

META DISCOURSE MARKERS IN 2023 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION PETITION COURT JUDGMENT

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Abstract

This paper carried out a study on meta-discourse markers in the 2023 judgment of the Presidential Election Petition Court where it examined how linguistic resources are used in judicial discourse to form meaning, authority, and persuasion. Legal judgments, particularly those arising from electoral disputes, are not merely repositories of legal reasoning but are rhetorically structured texts that inform public perception. But despite the significance of such texts, existing studies on Nigerian electoral adjudication have focused on legal and political dimensions with limited attention to the linguistic features that guide interpretation and judicial stance. This study is motivated by the need to bridge this gap by exploring the role of meta-discourse markers in the judgment. The study was anchored on Hyland's (2005) meta-discourse model, complemented by Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005), which together provide a framework for the analysis. As a qualitative research, data were purposively drawn from the officially published 2023 Presidential Election Petition Court judgment and analysed through the identification, classification, and interpretation of meta-discourse markers. Findings revealed a dominance of interactive markers such as transitions, frame markers, and evidentials, which enhance coherence and structure legal reasoning, while interactional markers were used to assert authority and project institutional voice. The study concluded that meta-discourse markers are essential rhetorical tools in judicial communication which aid in interpretation.

Keywords: Meta-discourse Markers; Judicial Discourse; Presidential Election Petition Court; Legal Discourse; Rhetorical Analysis.

Introduction

As a major tool of human communication, language has metamorphosed from joust a mere tool for transmission of information to an entity that redefines how meaning is created within a given context. From a legal point of usage of language like the law, language functions as an entity that conveys legal facts and principles that structures logical reasoning in order to establish authority, and guide interpretation among diverse audiences (Maley, 2014). By this, Hyland and Jiang (2024) are of the view that for a communication to become effective, it depends on the ability of language users to make discourse coherent, intelligible, and persuasive to a particular audience by highlighting the inherently interactive nature of meaning-making This point of view has reveals that language is a socially situated entity that shows the intentions, assumptions, and expectations of its users while at the same time, defining the responses of its audience. In institutional discourse, especially legal communication, this role becomes even more pronounced, as texts such as judicial judgments have to be formed to show legitimacy and authority through carefully selected linguistic choices and not just a mere presentation of legal arguments (Hyland & Jiang, 2024).

The Nigeria's 2023 general elections represented a critical juncture in the nation's democratic trajectory, marked by intense political competition, legal contestations, and heightened public scrutiny of electoral outcomes (International IDEA, 2023). The Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) reported over 93 million registered voters, reflecting the scale of civic engagement and the stakes involved in the polls (INEC, 2023). However, disputes arising from the presidential, gubernatorial, and legislative elections inevitably culminated in litigation at the Nigerian Supreme Court, the apex judicial body with final authority on constitutional and electoral matters (Nwabueze, 2022).

The Court's decisions on the 2023 general elections were under severe political limelight. The decisions had profound implications for democratic legitimacy, rule of law, and public opinion. The language of the decisions, the choice of transition markers, evidential claims, hedges, and boosters affected not only legal clarity but also public trust and institutional credibility. The presidential election petition court judgment extends beyond mere legal pronouncements; they are socio-political texts that shape public trust, institutional legitimacy, and democratic stability (Akinseye-George, 2017). The language employed in these judgments is meticulously crafted to achieve dual objectives which are: legal precision in interpreting statutes, precedents, and rhetorical effectiveness in persuading audiences ranging from litigants and legal practitioners to the public and international observers (Maley, 1994). These dual functions have shown the significance of meta-discourse markers linguistic devices that organize discourse, signal authorial stance, and engage readers as pivotal tools in judicial communication.

Meta-discourse, as conceptualized by Hyland (2005, p. 37), refers to "the linguistic mechanisms writers use to organize their texts and signal their attitudes toward both the content and the audience." In legal contexts, these markers serve critical functions: Interactive markers (e.g., furthermore, consequently, etc.) structure complex legal arguments and enhance textual coherence (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Interactional markers (e.g., it is clear that, we must emphasize, in our view) construct judicial authority, express certainty, and position the Court relative to competing narratives (Martin & White, 2005).

In Nigeria's Court judgments, meta-discourse choices carry heightened significance due to the politicized nature of electoral disputes. As observed by Eze (2020, p. 112), "judicial language in election petitions is a site of ideological struggle where justices navigate legal objectivity and political sensitivity". As part of its direct involvement in the electoral process, the judiciary in developing democracy has increasingly been involved in the resolution of electoral disputes. The constitutional power of the court as enthused by Hirsch (2006) and Bork (2002) places on the judiciary all the powers and sanctions of a court of law and makes the court arbiter in all disputes. When judges make pronouncements, they do not consider only the legality of the cases neither do such pronouncements hinge on the exhibits available. More often the society, the power-play, socio-cultural factors play a major role in such decisions.

From the foregoing backdrop, this study argues that during the court judgments of election disputes, judges explicitly make evaluations that are informed by certain ideological leanings deployed to ensure social equilibrium in the face of looming crisis and threat to nationhood. Despite its significance, existing studies on electoral adjudication in Nigeria have largely focused on legal reasoning, constitutional provisions, and political outcomes, with limited attention to the linguistic mechanisms through which such judgments are constructed and communicated. This study,

therefore, seeks to bridge this gap by examining the use of meta-discourse markers in the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Court judgment. This study is important given the roles of judges in election disputes in Nigeria where elections are constantly marred by litigations and fierce contestation for political offices exacerbated by a policy that is adjudged fragile and constantly on the brink of decimation. This study argues the importance of meta-discourse markers as linguistic devices that encode political and is interested in examining the linguistic resources of meta-discourse markers and the attendant political stance that evolves throughout the judgment.

Statement of the Problem

Despite extensive research on legal discourse (e.g., Gibbons, 2003; Tiersma, 1999) and meta-discourse in academic/professional writing (Hyland, 2005; Ådel, 2006), few studies have systematically analyzed meta-discourse markers in Nigerian presidential election petition court judgment on elections. Existing scholarship on Nigerian judicial language has focused primarily on precedent-setting (Oko, 2018), constitutional interpretation (Nwabueze, 2022), or socio-political impact (Akinseye-George, 2017), neglecting the micro-linguistic strategies through which justices legitimize their authority and manage audience reception. This study addressed this gap by examining meta-discourse markers in Nigerian presidential election petition court judgment on elections. The research seeks to uncover how these meta discourse markers reflect judicial positioning, power dynamics, and the negotiation of legitimacy in Nigeria's volatile democratic landscape. The findings contribute to theoretical debates on legal linguistics, meta-discourse, and the role of language in institutional authority, while offering practical insights for judicial writing and electoral reform in Nigeria.

Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to investigate the use of meta discourse markers in Nigerian presidential election petition court judgment. The aim would be achieved through this objective:

- i. To identify and classify the meta-discourse markers in the Nigerian presidential election petition court judgment on 2023 elections judgments.

Research Question

- i. What are the classifications of the meta-discourse markers in the Nigerian presidential election petition court judgment on 2023 elections judgments?

Review of Related Literature

Meta Discourse Markers

Research into Discourse Markers started since the 1970s and with the growing interest in production and comprehension of discourse, pragmatic and contextual interpretations (Maschler & Schiffirin, 2015). The study of discourse markers has been on the increase. Linguists have busied themselves with inquiry into other types of relations that need to be encoded in discourse. This broadening interest brought about increased attention to those elements of linguistic structure that appear to be most directly involved in the relation of separate utterances. Traditionally, some words or phrases are considered as sentence connectors, fillers and expletives that had no function at all. Discourse markers fall into such a category, however, interest in its study expanded from the 1980s when it was found that discourse markers have a prominent role, not only in pragmatic and discourse research but also in language learning and acquisition (Brinton, 2010). The research into discourse markers therefore seeks to ascertain what they are, what they mean and what functions they have.

A discourse marker is a word or phrase that is relatively syntax independent and does not change the meaning of the sentence and has a somewhat empty meaning.

Michael Swan (2005, p. 16) sees a discourse marker as a word or expression which shows the connection between what is being said and the wider context. Discourse markers are words, or phrases that function within the linguistic system to establish relationship between topics or grammatical units in discourse. They also serve pragmatic functions used by a speaker to comment on the state of understanding of information about to be expressed, they may also be used to express a change of state or for subtle commentary by the speaker, suggesting that "what seems to be the most relevant context is not appropriate" (Jucker, 1993, p. 438). These lexical items according to Östman (1981, p. 30) and Schiffrin (1987, p. 26) are devoid of semantic context in and on themselves and are dependent on the local context and sequence of talk for their interpretation. Schiffrin (1987, p. 9) added that discourse markers are linguistic items that contribute to the coherence of the text by establishing coherent relationships between units of talk.

Legal Discourse

Legal discourse refers to the particular way language is used within the field of law. It covers both written texts such as laws, contracts, and court judgments—and spoken communication in legal settings, like courtroom proceedings (Maley, 2014). What makes legal language distinct is its formality, precision, and structured nature. These features are designed to ensure clarity, establish authority, and regulate interactions among participants in legal contexts. A defining feature of legal discourse is its reliance on specialized vocabulary and expressions that help structure arguments, clarify legal reasoning, and guide communication between writers or speakers and their audiences (Solum, 2013). These audiences may include judges, lawyers, jurors, or members of the public. For example, in judicial decisions, connective words such as "therefore," "however," and "furthermore" are often used to signal logical flow and coherence, helping readers follow complex reasoning step by step.

Legal texts also tend to employ long, complex sentences, formal terminology, and frequent references to statutes or past cases (Solan, 2018). These stylistic choices give legal writing its precision and authority but also make it difficult for non-specialists to understand. For instance, a clause might read: "*Notwithstanding any other provision, the party in breach of this agreement shall remedy the default within thirty (30) days of receiving written notice, to the satisfaction of the non-breaching party.*" While such complexity provides clarity in legal enforcement, it can appear inaccessible to the layperson. Another important characteristic is the strategic use of vagueness. Expressions like "*reasonable steps*" or "*beyond a reasonable doubt*" are intentionally open-ended. This flexibility allows judges to adapt legal principles to different contexts, but it also highlights the interpretive power embedded in legal language. Researchers often study such phrases to show how legal discourse shapes meanings and influences judicial outcomes.

Scholars employ different approaches to study legal discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), for example, examines how legal language reflects and sustains power relations or ideological positions whether in courtroom exchanges or legislative texts (Peng & Li, 2025). Frame analysis explores how legal issues are linguistically structured to favor particular interpretations during debates, trials, or negotiations.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study will be eclectic in adopting theories. It will be anchored on Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) as the foundation, Martin and White's Appraisal Theory as an extension for examining evaluative language, and Hyland's (2005) meta-discourse model as the main analytical tool. Taken together, these frameworks help

explain how Nigerian Supreme Court justices use language to structure arguments, project authority, and engage their audiences in high-stakes election judgments. The systemic functional Linguistics developed by Halliday (1994) SFL views language as performing three functions or “meta-functions” simultaneously in social contexts, that is, the idiomatic meta functions primarily concerned with representing experience and logical relations in judgments: This is where legal reasoning is articulated, for example, “*The petitioner failed to prove non-compliance with Section 65(2)*”. There is also the interpersonal meta-function concerned with social relations, power, and stance. For instance, in judgments, Judges assert authority or express alignment, as in “*We unequivocally hold that...*”.

However, textual meta-function focus on organizing discourse into coherent messages. In judgements, This is seen in transitions and thematic progression, e.g., “*Having reviewed Exhibit P12, we now turn to...*” Martin and White’s (2005) Appraisal Theory expands the interpersonal dimension of SFL by detailing how writers evaluate, align, and persuade. It identifies three subsystems, Attitude, Engagement, Graduation. Appraisal Theory thus provides a nuanced way to understand how meta discourse markers operate beyond text organization, revealing how judges position themselves ideologically and rhetorically in politically charged cases.

Hyland’s (2005) Meta-Discourse Model offers a comprehensive taxonomy of meta discourse markers, distinguishing between Interactive resources which help structure the discourse and guide readers (e.g., transitions, evidentials, frame markers), and Interactional resources which involve the writer’s stance and engagement with readers (e.g., hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions). Hyland’s model has been widely applied in academic and professional discourse, but relatively few studies have applied it systematically to legal discourse. By combining Hyland’s operational categories with SFL and Appraisal Theory, this study bridges the gap between linguistic micro-analysis (specific markers) and discourse-level interpretation (stance, persuasion, ideology).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research designed to provide the analysis of meta-discourse markers in the 2023 Judgment of the Presidential Election Petition Court. This design is central to the study as it enables an in-depth examination of how judicial actors strategically deploy meta-discourse markers to form arguments, express stance, and guide readers’ interpretation within a legal context. Data for the study are primarily gotten from officially published Presidential Election Petition Court judgments on the 2023 presidential election, sourced from authenticated legal reports to ensure reliability and validity of the data. For this reason, a purposive sampling technique is employed to select data from the judgment based on their legal significance and discursive richness. The data are carefully coded according to transitions, hedges, boosters, engagement markers, and self-mentions and subsequently interpreted to show how linguistic choices function to organize discourse, project judicial authority, and form meaning.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The meta-discourse markers in the Nigerian Presidential Election Petition Court Judgment on 2023 elections judgments are presented accordingly as:

1. Transitions

However, the petitioner failed to establish...

Therefore, this court holds that...

Furthermore, the evidence presented...

From the excerpt, the use of transitions in the judgment serves as interactive meta-discursive tools where they clearly signaled logical relationships between propositions that enhanced textual coherence and argumentative clarity. These markers within Hyland's (2005) framework, guide readers through the progression of legal reasoning by marking contrast (*however*), consequence (*therefore*), and addition (*furthermore*), ensuring that each stage of the judicial argument is systematically connected. These transitional devices in SFL perspective are used to realize the textual metafunction that organized discourse into a cohesive and interpretable whole. Their frequent usage show the need for accuracy and logical sequencing in legal discourse, where ambiguity could undermine the legitimacy of judicial decisions.

2. Frame Markers

In this regard...

At this stage of the analysis...

Finally, we turn to the issue of...

Frame markers are functioning as signposts that structure the judgment into clearly defined stages that help a reader to understand difficult legal arguments. These markers belong to the interactive category because they clearly show discourse boundaries and shifts in argumentative focus which are in line with Hyland's (2005) theory. The frame markers also form the textual metafunction in the SFL framework because the discourse is segmented into manageable units that enhance readability and coherence. In this judgment, their use is a reflection to the formal and procedural nature of legal reasoning, where arguments must be presented in a logically ordered sequence. Similarly, frame markers implicitly emphasize the authority of the court by demonstrating methodological accuracy and control over the discourse. Their impersonal tone from the Appraisal perspective reduces overt evaluation while still guiding interpretation, thereby maintaining the objectivity expected in judicial discourse.

3. Evidentials

According to Section 134 of the Constitution...

As held in Amaechi v. INEC...

This position was affirmed in earlier decisions...

Evidentials is also a meta-discourse tool that performs major role in forming the intertextual and convincing basis of the judgment by emphasizing legal statutes, precedents, and prior judicial decisions. Evidentials in Hyland's (2005) model are interactive resources that connect the current text to external sources, thereby positioning it within a wider legal discourse. These markers contribute to both the textual and interpersonal metafunctions in SFL as they organize information. Their wide usage in the judgment is a reflection to the principle of *stare decisis* (to stand by thing decided), where legal arguments derive legality from established precedents. Through the lens of Appraisal Theory, Therefore, evidentials function as the engagement system that acknowledged external voices while aligning the court with authoritative legal positions.

4. Code Glosses

That is to say, the petitioner must prove...

In other words...

For example...

Furthermore, code glosses function to create clarity, elaborate, or restate complicated legal concepts thereby enhancing understanding. They are interactional markers that anticipate potential comprehension difficulties and provide interpretive assistance to the reader. These codes also enhanced the textual metafunction by ensuring that

meaning is clearly articulated and processed easily. Their usage in the judgment creates an awareness of a diverse audience that may include not only legal experts but also the public who are not legal luminaries. From an Appraisal perspective, Code glosses, from an Appraisal perspective, facilitate interpretation by narrowing the range of possible meanings thus, reducing ambiguity. This function is particularly important in legal discourse, where precision and clarity are essential for maintaining credibility and preventing misinterpretation.

5. Boosters

Clearly, the petitioner has failed...
Undoubtedly, this court finds...
It is evident that...

In the same vein, boosters are interactional meta-discourse markers in the judgment where they express certainty and establish the authority of judicial pronouncements. According to Hyland's (2005) theory, these boosters allow writers to present propositions as indisputable closing alternative interpretations. In the SFL perspective, these boosters realize the interpersonal metafunction, as they translate authorial stance and position the court as a decisive and authoritative voice. Similarly, The Appraisal theory shows that boosters operate within the graduation system that amplifies the force of evaluative statements and strengthening the court's commitment to its claims. This creates certainty in legal decisions.

6. Hedges

It appears that...
This may suggest...
Arguably...

Hedges, in the same vein, are functioning as interactional markers that introduce caution and limit the strength of claims or judicial restraint. Hedges allow writers to open up space for alternative interpretations, which is essential in contexts involving contested evidence which is in line with Hyland's (2005) model. Also, hedges from SFL point of view contribute to the interpersonal metafunction by moderating the level of commitment expressed in the discourse. Through Appraisal theory, hedges are associated with the engagement system that acknowledges the possibility of other viewpoints thereby enhancing the fairness and objectivity of the judgment.

7. Attitude Markers

Importantly...
Significantly...
Regrettably...

Another form of meta-discourse marker is the attitude markers used to reveal the evaluative stance of the court which at the same time, show the importance, desirability, or implications of particular arguments in the judgment. Hyland's (2005) framework shows this marker as interactional resources that express the writer's evaluative position. In SFL, these markers form the interpersonal metafunction that contribute to the expression of attitudes and values. Through the Martin and White's (2005) appraisal model, the markers fall under the attitude system, encompassing affect, judgment, and appreciation. Their use in the judgment helps the court to convey approval, disapproval, or emphasis without overtly compromising objectivity.

8. Self-mentions

We hold that...
We are of the view that...

Self-mentions in the judgment also function as markers of institutional authorship that represent the collective voice of the court rather than individual judges. According to

Hyland (2005), self-mentions are interactional resources that allow the judges to project their identity and authority. At the same time, they contribute to the interpersonal metafunction by establishing the speaker's role and relationship with the audience. In appraisal theory, these markers are linked to the engagement system where they position the court as the ultimate arbiter of meaning. The consistent use of plural pronouns (*we*) emphasizes the collective and authoritative nature of judicial decision-making.

9. Engagement Markers

It must be noted that...

One must consider...

Finally, another marker identified is the engagement markers which are used to clearly address and guide the reader. In Hyland's (2005) model, the markers bring readers into the discourse by directing their attention or anticipating their responses. From an SFL perspective, they contribute to the interpersonal metafunction, fostering a relationship between the writer and the reader. They function within the engagement system in appraisal theory as they are used to manage dialogic interaction by acknowledging the reader's presence.

Discussion

From the data presented and analyzed above, it reveals there is a dominance of interactive resources, particularly transitions, frame markers, and evidentials, which emphasizes the procedural nature of legal discourse. The frequent use of transitions such as *however*, *therefore*, and *furthermore* shows the court's commitment to logical sequencing and coherence, ensuring that each stage of the argument is connected and systematically developed. Similarly, frame markers like *in this regard* and *at this stage of the analysis* function as signals that segment the judgment into clearly defined stages, enhancing understanding and possible interpretations. Evidentials, which refer to constitutional provisions and judicial precedents, further foregrounds the intertextuality of the judgment by affixing arguments in well-established legal authorities. Within Hyland's (2005) meta-discourse framework, this dominance of interactive markers shows the court's priority in guiding readers through difficult legal reasoning. From the perspective of SFL, these markers mainly realize the textual metafunction, organizing the discourse into a coherent whole. It also contributes to the interpersonal metafunction by establishing credibility and authority. This pattern has confirmed that legal judgments are carefully written texts where clarity, structure, and logical progression are paramount for ensuring interpretive accuracy.

In contrast, the analysis shows that interactional meta-discourse markers are more used with boosters being the most prominent category, followed by limited use of hedges, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. The frequent use of boosters such as *clearly*, *undoubtedly*, etc. shows a strong preference for assertiveness and certainty. At the same time, the occasional use of hedges reveals moments of judicial caution, particularly in contexts involving contested evidence, thereby maintaining a balance between decisiveness and fairness. Self-mentions where are expressed through collective pronouns such as *we*, shows the voice of the court, while the limited presence of engagement markers shows the objective and authoritative tone that is typical to legal discourse. Finally, the findings suggest that the judgment places priority to structural clarity through interactive markers and it strategically employs interactional markers to assert authority, manage stance, and credibility of its decisions.

Conclusion

This study has duly shown that meta-discourse markers form the fundamental linguistic resource in the formation and interpretation of judicial discourse, particularly in the 2023 Presidential Election Petition Court judgment. The analysis revealed that the judgment is not merely a legal document but a carefully structured and rhetorically crafted text which show the court's commitment to clarity, coherence, and logical sequencing, ensuring that complex legal arguments are systematically presented and easily navigable. By revealing the linguistic strategies embedded in the judgment, this study therefore, contributes to the larger understanding of legal discourse as a form of strategic communication, where language is used not to only adjudicate disputes but also to form legality. Therefore, meta-discourse plays a crucial role in forming how judicial meaning is constructed, communicated, and received within the legal and socio-political context of Nigeria.

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