EPISTEMIC STANCE AND TRUST IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN DIGITAL DISCOURSE: VERIFICATION MARKERS, HEDGING AND AI-MEDIATED TEXTS

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Abstract: This article examines how contemporary Russian online discourse encodes the source, certainty and interpersonal presentation of knowledge. Drawing on discourse pragmatics, studies of Russian verification markers and recent research on internet linguistics, it develops a qualitative analytical framework for expressions such as po dannym ("according to data"), kak soobshchaetsya ("as reported"), vyyasnilos' ("it emerged"), yakoby ("allegedly"), vozmozhno ("possibly") and skazhem tak ("let us put it this way"). Constructed examples compare institutional announcements, social-media comments and AI-mediated drafts without treating them as an empirical corpus. The study distinguishes attribution, evidential warrant, epistemic commitment, dialogic alignment and textual responsibility. It argues that credibility emerges from the interaction of lexical choices, proposition type, source accessibility and genre conventions rather than from any isolated marker. A diagnostic matrix

and classroom-oriented annotation procedure are proposed for future corpus validation.

Keywords: Russian linguistics, digital discourse, epistemic stance, evidentiality, verification markers, hedging, generative AI, discourse pragmatics.

I. Introduction

Digital communication has become a major environment in which Russian speakers encounter, circulate and contest information. A news headline may frame a claim as established fact, a messaging-channel post may attribute the same claim to unnamed sources, and a comment may recast it as uncertain or suspicious. The propositional content can remain almost identical while the reader's understanding of responsibility, confidence and credibility changes substantially. This makes the linguistic organization of knowledge claims an important object of contemporary Russian-language research.

The present article focuses on epistemic stance: the resources speakers use to position themselves in relation to what is known, inferred, reported or doubted. It also distinguishes evidential attribution, which concerns access to information, from epistemic modality, which concerns commitment to a proposition. These categories intersect in everyday

discourse, but their analytical separation is necessary. The word yakoby ("allegedly"), for example, can identify reported information and invite scepticism; its actual effect nevertheless depends on speaker position, genre and context.

Digital environments complicate the issue because reported claims circulate beyond their original communicative situation. A screenshot detaches a quotation from an article, a short post omits qualifications, and machine-assisted rewriting can replace cautious formulations with authoritative ones. Such transformations are not merely stylistic. They alter the distribution of epistemic responsibility among original source, current writer, platform and reader. Linguistic analysis must therefore consider the full chain from a claim's framing to its reception.

The aim is to develop a replicable interpretive framework for studying verification expressions and hedging constructions in Russian digital texts. Three questions guide the analysis: how are information sources linguistically indexed; how does a statement signal certainty, caution or distance; and how do platform genres and AI-assisted rewriting modify the perceived authority of a claim? Rather than claiming corpus frequencies, this paper offers systematic contrasts through explicitly constructed examples and a protocol for subsequent empirical investigation.

II. Literature Review

Work on evidentiality and modality provides the conceptual foundation for the study. Aikhenvald (2004) characterizes evidentiality principally in terms of information source, while Palmer (2001) addresses the wider system of modal meanings. In discourse, source attribution and belief commitment often coincide, but neither category can be inferred automatically from the other. A message may correctly report a source that the speaker doubts, or express strong personal confidence without offering any verifiable evidence.

Discourse markers have long been studied as resources for coherence, interaction and interpretive guidance. Schiffrin (1987) demonstrates that markers connect structural and interactional levels of discourse, while Fraser (1999) treats particular expressions as signals of relationships between discourse segments. For Russian, this theoretical background helps explain why a marker cannot be described adequately by translating it into a single English counterpart. Position in the utterance and the surrounding argumentative sequence remain essential.

Recent Russian-language scholarship has advanced the functional and classificatory discussion. Kuleshova and Slastnikova (2024) review functional-pragmatic and functional-semantic approaches to discourse markers, and Kuleshova (2025) compares several contemporary theoretical models. Their analyses support a plural description in which

grammatical form, conventional meaning and communicative effect must be examined together. Such a framework is particularly relevant when words traditionally catalogued as adverbs, particles or parenthetical units perform comparable discourse-management tasks.

Podlesskaya (2024) investigates the Russian expressions skazhem and skazhem tak, showing their pragmaticalization from a speech verb toward approximation and hedging. This work is directly relevant to digital comments such as "Skazhem tak, reshenie bylo ne ideal'nym" ("Let us put it this way, the decision was less than ideal"). The expression does not merely describe a speech act; it prepares the recipient for a strategically softened assessment. It may mitigate criticism while still communicating a negative evaluation.

Issers and Radbil (2024) examine verification predicates in Russian internet media discourse, including vyyasnilos', ustanovleno, podtverdilos' and stalo izvestno. Their analysis places these constructions within active pragmatic processes in online media and foregrounds the effects of verification language. A statement introduced by "it was established" creates a different interpretive expectation from one introduced by "someone claims", even if both concern the same event. The source's traceability remains crucial to whether that expectation is warranted.

Other scholarship provides further nuance. Cotta Ramusino, Dobrovol'skij and Pöppel (2024) compare Russian truth-confirmation markers through

corpus evidence, while Kim (2026) analyzes discourse markers and empathic alignment. These studies indicate that markers can organize both the truth-status of propositions and the relation between interlocutors. Epistemic stance is consequently not a purely individual cognitive attitude: it can be negotiated, resisted and ratified as conversation unfolds.

Internet linguistics considers the changing relation between communicative setting and linguistic form. Crystal (2011) outlines the need to investigate digital environments as specific linguistic contexts, and Herring (2004) sets out a framework for computer-mediated discourse analysis. Borisova (2025) reviews internet linguistics as a distinct field and identifies multiple trajectories of research. These perspectives caution against treating all online Russian as one register: messaging channels, institutional accounts, comments and edited articles have different participation structures and norms.

The emergence of generative AI introduces another analytical layer. Research into AI-produced Russian scientific writing, including Ryabtseva (2025), raises questions about statistical regularities and the identification of machine-generated content. However, the presence of formulaic constructions or polished syntax is not sufficient proof that a particular text was generated by AI. The present article addresses AI mediation as a scenario of textual revision and redistributed authorship, not as a problem that can be solved by lexical detection alone.

III. Materials and Methods

This is a qualitative, theory-driven study. Its linguistic material consists of purpose-built Russian microtexts, each paired with an English explanatory translation and a defined hypothetical communication situation. The examples are not harvested from platforms, attributed to actual users or represented as a statistically sampled corpus. Constructed examples allow the analyst to hold propositional content constant while altering one or two stance-relevant expressions, making interpretive contrasts visible without confounding them with unknown conversational history.

The first analytical dimension is attribution: whether a claim cites an identifiable institution, an unspecified collective voice, a named speaker, or no source. The second is the evidential warrant: whether the statement points to data, observation, inference, testimony or an indeterminate basis. The third is epistemic commitment: whether the formulation presents the claim as settled, tentative, probable or contested. These dimensions must be recorded separately because lexical forms may combine several effects.

Two further dimensions capture the interpersonal and digital setting. Dialogic alignment concerns agreement, challenge, empathy and the willingness to revise a claim. Textual responsibility concerns who stands behind the statement after quotation, summary or AI-assisted rewriting. A

six-field annotation record is proposed: expression; proposition; source type; commitment; interactional function; and genre-specific implication. The record also includes a mandatory note on alternative interpretations, thereby resisting rigid one-expression/one-function classifications.

The procedure consists of four steps. First, identify the base proposition while setting aside framing expressions. Second, compare minimal pairs whose factual content is equivalent but whose epistemic framing differs. Third, specify the imagined platform context, including whether the message is original, quoted, forwarded or rewritten. Fourth, assess whether an independent reader could recover the claimed source and distinguish evidence from authorial evaluation. Each interpretation is argued from overt language and stated context rather than from assumed speaker psychology.

The analysis does not involve participant recruitment, scraped private messages, automatic text generation tests or inter-annotator reliability scores. It therefore cannot establish population-level prevalence or causal effects on readers. Its contribution is an explicit coding instrument and a set of falsifiable expectations for future observational and experimental research. Such methodological limits are important because discussions of digital credibility can otherwise mistake plausible intuitions for verified behavioural patterns.

IV. Results

1. Source attribution and verifiability. Consider the pair "Po dannym gorodskogo departamenta, marshrut izmenitsya" ("According to the city department's data, the route will change") and "Kak soobshchaetsya, marshrut izmenitsya" ("As reported, the route will change"). Both frame the route change as reported rather than personally witnessed. Only the first, however, names a possible source that readers may attempt to verify. The second turns reporting into a relatively impersonal textual operation; its source may be inferable from surrounding links, but no source is recoverable from the sentence alone.

Source naming should not be equated with source reliability. "Po dannym ekspertov" ("according to experts") appears explicit on the surface but does not identify which experts or what evidence they used. The construction may create an aura of institutional or specialist authority without providing sufficient details for independent checking. Conversely, a cautious statement that fully names a document and specifies its uncertainty can be more accountable than a categorical assertion accompanied by vague attribution. This distinction is central to an adequate linguistic account of credibility.

2. Verification predicates and apparent closure. Compare "Vyyasnilos', chto dokument byl izmenen" ("It emerged that the document had been altered") with "Predpolagayut, chto dokument byl izmenen" ("It is

supposed that the document had been altered"). Vyyasnilos' presents a transition from uncertainty to discovery, whereas predpolagayut leaves the judgement located within an unspecified set of observers. Neither formula alone proves the state of the underlying evidence. The first may be responsible reporting if it follows a documented investigation, or rhetorical overstatement if verification is absent.

Related formulas differ in the type of warrant they suggest. "Podtverdilos', chto…" ("It was confirmed that…") presupposes an earlier candidate claim and subsequent confirmation; "ustanovleno, chto…" ("It has been established that…") evokes a completed institutional or investigative procedure; "stalo izvestno, chto…" ("It became known that…") primarily marks a change in the public availability of information. Interchanging these expressions can shift the interpretive status of a claim even when its propositional content stays unchanged.

3. Reportative distance and contestation. The pair "On poluchil preimushchestvo" ("He gained an advantage") and "On yakoby poluchil preimushchestvo" ("He allegedly gained an advantage") illustrates how yakoby can convert a plain assertion into an attributed, potentially contested claim. In Russian digital polemics, the particle can also perform a distancing or ironic function. It would be incorrect, however, to treat scepticism as an invariant semantic value in every context: an author may choose yakoby in order to avoid adopting an unverified accusation.

A second contrast uses “Govoryat, proekt zakryvayut” (“They say the project is being closed”) and “V ofitsial’nom uvedomlenii ukazano, chto proekt zakryvayut” (“The official notice states that the project is being closed”). The colloquial reportative govoryat makes the speaker a conduit of circulating talk and can establish conversational solidarity: both speaker and recipient occupy the same informational uncertainty. The institutional attribution narrows that uncertainty but introduces a new obligation to ensure the document really exists and supports the stated conclusion.

4. Hedging, probability and facework. Compare “Eto oshibka” (“This is an error”), “Vozmozhno, eto oshibka” (“Possibly this is an error”) and “Skazhem tak, eto ne samoe udachnoe reshenie” (“Let us put it this way, this is not the most successful decision”). Vozmozhno explicitly weakens the degree of commitment to the proposition, whereas skazhem tak manages the forthcoming formulation. The latter may soften criticism through understatement but does not necessarily express uncertainty about the assessment. These distinctions matter for automated annotation of cautious language.

In a comment thread, hedging can perform several nonexclusive functions. It can acknowledge incomplete evidence; it can avoid categorical disagreement with a respected participant; it can protect the writer against reputational consequences; or it can invite the reader to infer a sharper criticism than the literal wording supplies. A valid pragmatic interpretation therefore requires attention to the target of the

hedge: the truth of the statement, the precision of the chosen term, or the interpersonal force of the utterance.

5. Dialogic alignment through response particles. Consider the constructed exchange: A: "Po-moemu, eto tol'ko predvaritel'nye dannye" ("I think these are only preliminary data"). B: "Da, pokhozhe, chto tak" ("Yes, it seems so"). Speaker B combines agreement with a limitation on certainty; the reply ratifies the interlocutor's cautious stance rather than simply asserting the proposition. A reply such as "Da net, vse uzhe dokazano" ("No, everything has already been proven") instead contests the epistemic framing by presenting verification as complete. The particles organize interpersonal positioning as much as logical content.

6. Platform conventions and decontextualization. A phrase such as "Eksperty podtverdili…" ("Experts confirmed…") may operate differently in a linked institutional article, a clipped social-media headline, a forwarded screenshot and a comment quoting that headline ironically. Formatting, hyperlinks, quotation marks and message forwarding affect whether readers can locate the underlying evidential chain. Linguistic analysis must accordingly describe the ecology of the utterance without assuming that typography alone supplies authenticity.

When an online post is shortened, limitations can disappear. The original "Po predvaritel'nym otsenkam, izmenenie mozhet privesti k…" ("According to preliminary estimates, the change may lead to…") may be recast as

"Izmenenie privedet k…" ("The change will lead to…"). This edit removes the source qualification and replaces an epistemic possibility with predictive certainty. Even if the core event is maintained, the communicative claim has been altered. Reposting and headline compression thus deserve analysis as epistemic transformations, not merely changes of length.

7. AI-mediated rewriting and the redistribution of commitment. Consider a hypothetical editor who asks an automated writing assistant to "make the paragraph more confident". A draft sentence, "Vozmozhno, rezultaty ukazyvayut na tendentsiyu" ("Possibly the results suggest a trend"), may become "Rezultaty demonstriruyut ustoychivuyu tendentsiyu" ("The results demonstrate a stable trend"). The revised sentence changes both modal certainty and the lexical evaluation of evidential strength. The example is constructed; it illustrates a risk in rewriting, not a measured behaviour of a particular AI system.

The reverse transformation is also possible: an assistant may add conventional hedges and generalized source labels, such as "soglasno ryadu issledovanii" ("according to a number of studies"), without supplying any traceable references. Linguistic polish cannot substitute for evidential accountability. An editorial audit should therefore compare source claims, modality, scope and reported agents before and after machine-assisted revision. The question is not whether a sentence sounds

human or artificial, but whether its degree of warranted commitment is preserved.

8. An integrated interpretation matrix. The analysis yields five cross-cutting functional configurations: (a) attributable and checkable assertion; (b) unattributed institutional-sounding assertion; (c) explicitly provisional inference; (d) reportative distancing; and (e) interpersonal mitigation. Each configuration may be produced by several lexical resources, and the same resource may serve more than one configuration. The mapping should thus be treated as a heuristic for coding passages rather than a closed taxonomy of Russian lexical items.

For instance, “Po dannym otcheta, vozmozhno…” combines documentary attribution with reduced commitment; “Kak budto vse uzhe resheno” (“As if everything had already been decided”) can express ironic distance without a literal external source; and “Chestno govorya, ya ne uveren” (“Frankly, I am not sure”) foregrounds subjective responsibility while admitting uncertainty. Analyses that count only isolated keywords would miss these interactions. Whole-clause and discourse-sequence annotation is preferable to one-to-one assignment.

9. Punctuation and the packaging of epistemic stance. Russian orthography offers additional cues for the interpretation of uncertainty. Parenthetical expressions such as po-vidimomu (“apparently”) and navernoe (“probably”) may be separated by commas in edited prose,

whereas informal comments regularly omit punctuation or place qualifying phrases after the main assertion. Compare “On, po-vidimomu, ne pridet” (“He apparently will not come”) with “On ne pridet, navernoe” (“He will not come, probably”). In the second construction, the proposition arrives before the qualification, so the reader momentarily processes a categorical claim before encountering the speaker’s revision. This sequential effect cannot be adequately captured by counting the word navernoe in isolation.

10. Questions and contesting the evidential ground. The constructed response “A kto eto podtverdil?” (“And who confirmed this?”) directly challenges a verification claim without asserting that it is false. Likewise, “Otkuda izvestno?” (“How is this known?”) requests the basis for an information-status predicate. Such questions display the reader’s refusal to accept an implied warrant at face value. They also show how epistemic stance can be distributed across turns: the first speaker presents a proposition as confirmed, and the next demands a source, thereby transforming the conversation into a negotiation over evidential adequacy. In an online thread, this challenge may be sincere, rhetorical, mocking or strategic; local cues and participant history determine the strongest interpretation.

11. Negation, quotation and scope. The string “Ne podtverdilos’, chto…” (“It was not confirmed that…”) does not automatically mean that the embedded proposition has been disproved. It says that the expected

confirmation was absent, leaving open several epistemic possibilities. Similarly, "On nazval eto 'dokazannym faktom'" ("He called it a 'proven fact'") attributes a strong claim to another voice rather than necessarily endorsing it. The scope of negation and the identity of the quoted speaker should therefore be annotated separately. Failing to distinguish "unconfirmed", "false" and "someone says it is true" produces serious interpretive errors in digital information disputes.

12. Metadiscursive appeals and the illusion of transparency. Phrases such as "esli chestno" ("to be honest"), "na samom dele" ("in fact") and "v deistvitel'nosti" ("in reality") can establish a contrast between the speaker's account and a supposedly less accurate public version. Their contribution is frequently argumentative: they invite the reader to treat the forthcoming statement as corrective and more authentic. However, a claim to speak honestly is not itself evidence. The analyst should note the rhetorical work performed by such formulas while reserving factual judgement for the referenced data or argument. The same expression may introduce sincere clarification, deliberate exaggeration or an ironic reversal.

13. From local annotations to genre comparison. In a later empirical phase, the proposed coding matrix could be applied to matched subsets of institutional announcements, science journalism, news aggregators and public discussion comments. The dataset would require an explicit sampling period and archival procedure, with sensitive personal

information excluded or responsibly masked. Researchers could compare the proportion of propositions accompanied by identifiable sources, the placement of qualifications and the incidence of challenges such as "Who confirmed it?". Any observed differences would have to be interpreted with reference to genre constraints, moderation systems and topic selection; the present analysis does not anticipate the direction or statistical magnitude of such differences.

V. Discussion

The principal theoretical outcome is a distinction between lexicalized epistemic meaning and the socially recognizable performance of credibility. Verification predicates such as podtverdilos' can encourage readers to interpret a proposition as settled, but the strength of the evidence must be determined outside the lexical form. Similarly, yakoby may distance the speaker from a claim without demonstrating that the claim is false. The linguistic analyst can describe positioning and implied warrants; fact-checking of a specific public assertion remains a separate task.

This distinction matters for the interpretation of contemporary Russian media discourse. Digital communication frequently combines source references, evaluative language and interpersonal cues in short textual units. The resulting stance is multidimensional: a writer may identify a source yet challenge its conclusion; may agree with an interlocutor while

hedging a prediction; or may use a verification predicate ironically. Annotation schemes should therefore record contextual alternatives and mark cases that resist confident categorization rather than forcing all cases into a single categorical label.

For applied analysis, a practical coding workflow can begin with proposition segmentation, followed by source extraction and assessment of linguistic certainty. A second pass should identify interpersonal targeting and the role of quotation or reposting. At least two trained annotators would be needed in a subsequent corpus study, with disagreements adjudicated through explicit decision rules. Genre-balanced sampling could then compare institutional releases, online journalism, discussion forums and public messaging channels using ethically obtained and anonymized texts.

AI-mediated writing introduces a particularly important methodological caution. No reliable linguistic diagnosis of origin can rest on the occurrence of formulaic phrases, source attributions or hedges in isolation. Instead, researchers can study transformations between drafts where revision histories and permissions are available. A prospective experiment could ask participants to judge paired versions with identical factual content but different degrees of qualification, without presuming its results in advance. Such a design would help test whether markers influence perceived confidence, credibility and reader willingness to verify.

The present framework also has relevance for Russian-language education and media literacy. Students can compare a categorical headline with its qualified source paragraph, mark the expressions that have changed and explain which evidential obligations arise. They can also annotate AI-assisted rewrites and restore missing attributions. These exercises link grammatical interpretation to responsible reading and writing while avoiding the simplistic assumption that all uncertainty language is weak or that all authoritative language is accurate.

Several limitations remain. Constructed microtexts demonstrate possible readings, not naturally occurring frequencies or conventionalized patterns in a defined speaker population. The proposed categories have not been tested for inter-rater reliability. Furthermore, online genres evolve quickly and vary by platform, age group, discourse community and institutional setting. The paper does not compare these populations and does not establish whether generative AI has already shifted the distribution of particular Russian expressions. These questions require independent empirical investigation.

One reason to preserve these distinctions is the polyfunctionality of Russian parenthetical expressions. A text may contain a single surface marker that participates simultaneously in epistemic qualification and audience design. For example, “konechno” (“of course”) can present a proposition as mutually obvious, express polite agreement or, through irony, communicate the speaker’s rejection of a prior claim. Without

sequential context, a coder may misread ironic rejection as maximal certainty. This suggests that future annotation guidelines should include labels for irony and quotation, along with an explicit "insufficient context" option where warranted.

The proposal also recommends separating descriptive claims about linguistic forms from normative claims about responsible public communication. Linguistics can identify how a phrase construes authority, but it cannot conclude from that choice alone that an author is dishonest or that a statement is fabricated. Conversely, media-literacy instruction can encourage explicit source attribution without treating stylistic convention as proof of accuracy. Maintaining the boundary between semantic-pragmatic description and fact verification is especially important when communication is polarized or generated content circulates under ambiguous authorship.

VI. Conclusion

Contemporary Russian digital discourse makes epistemic positioning visible through a network of attribution formulas, verification predicates, hedges and interactional markers. The comparisons presented here show why source reporting, the degree of commitment and the interpersonal force of an utterance should be analyzed as distinct but interacting dimensions. Expressions such as po dannym, vyyasnilos', yakoby,

vozmozhno and skazhem tak cannot be assigned stable credibility values without considering their propositional context and communicative setting.

The article contributes a qualitative analytical matrix that differentiates traceable source attribution, apparent verification, reportative distance, tentative inference and dialogic mitigation. Its account of AI-mediated rewriting highlights how apparently stylistic edits may change the scope and strength of a claim. Because the examples are illustrative, these findings remain methodological propositions rather than population-level empirical generalizations. Future studies should test the scheme on transparent, ethically sourced corpora, assess annotation agreement and examine how readers interpret epistemic framing across online genres.

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