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# Balancing Conviction and Caution: The Rhetoric of Boosters and Hedges in *People's Court* TV Comedy Series

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***Abstract***

This study examined the rhetorical strategies of balancing conviction and caution through boosters and hedges in the *People's Court* TV comedy series. The research gap addressed was the limited attention given to how markers of certainty and doubt function not only in academic or professional settings but also in popular media discourse. The specific objectives of the study were to identify the use of boosters and hedges, analyse their functions in creating humour and persuasion, and evaluate their implications for the portrayal of legal discourse in comedic contexts. The study adopted Hyland's model of boosters and hedges as its theoretical framework and employed discourse analysis as the methodology, focusing on selected episodes of *People's Court*. The study found that boosters were more prevalent than hedges, serving as markers of authority, confidence, and exaggeration, while hedges introduced doubt, irony, and deliberate evasiveness for comedic effect. The study also found that the exaggerated interplay of these devices shaped character dynamics and audience perception of courtroom proceedings. Furthermore, the study found that the strategic manipulation of certainty and doubt simplified complex legal discourse, making it more accessible to general audiences. The study concluded that boosters and hedges play a critical role in reinforcing humour, authority, and satire in courtroom comedies. The study contributed to existing knowledge by extending rhetorical analysis of certainty markers into the realm of popular media and demonstrating how they function as tools of entertainment and public engagement.

**Keywords:** Boosters, Hedges, Courtroom discourse, TV comedy, Rhetoric

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background Information

Courtroom discourse plays a critical role in legal argumentation, serving as a structured means of persuasion through which parties seek to establish credibility, challenge opposing claims, and influence judicial decisions. The use of rhetorical strategies in legal settings is essential, as arguments must be delivered with a balance of conviction (certainty) and caution (doubt) to maintain credibility while persuading an audience (Hyland, 1998b). In real courtroom settings, the strategic deployment of rhetorical devices such as boosters-expressions that enhance certainty, and hedges-expressions that introduce doubt, helps legal practitioners construct compelling narratives (Zou & Hyland, 2022). These linguistic

tools are not only relevant to actual legal practice but also play a fundamental role in fictional representations of courtroom discourse, where they contribute to dramatic and comedic effects. *People's Court*, a Nigerian TV comedy series, satirizes real-life legal proceedings, exaggerating courtroom interactions to create humour. The show employs rhetorical strategies similar to those found in real courts, but with intentional distortions that make legal discourse accessible and entertaining for a broader audience (Attardo, 2020). Within this fictional setting, boosters are often used to portray authority and overconfidence, while hedges introduce comedic hesitation, irony, and misinterpretation. The strategic manipulation of these rhetorical devices influences character dynamics, reinforcing power hierarchies between judges, plaintiffs, and defendants, while also generating humour.

Despite extensive research on legal discourse, rhetorical strategies in courtroom settings have primarily been examined in the context of judicial opinions, legal dissents, and political rhetoric (Gibbons, 2003; Tiersma, 2008; Chovanec, 2011; Simpson, 2003). Studies have focused on how legal practitioners use language to construct persuasive arguments and establish authority, but there is limited attention to how these strategies function in fictional and comedic representations of legal discourse. Most existing studies examine boosters and hedges in academic writing, scientific discourse, and political communication (Hyland, 2005; Holmes, 1995), with little attention to their role in television courtroom interactions. Given that courtroom-based TV series often shape public perceptions of the legal system, it is important to examine how legal rhetoric is adapted for entertainment purposes. *People's Court* offers a unique opportunity to analyze how rhetorical choices contribute to both persuasion and humour, highlighting the interplay between conviction and caution in fictional legal disputes. The lack of scholarly engagement with the comedic application of boosters and hedges in courtroom discourse creates a gap in understanding the intersection of legal rhetoric, television discourse, and humour studies (Dynel, 2018). This study aims to address this gap by analyzing the rhetorical use of boosters and hedges in *People's Court* and how they contribute to balancing conviction and caution for both comedic and persuasive effects. Specifically, the study seeks to: (1) identify and categorize boosters and hedges in *People's Court* using established taxonomies, (2) examine the functions of these rhetorical strategies in shaping courtroom argumentation and comedic effect, and (3) determine how the interplay of certainty and doubt influences audience engagement and character perception in the series. By analyzing linguistic patterns in courtroom dialogues, this study will provide insights into how legal argumentation is creatively adapted in fictional settings to enhance humour and accessibility.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Boosters and Hedges in Rhetoric

Boosters and hedges are key rhetorical devices used in discourse to convey varying degrees of certainty and doubt. Boosters are linguistic elements that express confidence and assertiveness, reinforcing the speaker's commitment to a proposition (Zou & Hyland, 2022). These include adverbs (e.g., "clearly," "undoubtedly"), evidential markers (e.g., "it is proven that"), and emphatic expressions that strengthen claims. In contrast, hedges introduce uncertainty, politeness, or deference, allowing speakers to soften their statements and acknowledge alternative perspectives (Poole, 2021). Hedges often manifest through modal verbs (e.g., "might," "could"), adverbs (e.g., "possibly," "likely"), and cognitive verbs (e.g., "seems," "appears"). The strategic use of boosters and hedges plays a crucial role in persuasion, as it enables speakers to balance conviction with caution, depending on the

communicative context (Danet, 1980). In legal discourse, boosters help establish authority and reinforce strong arguments, while hedges allow for various lines of reasoning and legal interpretation, thereby preventing absolute assertions that might be legally unsound (Stanley-Idum & Agaba, 2020). Legal practitioners, particularly in courtroom settings, use these devices to navigate complex legal arguments, ensuring that claims are forceful yet adaptable to counterarguments and judicial scrutiny (Vazquez-Orta, 2013).

In discourse analysis, boosters and hedges serve as interpersonal and textual metadiscourse markers that structure communication and guide audience interpretation (David, 1973). The effectiveness of argumentation in legal contexts, as well as in media representations such as courtroom TV series, often depends on how speakers manage certainty and doubt (Donadio & Passariello, 2022). Boosters are commonly used by figures of authority, such as judges and lawyers, to emphasize credibility and reinforce their legal reasoning, while hedges are frequently employed by witnesses or defendants to introduce ambiguity, evade direct responsibility, or express politeness (Danet, 1980). In fictionalized legal discourse, such as that in *People's Court*, these rhetorical strategies not only mirror real-life courtroom argumentation but also enhance dramatic and comedic effects. The exaggeration of boosters can heighten the assertiveness of legal arguments, making a character appear overly confident or arrogant, whereas excessive hedging can create humour by portraying uncertainty or incompetence (Vazquez-Orta, 2013). These linguistic choices influence audience perception, shaping how authority, persuasion, and humour are constructed within legal and media discourse.

### 2.2 Courtroom Discourse and Argumentation Strategies

Courtroom discourse is a specialized form of legal communication that relies heavily on rhetorical strategies to construct persuasive arguments and mitigate opposition. In both real and fictional legal settings, the language used by judges, lawyers, and litigants follows structured argumentative patterns designed to establish authority, present evidence, and counter claims effectively (Tiersma, 1999). One of the key linguistic features of courtroom argumentation is the use of boosters-expressions that emphasize certainty and conviction, to reinforce claims and assert dominance over opposing arguments (Takimoto, 2015). These rhetorical devices are particularly important in adversarial legal systems, where opposing parties must convince the judge or jury of the validity of their arguments through forceful language and logical reasoning (Shatin & Silantev, 2020). Conversely, hedges-expressions that introduce uncertainty or qualification are often used to acknowledge legal ambiguities, present alternative interpretations, or soften the impact of potentially controversial statements (Toska, 2012). In legal discourse, hedging is an essential tool for legal practitioners to navigate complex cases, allowing them to make strategic concessions or express doubt without entirely undermining their argument (Szczyrbak, 2021).

The significance of linguistic devices in courtroom discourse extends beyond real legal settings to fictional portrayals, such as *People's Court*, where rhetorical strategies are creatively adapted for entertainment purposes. While real courtroom discourse often prioritizes clarity and precision, fictional representations amplify certain rhetorical elements for dramatic or comedic effect (Tracy & Caron, 2017). Judges in television courtroom dramas and comedies frequently employ boosters to project authority and decisiveness, reinforcing their role as the ultimate decision-makers (Tracy & Hodge, 2018). At the same time, hedging is often used by defendants and witnesses to introduce ambiguity or evade responsibility, leading to humorous misunderstandings or exaggerated attempts at persuasion (Vande Kopple, 1985). The strategic manipulation of these linguistic elements

influences audience perception, shaping how characters are viewed in terms of credibility, intelligence, or moral standing (Yang & Wang, 2021). Additionally, courtroom discourse in fictional settings often reflects broader socio-cultural narratives, such as the tension between legal formalism and common-sense reasoning, or the contrast between professional legal expertise and layperson argumentation (Wald, 1995).

### 2.3 Comedy and Linguistic Strategies in Television Discourse

Comedy in television discourse often relies on linguistic strategies such as exaggeration, irony, and strategic ambiguity to create humour. These techniques shape how comedic narratives unfold, influencing audience engagement and perception. Exaggeration, a key comedic device, heightens reality to absurd levels, making legal discourse appear more dramatic and entertaining. In television courtroom settings like *People's Court*, exaggeration is evident in the over-the-top reactions of litigants, attorneys, and even judges, making legal proceedings feel more theatrical (Cotterill, 2003). Irony, another powerful linguistic strategy, arises when spoken words contradict the actual situation, creating a humorous contrast. This is especially common in legal comedy, where lawyers may argue cases with apparent seriousness over trivial disputes, exposing the absurdity of legal formalism (Heffer, 2005). Additionally, strategic ambiguity allows characters to misinterpret legal terms or regulations for comedic effect. By leaving statements open to multiple interpretations, television scripts play with audience expectations, often leading to humorous misunderstandings (Levinson, 1983). Such ambiguity is a frequent source of humour in legal discourse, as seen in exchanges between judges and defendants who take statements too literally or twist words to suit their advantage (Maley et al., 1995).

Television adaptations of legal discourse, particularly in *People's Court*, modify courtroom language to suit comedic storytelling. Unlike real courtroom settings, where legal language is formal and precise, television scripts deliberately incorporate linguistic simplifications and everyday expressions to appeal to a broader audience (Gibbons, 2003). The use of conversational markers, rhetorical questions, and sarcasm in judges' statements makes legal discourse more relatable and entertaining (Fraser, 1996). For instance, a judge may deliver a verdict with an exaggerated pause, building comedic tension before delivering a humorous punchline (Rosulek, 2010). Additionally, lay litigants in televised courtrooms often use informal speech patterns, mispronunciations, or misplaced legal jargon, leading to comedic exchanges that highlight the contrast between legal professionals and ordinary individuals (Chenge, 2008). Another notable feature in legal comedy is the interplay between power dynamics and humour. While real courtrooms emphasize decorum and judicial authority, television courtrooms allow judges to engage in witty banter, reinforcing their dominance while entertaining the audience (Kurzon, 2001). Furthermore, the adaptation of legal language for humour often satirizes the complexities of real judicial processes, making legal discourse more accessible and entertaining (Dumas, 2000). Through these strategies, comedic courtroom discourse transforms rigid legal proceedings into engaging, humorous narratives that resonate with audiences while subtly critiquing legal formalities.

### 2.4 Theoretical Frameworks

#### Hyland's Model of Boosters and Hedges

Hyland's (1998) model of boosters and hedges is a pragmatic framework that explains how linguistic markers of certainty and doubt shape communication, persuasion, and credibility in discourse. According to Hyland, boosters are expressions that convey conviction and assertiveness, leaving little room for alternative interpretations. Examples include words

such as *clearly, obviously, certainly,* and *without doubt*, which help a speaker strengthen arguments, align audiences with their perspective, and project authority. By contrast, hedges are expressions of caution or uncertainty, such as *perhaps, it seems, might,* or *arguably*, which soften claims, allow for negotiation of meaning, and protect speakers from absolute commitment. Hyland argues that these linguistic resources are not neutral but are strategically deployed to manage stance, politeness, and interpersonal positioning in discourse. They influence how messages are received, how credibility is assessed, and how arguments are interpreted. In academic, professional, and institutional settings, the balance of boosters and hedges reflects a speaker's need to project confidence while maintaining flexibility in the face of potential challenge. This dual function underscores the centrality of language choice in constructing persuasive, context-appropriate communication.

Applied to courtroom comedy such as *People's Court*, Hyland's framework illuminates how certainty and doubt are exaggerated for rhetorical and comedic effect. The study reveals that judges and plaintiffs often rely heavily on boosters-terms such as "clearly" or "undoubtedly", to project authority and control, mirroring real-world legal practices in which confidence enhances persuasiveness. However, in a comedic context, this overuse of boosters becomes a source of humour, as exaggerated confidence may lead to absurd or overstated claims. On the other hand, hedges are strategically deployed by defendants and witnesses to create hesitation, evade direct responsibility, or inject irony into the discourse. Phrases such as *"maybe" or "it seems"* are used to signal uncertainty, but when overextended, they contribute to comical portrayals of incompetence, dishonesty, or nervousness. Importantly, the misapplication of boosters and hedges by lay participants in the show amplifies the humour, as inappropriate confidence or unnecessary doubt exposes the gap between formal legal rhetoric and everyday speech. This aligns with Hyland's view that boosters and hedges shape credibility and interpersonal relations, but extends it by showing how their manipulation in fictional courtrooms enhances entertainment. Thus, the study demonstrates that *People's Court* adapts Hyland's model within a comedic frame, in which the interplay of certainty and uncertainty not only reflects real-world legal strategies but also satirises them, thereby making legal discourse more accessible and engaging to audiences unfamiliar with its complexities.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to ensure methodological rigour, credibility, and trustworthiness. The design was appropriate because it combined statistical insights with interpretive depth, thereby enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. The data comprised transcribed courtroom dialogues from selected episodes of the *People's Court* TV series, chosen purposively to capture scenes rich in rhetorical argumentation and humour. The sample included ten episodes that prominently featured boosters and hedges, ensuring sufficient representation of linguistic variation. The selection criteria emphasised episodes in which courtroom exchanges displayed persuasion, conflict, and comedic framing, thereby making them relevant to the examination of rhetorical strategies. Data were collected by transcribing courtroom dialogues verbatim, after which a coding scheme grounded in Hyland's (1998b) taxonomy of boosters and hedges, supported by Zou and Hyland (2022), was applied. Quantitative analysis involved frequency counts of certainty and doubt markers, while qualitative analysis employed thematic and discourse analysis to explore their persuasive and humorous functions. NVivo software was used to assist coding and theme identification, thereby enhancing transparency and replicability. Thematic analysis allowed recurring patterns of conviction and caution to be identified and interpreted within

the frameworks of legal rhetoric and humour theory. While the focus on a limited number of episodes restricted generalisability, the qualitative richness compensated for by yielding insights into courtroom parody. The novelty of this methodology lies in adapting rhetorical and humour analysis to a fictionalised legal setting, thereby contributing new knowledge to studies of legal discourse and televised comedy.

## 4. Results

Drawing on Hyland's (1998b) framework, the findings demonstrate that courtroom participants use markers of certainty and doubt in exaggerated ways that both mimic and parody real legal communication. The analysis reveals recurring patterns in the use of boosters by judges and plaintiffs to assert dominance, while defendants frequently employ hedges to deflect responsibility. These dynamics underscore how rhetorical strategies enhance the satirical portrayal of legal discourse.

### 4.1 Identification and Categorization of Boosters and Hedges

This section presents the findings on the frequency distribution of boosters and hedges in the courtroom discourse of *People's Court*. The data, drawn from selected episodes, are analyzed based on Hyland's (1998b) and Zou & Hyland's (2022) taxonomy. The analysis identifies different types of boosters and hedges, highlighting their humorous effects in Nigerian Pidgin.

#### 4.1.1 Frequency Distribution of Boosters and Hedges

The frequency analysis reveals that boosters occur more frequently than hedges in *People's Court* courtroom discourse. Boosters appear in assertive statements made by judges, lawyers, and even litigants, often exaggerating claims to appear more convincing. Hedges, on the other hand, are used to introduce uncertainty, soften arguments, or create humour through hesitation and self-doubt.

**Table 1: Frequency of Boosters and Hedges in *People's Court***

| Rhetorical Device | Frequency | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Boosters | 145 | 65% |
| Hedges | 78 | 35% |
| **Total** | **223** | **100%** |

The data in Table 1 reveal a marked dominance of boosters over hedges in courtroom discourse. As shown in Table 1, boosters occurred 145 times, representing 65% of the identified markers, while hedges appeared 78 times, accounting for 35% of the data. This numerical disparity highlights the rhetorical tendency of courtroom participants, judges, lawyers, and litigants alike to rely more heavily on assertive, exaggerated, and conviction-laden expressions than on cautious or mitigating ones. Boosters frequently manifested in declarative and emphatic statements, such as absolute claims of guilt or exaggerated assurances of innocence, which enhanced the authority of speakers and created a strong persuasive impact. Hedges, in contrast, functioned to soften claims, signal hesitation, or allow for interpretive flexibility. Interestingly, in the comedic context of *People's Court*, hedges were often used to humorous effect, as litigants displayed uncertainty, self-doubt, or nervous digressions that contrasted with the confident rhetoric of the judge.

The results suggest that assertiveness and certainty were not only central to the parody of courtroom persuasion but also instrumental in generating humour. Boosters reinforced exaggerated authority and dramatic tension, while hedges provided comedic relief through awkward pauses, conditional language, or playful ambiguity. The higher frequency of

boosters underscores the parody of legal discourse as a space dominated by overstatement and verbal contestation, while the presence of hedges demonstrates how doubt and caution were strategically woven in to balance persuasion with humour. This interplay illustrates the dual rhetorical and comedic functions of boosters and hedges in fictional courtroom discourse.

### 4.1.2 Types of Boosters

Boosters in *People's Court* are primarily expressed through epistemic adverbs and evidential markers, which enhance the certainty of claims. These boosters make arguments sound stronger, adding dramatic intensity to courtroom interactions.

**Table 2: Common Boosters in *People's Court***

| Booster Type | Example in Nigerian Pidgin | Literal English Translation | Humorous Effect |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Epistemic Adverbs** | "Na sure banker!" | "It's a sure thing!" | Overconfidence in weak evidence |
| **Evidential Markers** | "Everybody sabi say e thief!" | "Everybody knows he stole!" | Exaggerating public knowledge |
| **Intensifiers** | "I swear, na 100% true!" | "I swear, it's 100% true!" | Over-the-top certainty |

Boosters in *People's Court* are expressed through epistemic adverbs, evidential markers, and intensifiers, which collectively heighten the certainty of claims and dramatise courtroom exchanges. As shown in Table 2, phrases such as *"Na sure banker!"* and *"Everybody sabi say e thief!"* are not mere fillers of speech but powerful rhetorical devices. They function as cultural signifiers of confidence and authority in Nigerian Pidgin, a language that thrives on expressiveness, exaggeration, and immediacy. The choice of such boosters reflects a cultural orientation towards emphatic communication, where conviction is often valued as much as, or even more than, evidence.

The comedic effect arises because these boosters amplify confidence even in the face of weak or questionable proof. When a litigant declares *"Na sure banker!"*, the overblown certainty highlights the fragility of their case, producing humour for an audience attuned to the gap between assertion and reality. Similarly, *"Everybody sabi say e thief!"* relies on a supposed collective knowledge that is never substantiated, parodying the reliance on hearsay in everyday discourse. Such boosters reveal how certainty is performatively constructed to command attention and authority. Their exaggerated use not only mocks the language of persuasion in real legal contexts but also entertains viewers by exposing the tension between rhetorical bravado and evidential inadequacy.

### 4.1.3 Types of Hedges

Hedges, though less frequent, contribute significantly to the comedic nature of the show by introducing doubt and hesitation into arguments. They are often used when characters want to avoid direct confrontation, admit uncertainty, or downplay responsibility.

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Table 3: Common Hedges in *People's Court*

| Hedge Type | Example in Nigerian Pidgin | Literal English Translation | Humorous Effect |
|---|---|---|---|
| Cognitive Verbs | "I think say e fit be mistake…" | "I think it might be a mistake…" | Softening an obvious crime |
| Modal Adverbs | "Maybe e no too bad like dat…" | "Maybe it's not that bad…" | Downplaying a serious offense |
| Tentative Language | "E get as e be sha…" | "It's somehow, though…" | Avoiding commitment to a stance |

Although less frequent than boosters, hedges play a crucial role in shaping the humour and social dynamics of *People's Court*. They are employed through cognitive verbs, modal adverbs, and tentative expressions that strategically introduce uncertainty into speech. Far from being mere indicators of politeness, these hedges embody a culturally nuanced way of avoiding direct confrontation and softening accusations. In Nigerian Pidgin, expressions such as *"I think say e fit be mistake…"* or *"E get as e be sha…"* resonate with everyday conversational norms where speakers tactfully distance themselves from absolute claims in order to preserve social harmony.

The humour emerges from the deliberate mismatch between the hedge and the obviousness of the situation. When a defendant insists, *"Maybe e no too bad like dat…"* in reference to a serious wrongdoing, the understatement produces laughter because it trivialises a significant act. This linguistic strategy allows characters to downplay responsibility while simultaneously inviting the audience to recognise the absurdity of such avoidance. The cultural effect is twofold: it mirrors familiar patterns of indirectness in Nigerian discourse, while also parodying how legal language can be manipulated to evade culpability. Ultimately, hedges expose the fragility of truth-telling in the courtroom and intensify the comedic value of rhetorical hesitation.

### 4.1.4 Interpretation of Boosters and Hedges in *People's Court*

The corpus demonstrates a clear rhetorical architecture: boosters provide the baseline texture of talk (65%), while hedges act as a strategic counterpoint (35%). This asymmetry matters. A comedy-courtroom thrives on the public performance of certainty; the judge, counsel, and even lay litigants fashion authority through language that sounds final, unavoidable, and true. In a Nigerian media context, where Nigerian Pidgin signals immediacy, solidarity, and streetwise credibility, such certainty is not merely propositional but cultural, an audible stance of confidence that audiences recognise and enjoy. The humour arises when this loud certainty collides with thin evidence, or when it meets a defendant's softly hedged reply. What looks like "just style" is a carefully tuned discourse economy: certainty creates dramatic pressure; doubt punctures it for comic release.

#### 1) Boosters as markers of confidence and exaggeration

Boosters work through epistemic adverbs, evidential claims, and intensifiers, forms that announce, rather than argue, truth. Utterances such as "Na sure banker!" and "I swear, na 100% true!" do more than add emphasis; they stage control of the narrative and compress legal ambiguity into audience-friendly certitude. Delivery matters: raised volume, clipped tempo, and assertive gesture convert a line into a verdict-like performance. Speakers do this to seize the initiative, claim moral high ground, and override rival accounts before evidence is weighed. The effect is twofold. First, institutional authority is dramatised; the judge sounds decisive, counsel appears competent, and litigants mimic the same stance to look

believable. Second, the exaggeration is legible to viewers as bravado. Nigerian audiences, attuned to Pidgin's playful hyperbole, read these lines with ironic distance; laughter comes from recognising the gulf between the swagger of "100% true" and the wobble of the facts. The result is persuasive theatre, credible enough to move the scene forward, exaggerated enough to entertain.

### 2) Hedges as tools for avoidance and humour

Hedges surface through cognitive verbs (*I think*), modal frames (*fit*, *maybe*), and pragmatic particles (*sha*) that soften commitment, "I think say e fit be mistake…", "E get as e be sha…". These choices enact face-saving and deference in a setting saturated with power asymmetries. Speakers hedge to avoid self-incrimination, to show respect to the bench, or to keep multiple stories viable until the conversational weather improves. The cultural meanings are sharp: indirectness in Pidgin can be cooperative rather than evasive, signalling tact, community-mindedness, and a wish to cool conflict. Humour emerges when mitigation patently underplays a serious act, "Maybe e no too bad like dat…", inviting the audience to enjoy the audacity of minimisation. Prosodically, hedges lengthen vowels, lower volume, and invite overlaps, producing comic awkwardness as the speaker tiptoes around the obvious. The effect is an ethical tease: everyone hears the truth peeking through the hedge, and the show's fun lies in that shared recognition.

### 3) The balance between certainty and doubt in comedy

The engine of the programme is a rhythmic call-and-response. A booster claim, "Everybody sabi say e thief!" creates a sharp ridge of certainty. A hedged reply, "E get as e be sha…" slides down that ridge, re-opening space for interpretation. This choreography answers how humour is generated: certainty builds tension; doubt releases it. It explains why characters speak as they do: authority figures must sound resolute to inhabit their roles; vulnerable speakers must mitigate to survive interrogation. It clarifies effect: audiences are invited to align, then realign, producing engagement through stance-taking. Crucially, the numbers support the reading. With boosters dominating, scenes begin and pivot on assertion; hedges intervene at pressure points to steer the encounter away from closure and towards comic elasticity.

The findings show more than a tally of forms. They reveal a culturally situated rhetoric where Pidgin's expressive resources are mobilised to craft convincing performances of law and laughter. Boosters deliver spectacle and narrative propulsion; hedges provide social tact and comic valve. The interplay sustains character archetypes, decisive judges, swaggering plaintiffs, and hedging defendants while ensuring that certainty never becomes dead weight and doubt never dissolves the plot. In *People's Court*, persuasion and humour are not competing goals; they are co-produced through the calibrated swing between conviction and caution.

## 4.2 Functions of Boosters and Hedges in Courtroom Argumentation and Humour

The use of boosters and hedges in *People's Court* serves multiple rhetorical functions that contribute to both courtroom argumentation and humour. Boosters function as markers of confidence, authority, and persuasion, allowing characters to present their arguments with exaggerated certainty. Hedges, on the other hand, introduce uncertainty, deference, and comedic irony, often softening claims or creating humorous contradictions. The interplay between these rhetorical devices reinforces character dynamics, particularly in the contrast between assertive judges and hesitant defendants.

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### 4.2.1 Boosters as Markers of Confidence, Authority, and Persuasion

Boosters in *People's Court* strengthen courtroom arguments by projecting confidence and certainty. Judges and lawyers frequently use them to assert dominance over cases, making their arguments appear indisputable. Plaintiffs and defendants also use boosters to sound convincing, especially when making exaggerated claims.

**Table 4: Functions of Boosters in *People's Court***

| Function | Example in Nigerian Pidgin | Literal English Translation | Humorous Effect |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Confidence** | "I no dey talk anyhow, na 100% sure!" | "I don't talk carelessly, it's 100% sure!" | Overconfidence in weak claims |
| **Authority** | "As I see am, I know say e be thief!" | "From the moment I saw him, I knew he was a thief!" | Instant judgment without evidence |
| **Persuasion** | "Ask anybody, dem go tell you!" | "Ask anyone, they'll confirm it!" | Assumption that everyone agrees |

Boosters in People's Court function as performative devices that consolidate confidence, authority and persuasion within courtroom exchanges. These markers, epistemic adverbs, evidential claims and intensifiers are disproportionately deployed by judges and counsel to stage incontestable verdicts and to pre-empt opposing narratives. The corpus shows that boosters account for 65% of stance markers, a distribution that underlines the show's reliance on assertive rhetoric to propel scenes and elicit audience alignment. Use of Pidgin formulations such as "I no dey talk anyhow, na 100% sure!" carries cultural weight: its hyperbolic cadence signals streetwise certainty and communal solidarity while simultaneously inviting ironic distance. Performatively, speakers amplify claims through prosodic emphasis, shortened phonology and gesture, transforming ordinary assertions into televisual pronouncements. Speakers choose boosters to occupy narrative initiative and to secure the viewer's trust in a character's moral or factual authority; when evidence is scant, however, such amplification can register as bravado and provoke laughter rather than conviction. The effect is twofold: boosters enhance dramatic momentum and establish character archetypes, decisive judges, and assertive plaintiffs, yet they also create comic opportunities when the asserted certainty collides with contradictory facts or hedged testimonies. Context matters; a live studio or domestic audience familiar with Nigerian linguistic pragmatics readily decodes these exaggerated claims as performative rather than empirical. Consequently, boosters operate less as neutral logical devices and more as culturally inflected tools of persuasion and satire, shaping reception while exposing the theatricality of legal discourse. This rhetorical pattern insists that persuasion is inseparable from performance in televised legal parody and audience enjoyment.

### 4.2.2 Hedges as Tools for Uncertainty, Deference, and Comedic Irony

Hedges in *People's Court* introduce uncertainty and hesitation, often used by defendants and reluctant witnesses to evade responsibility. They function as a strategy for softening statements, showing deference, or creating comedic irony by downplaying serious accusations.

Table 5: Functions of Hedges in *People's Court*

| Function | Example in Nigerian Pidgin | Literal English Translation | Humorous Effect |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Uncertainty** | "E be like say I fit don do am…" | "It seems like I might have done it…" | Pretending not to remember a clear action |
| **Deference** | "I no too sabi law, but…" | "I don't really know the law, but…" | Softening a weak argument |
| **Comedic Irony** | "E get as e be, but e no be like dat!" | "It's somehow, but not like that!" | Contradicting oneself in a funny way |

Hedges in *People's Court* are deployed as subtle linguistic strategies that convey uncertainty, mitigate responsibility, and produce comedic irony. Unlike boosters, which project authority and assertiveness, hedges operate at the opposite end of the spectrum by signalling hesitation, tentativeness, or a lack of conviction. Defendants and reluctant witnesses are the primary users of hedges, often employing them as face-saving devices to avoid direct confrontation with the judge or to obscure their culpability. For instance, the Pidgin expression *"E be like say I fit don do am…"* ("It seems like I might have done it…") reveals a deliberate attempt to dilute the force of admission. The humour emerges because the audience recognises the obviousness of the action, making the hedged response appear both evasive and absurd.

Culturally, such hedges resonate with Nigerian communicative practices, where indirectness often serves as a politeness strategy in hierarchical or conflictual situations. When a defendant says, *"I no too sabi law, but…"* ("I don't really know the law, but…"), the hedge performs deference, acknowledging limited knowledge while still trying to participate in the courtroom narrative. This gesture of modesty is culturally intelligible as a sign of respect, but in the exaggerated, televised setting, it produces laughter as the speaker simultaneously undermines their credibility.

The most striking effect of hedges is their role in generating comedic irony. Contradictory statements like *"E get as e be, but e no be like dat!"* highlight the tension between wanting to appear innocent and the impossibility of escaping blame. Audiences enjoy the irony because it exposes human weakness and the universal tendency to dodge accountability. Thus, hedges in *People's Court* not only soften discourse but also amplify its entertainment value, turning uncertainty into a source of communal laughter.

### 4.2.3 Reinforcing Character Dynamics Through Boosters and Hedges

The contrast between boosters and hedges in *People's Court* helps reinforce character roles and dynamics.

### 1. Assertive Judges vs. Hesitant Defendants

Judges in *People's Court* routinely deploy boosters to perform institutional authority; such utterances do more than convey opinion, they stage decisiveness and command the floor. When a judge states, *"This case no get head or tail! Na clear case of theft!"*, the language functions as an act of role-enactment: certainty substitutes for evidential labour and produces an immediate rhetorical closure that pressures others to respond. Defendants counter with hedges that preserve face and create narrative friction: *"E get as e be… I no go fit talk am like dat…"*. That hedging is not merely evasive; it indexes cultural norms of indirectness and communal tact, which Nigerian audiences interpret as familiar conversational strategies. The clash of these styles generates humour because the judge's

amplified certainty and the defendant's tentative mitigation expose a gap between performance and proof. Audiences laugh at the mismatch while also recognising the social intelligence involved in hedging within unequal power relations.

### 2. Overconfident Plaintiffs vs. Uncertain Witnesses

Plaintiffs tend to use boosters to amplify perceived consensus and moral indignation: *"Everybody sabi say e thief! Ask anybody!"* This rhetorical thrust aims to mobilise communal judgment as evidence. Witnesses, however, hedge—*"I no too sure, but e be like say I see am…"* which undermines the plaintiff's assumed unanimity and introduces epistemic doubt. The effect is twofold: boosters create momentum and moral theatre, while hedges reopen interpretative space and provoke comic deflation. Context matters; Pidgin's expressive register amplifies both bravado and understatement, and a studio or domestic audience decodes these moves through shared cultural tropes. Consequently, the interplay not only constructs believable character types but also stages social commentary; persuasion and ridicule operate together, making legal parody both entertaining and telling.

### 4.2.4 The Role of Boosters and Hedges in Creating Humour

The comic value of *People's Court* is deeply tied to how speakers manipulate boosters and hedges to exaggerate, contradict, or confuse.

### 1. Exaggeration for Comic Effect

Boosters transform ordinary claims into hyperbolic performances, amplifying confidence to the point of absurdity. When a plaintiff insists, *"Na 100% sure, everybody sabi!"*, the humour arises not from the truth of the claim but from its theatrical certainty in an obviously weak context. This exaggeration mocks the cultural tendency to overstate in order to sound persuasive, exposing the thin line between conviction and bluff. Audiences laugh because the overconfidence highlights the gulf between the words spoken and the plausibility of the situation.

### 2. Contradictions and Irony

Hedges function as discursive loopholes, allowing speakers to dilute responsibility, but their overuse produces comic contradictions. A defendant saying, *"E be like say I fit don do am…"* creates irony because the hedge undermines the seriousness of an obvious admission. The cultural logic here is that hedging aligns with politeness and self-protection, but in a courtroom parody, it generates laughter through its blatant incongruity. The humour lies in the audience's recognition of the speaker's attempt to save face while unintentionally confirming guilt.

### 3. Miscommunication

The interplay between boosters and hedges heightens comic misunderstanding. Certainty collides with hesitation, as when a judge asserts an indisputable ruling while a witness equivocates. The tension produces humorous miscommunication because it mirrors real conversational breakdowns in Nigerian settings where power, respect, and survival are negotiated through speech. Ultimately, humour emerges not from trivial errors but from cultural recognition of how authority and deference clash in everyday interactions.

## 4.3 Audience Engagement and Character Perception

The interplay of certainty and doubt in *People's Court* plays a crucial role in shaping audience reactions, influencing how viewers perceive characters, and determining the overall humour effectiveness. The strategic use of boosters (markers of certainty) and hedges (markers of doubt) enhances dramatic tension, comedic relief, and audience

participation. This section explores how these rhetorical choices affect engagement, character believability, and the portrayal of legal discourse in popular media.

### 4.3.1 Certainty vs. Doubt: Engaging the Audience through Contrast

One of the primary ways People's Court captures audience attention is through the stark contrast between confident assertions and hesitant denials. The frequent use of boosters by judges and plaintiffs creates an illusion of absolute truth, while defendants and reluctant witnesses employ hedges to introduce uncertainty. This contrast fuels dramatic tension and comedic misunderstandings, keeping viewers engaged.

For instance, when a plaintiff confidently declares, "Everybody sabi say e thief! Na clear case!", the audience is drawn into the certainty of the statement. However, when the defendant responds with, "E get as e be… maybe I just take am small…", the sudden shift to uncertainty disrupts expectations and triggers laughter. This interaction mirrors real-life courtroom drama but exaggerates the roles for comedic effect, making the audience actively anticipate how the case will unfold.

Additionally, the audience often takes sides based on how convincingly characters use boosters or hedges. A forceful argument delivered with confidence can sway the audience to believe the accuser, while a well-placed hedge can evoke sympathy for the defendant. This dynamic makes each episode more interactive, as viewers mentally engage in evaluating the credibility of arguments.

### 4.3.2 The Effect of Rhetorical Choices on Character Believability

Rhetorical choices such as boosters and hedges play a central role in shaping the believability of characters in *People's Court*. Judges, as figures of authority, frequently employ boosters to establish decisiveness and control, even when the reasoning is hyperbolic. Statements such as *"This case na open-and-close! I no wan hear story!"* reinforce the judge's commanding presence and make their authority appear unquestionable. While the logic may not always hold in a real legal context, the repeated use of certainty markers bolsters the judge's credibility within the performative courtroom setting. This rhetorical stance sustains the character's believability as the arbiter of truth, while also drawing humour from exaggerated certainty.

Plaintiffs, on the other hand, use boosters to heighten the force of their accusations, often to the point of overstatement. The insistence in expressions like *"Na me see am with my own eye! No argument!"* portrays them as overly confident accusers. This exaggerated certainty makes their claims sound more convincing on the surface, but simultaneously sets them up for ridicule when inconsistencies appear. Their believability, therefore, is double-edged: they seem bold and passionate, yet their exaggerated rhetoric often exposes them as unreliable or emotionally charged. The humour lies in this contrast between unwavering confidence and factual weakness.

Defendants contrast sharply with judges and plaintiffs by relying heavily on hedges to create ambiguity. Phrases such as *"E fit be say I take am… but no be like dat!"* portray them as hesitant and defensive, which reduces the persuasiveness of their claims. Their hedging language positions them as either evasive or pitiable, depending on the interpretation. This undermines their believability as truthful narrators, while also generating comedic irony. The humour arises from the obvious mismatch between the gravity of the accusation and the defendant's attempt to downplay it through uncertain rhetoric.

Witnesses, caught between conflicting loyalties, also rely on hedges to protect themselves from blame or reprisal. Their language often oscillates between partial confirmation and denial, as in *"I no go talk say e thief, but I see am near the bag…"*. This cautious phrasing creates a perception of unreliability, but it also sustains their believability as characters who embody everyday social dilemmas of loyalty, fear, and truth. Audiences find humour in their inability to take a firm stand, as their hedging simultaneously reveals and conceals information. Ultimately, the interplay of boosters and hedges produces characters that are both exaggerated and authentic, allowing *People's Court* to satirise real-life courtroom and social interactions in a manner that is engaging and culturally resonant.

### 4.3.3 Boosters, Hedges, and the Effectiveness of Humour

The use of boosters and hedges in *People's Court* is central to its comedic success, as these rhetorical devices deliberately manipulate certainty and doubt to create humour. Much of the show's entertainment value comes from characters overstating or downplaying situations in ways that sharply contradict reality. This tension between what is said and what is actually true draws laughter from the audience, who recognise the exaggeration and absurdity in the language used. In this way, humour is constructed not only from the content of the disputes but from the rhetorical styles adopted by the participants.

One prominent comedic technique is the overuse of boosters in flawed arguments. For instance, when a character declares, *"Na 100% true, I no need prove!"*, their extreme confidence immediately invites scepticism. The audience anticipates the collapse of such certainty, and when questioning reveals contradictions or weaknesses, the humour is amplified. Boosters exaggerate the speaker's authority, but the inevitable exposure of their lack of credibility transforms the overconfidence into ridicule. The laughter therefore comes from the contrast between projected certainty and actual weakness.

Equally humorous is the inappropriate reliance on hedges in moments that clearly demand certainty. A defendant visibly caught on camera might still insist, *"E be like say no be me… but I resemble am small sha."* Such evasive phrasing undermines their believability while generating humour through self-contradiction. By subverting expectations, turning bold accusers into fools and hesitant defendants into suspicious characters, *People's Court* keeps its humour dynamic and engaging, blending satire with linguistic play.

### 4.3.4 Implications for the Portrayal of Legal Discourse in Popular Media

The comedic framing of courtroom arguments in *People's Court* illustrates a wider trend in the popularisation of legal discourse through the media. Real-life court proceedings are rooted in formal reasoning, rules of evidence, and professional conduct; however, the show deliberately exaggerates these elements through the use of boosters and hedges, transforming them into tools of satire and humour. This simplification not only makes legal debates more accessible but also sheds light on how courtroom performances are shaped by rhetoric as much as by evidence. The portrayal of overconfident plaintiffs, evasive defendants, and ironical witnesses creates a caricature of real trials, yet it also exposes the performative aspect of law. By highlighting how language can be manipulated to establish certainty or evade responsibility, the show critiques the human dimensions of legal practice while entertaining audiences.

A significant implication of this portrayal lies in the accessibility it brings to legal language. Courtroom discourse is often perceived as technical, elitist, and detached from everyday life, but *People's Court* dismantles this perception through its reliance on Nigerian Pidgin.

By framing arguments in a colloquial and humorous register, the show translates complex ideas about persuasion, evidence, and burden of proof into terms that resonate with ordinary viewers. This linguistic accessibility enables broader participation in the interpretation of legal debates, effectively democratising law for audiences who may otherwise feel alienated by its formality. In this sense, the use of boosters and hedges not only produces comedy but also functions as an educational tool, allowing viewers to grasp how credibility is negotiated in courtroom exchanges.

The influence of *People's Court* extends beyond entertainment, shaping public perception of law and courtroom behaviour. Audiences exposed to the exaggerated rhetorical strategies of boosters and hedges may begin to identify similar patterns in real-world legal contexts, recognising how confidence, hesitation, or self-contradiction affect credibility. While the comedic format risks trivialising legal practice, it also sharpens awareness of the persuasive power of language in law. By portraying trials as dynamic performances shaped by rhetorical choices, the show fosters critical reflection on how truth and justice are represented in courtrooms. In this way, *People's Court* contributes to media discourse that both entertains and educates, underscoring the role of humour in making legal culture more visible, relatable, and open to public critique.

## 5. Conclusion

The study concludes that boosters and hedges in *People's Court* serve as powerful rhetorical devices that not only shape courtroom argumentation but also define character roles and sustain audience engagement. The findings show that boosters, used mostly by judges and plaintiffs, project confidence, authority, and persuasion, while hedges, often employed by defendants and witnesses, create doubt, irony, and comic relief. This interaction mirrors real-life courtroom discourse but is exaggerated for entertainment, making legal arguments accessible and engaging to a wider audience. The study demonstrates how everyday language choices influence credibility and humour, thereby highlighting the performative nature of law in both fictional and real settings. The study analyzed how boosters and hedges are strategically deployed in courtroom-based comedy to balance certainty and doubt, authority and irony, persuasion and entertainment. Its contribution lies in extending studies of legal discourse beyond formal judicial contexts to the realm of popular culture, showing how humour and satire reshape public perceptions of law. In theory, it expands discourse analysis by linking rhetorical strategies to humour and media studies, while in practice, it demonstrates how courtroom-based entertainment can democratise legal knowledge by making it more relatable through language.

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