they are not always cleanly separated.

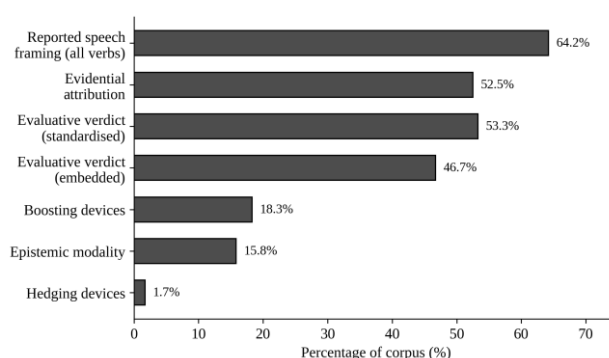
Near a verdict, modality more often works as a booster than as a hedge, as in “After a thorough investigation by the centre, we can confirm that there is no evidence” (CDD, 2022, October 6). The phrase is grammatically modal but pragmatically intensifying. The pattern characterises only a minority of posts, but it suggests a genre convention in which modality serves authority rather than caution: the same category softens when addressing what the audience already knows and strengthens when addressing what the fact-checker has

established. In Hyland's (2005) terms, the booster projects commitment and closes down alternative readings. Fact-checkers predominantly use language that reinforces their own epistemic stance rather than qualifying it, which suits a genre that favours epistemic finality over provisional judgement.

The corpus-wide counts (see Figure 2) show that the qualitative pattern holds at scale and is not an artefact of the examples chosen. Evidential attribution markers appear in 63 of the 120 posts (52.5%), more than three times the rate of epistemic modal markers, which appear in only 19 (15.8%). Modality is therefore a marginal metapragmatic device in the genre. Reported speech verbs are the most frequent marker type, at 128 tokens across 77 posts (64.2%), and "claimed" alone accounts for 73 of those tokens (57.0%), the clearest quantitative confirmation of the preference for "claimed" over "said" or "stated." Boosting markers outnumber hedging markers by about eleven to one (22 posts against 2), which points to epistemic intensification rather than caution. Every post includes a clear evaluative judgement. The standardised VERDICT line (64 posts, 53.3%) and CDD's embedded style (56 posts, 46.7%) divide the corpus almost equally, and that division bears on how readers recognise a verdict (see Section 5.4).

Figure 2

Frequency of Metapragmatic Strategies Identified in the Corpus



Note. $N = 120$ posts. Categories are not mutually exclusive, so percentages should not be summed across categories. Data compiled from the study corpus.

5.2 Constructing Epistemic Authority and Assigning Positions

The five metapragmatic categories are not separate from positioning. They are the means by which positioning is carried out. Reflexive positioning, in Davies and Harré's (1990) sense, appears first in how the fact-checker presents itself, consistently as a procedural mediator rather than an original authority. Evidential attribution builds this position. When an external institution can be cited, that institution, not the fact-checker, becomes the subject of the main verb. When no such source exists, as with altered images or fake videos, the fact-checker turns to first-person action verbs such as "can confirm," presenting itself as an active investigator rather than a passive administrator of institutional data. This shift is better explained by the available evidence than by a conscious branding decision. The master storyline these positions serve is easy to state: a claim has been made, the fact-checker holds the means to evaluate it, and the audience benefits from the evaluation.

The claim producer is positioned, through interactive positioning, at graded levels of delegitimation. At the mildest level, a named individual is presented through reported speech alone, as in the "repeated claims" example above. A further level positions an unnamed, politically motivated group, as in a CDD post about a former governor: "The story came from an opposition account... [targeting] Bola Tinubu" (CDD, 2023, March 9), where the origin of the claim is reframed as a partisan act rather than a simple mistake. At the far end, a fully anonymous claim is presented through agentless reported speech combined with boosting, as in "It does not provide details on where or when Tinubu made the comment" (Africa Check, 2022, August 26), which positions the claim as failing a basic standard of verification rather than as deliberate deception. Each step along this spectrum adds an identifiable metapragmatic device to the baseline of reported speech, so in this corpus metapragmatic strategy and discursive positioning operate as a single mechanism. At Bamberg's (1997) first level, this

work happens inside the story the post tells: the claim producer becomes a character who has said something, and the reporting verb fixes that character's standing.

The audience is positioned as a rational, information-seeking public. This is Bamberg's second level, where the participants are the fact-checker and its audience. The tone shifts with the perceived credibility of the claim, becoming collaborative and investigator-like for significant statistical or institutional claims and casual and peer-like for viral or clearly implausible ones. A post correcting an absurd rumour can be lighter than one analysing a disputed export figure, because the audience is assumed to be sceptical of the former. The "may have seen" hedge from Section 5.1 belongs here, since it addresses the audience as people who may already have met the claim.

At Bamberg's third level, the question is what identity accumulates across posts. The corpus suggests an identity built from repetition: the same evidential habits, recognisable verdict formats within each organisation, and the same hashtag branding, so that no single post carries the identity but the sequence does. Taken together, the three levels answer the second research question. Level 1 delegitimises the claim producer, Level 2 casts the audience as rational recipients and calibrates tone to the claim, and Level 3 consolidates the fact-checker as a reliable mediator of institutional knowledge.

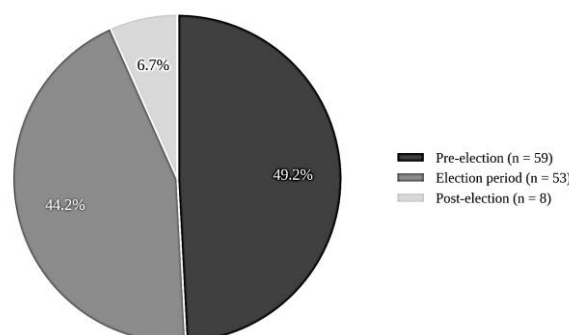
5.3 Maintaining Authority Amid Counter-Positioning

In positioning-theory terms, the third research question concerns second-order positioning, the point at which a fact-checker's first-order position is challenged and has to be defended (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Given the brevity of the X format, Nigerian fact-checkers rarely defend that position by naming and answering specific critics. The corpus shows instead anticipatory evidential redundancy matched to the type of claim. Statistical and factual claims draw on multiple sources, as in the Israeli exports example. Claims about a named candidate's behaviour prompt direct comment from the candidate or their office. Claims

involving altered images or videos call for technical methods, with fact-checkers describing the forensic steps taken, since no external institutional data exists for this type of claim. Beneath all three runs a fourth, cumulative strategy, consistent hashtag branding, which operates at Bamberg's third level and reinforces each post's credibility through the accumulated track record. This preference for structural redundancy over direct argument is best understood as a response to platform limits, although reputational caution offers another explanation: naming and answering a specific critic may raise that critic's visibility and imply the objection deserves a direct reply, a risk that pre-emptive evidential layering avoids.

5.4 Institutional and Socio-Political Implications

These patterns carry four implications. First, corrective activity is concentrated in the pre-election and election periods: 49.2% of posts come from the pre-election period and 44.2% from the election period itself, against only 6.7% from the post-election period (see Figure 3). Legally significant claims about collation and tribunals kept circulating long after corrective output declined. The mismatch likely reflects funding and staffing cycles aligned with the electoral calendar rather than any change in the misinformation environment. It also bears on the concern about epistemic erosion raised in Section 1. Bradshaw and Howard (2019) document organised manipulation at a cross-national level, and the present data point to one mechanism through which erosion might operate within Nigeria's fact-checking ecosystem: corrective capacity that is least available when claims about an election's legitimacy keep circulating.

Figure 3*Distribution of Posts by Election-Cycle Phase*

Note. $N = 120$ posts. Data compiled from the study corpus.

Second, verdict conventions differ between organisations, and even within one organisation across publishing formats, which puts at risk audiences who switch between them, since a reader trained to look for a VERDICT line may overlook an embedded CDD judgement. This fragmentation is a specific example, not documented in the literature reviewed in Section 2, of the context-specific vulnerability that Wasserman's (2020) account of African media specificity anticipates. Third, much corrective work concerns manipulated visual and video content rather than text alone, a dimension the mostly text-focused literature on fact-checking, including Amazeen's (2015) epistemological account, does not fully anticipate. This most likely reflects the composition of Nigerian X's misinformation ecology in 2023 rather than editorial preference. Fourth, verdicts are unevenly distributed at the claimant level. This should be read with caution, since it likely reflects which claims were selected for checking during the sampling period and not the candidates' relative honesty.

6. Conclusion

Within the Nigerian electoral context examined here, corrective authority on X is a discursive achievement. It is constructed and maintained through specific, recurring linguistic choices and does not belong to the institution by default. Fact-checkers build this authority mainly through evidential attribution and verdict formulae, use epistemic modality to frame

claims rather than judge them, and position claim producers along a graduated spectrum through reporting-verb selection combined with further devices. They sustain authority against challenge mainly through structural redundancy and accumulated institutional branding, and only rarely through direct rebuttal. The combined frameworks did explanatory work at each stage: the metapragmatic reading accounts for why the devices differ in salience, and positioning theory accounts for what they achieve socially at the narrative, interactional, and identity levels. The findings refine the five-category scheme used here, which draws on Verschueren's (2000) account of metapragmatic awareness, by showing that it needs an account of genre and format sensitivity when applied to short-form, multi-organisational, platform-mediated discourse. They also extend Bamberg's (1997) identity-level model to an environment far more constrained than the one it was designed for. The study is limited to English-language posts from three organisations, and its identity claims rest on posts alone. Later work could add other Nigerian languages, other platforms, and staff interviews. In practical terms, organisations using embedded verdicts might pair them with a brief, formally distinct evaluative marker, and resource allocation tied to the campaign calendar should be reconsidered, given the legally consequential claims that continued to circulate after election day.

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