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Authoritative and epistemic stance in the construction of conspiracy theories: A case study

Marquage épistémique et construction de l'autorité dans les discours de théories du complot : étude de cas

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Authoritative and epistemic stance in the construction of conspiracy theories: A case study

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Introduction

1. Analytical framework and method
 - 1.1. Stance and epistemic modality
 - 1.2. Corpus analysis method
 - 1.2.1. Corpus identification
 - 1.2.2. Corpus selection
 - 1.2.3. Main themes
 - 1.2.4. Method and procedures
 2. General results
 3. Plausibility hedges: A cautious stance?
 - 3.1. Voicing a plausible dissenting viewpoint
 - 3.2. Downplaying the elite's discourses
 - 3.3. Exposing the elite's manipulation of events
 4. Certainty boosters
 - 4.1. Shutting down opposing views
 - 4.2. The indisputable and consensual truth
 - 4.3. The contradictory alternative
 5. Strengthening authority through authorial involvement
 - 5.1. Booster verbs
 - 5.2. Hedge verbs
- Conclusion
-

Introduction

- 1 Simply defined, conspiracy theories are “the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces” (COMPACT). Moreover, conspiracy theories are counter-discourses which mainly oppose consensual and/or mainstream discourses. Conspiracy theorists strive to reveal the supposedly hidden or manipulated truth. Yet, when a speaker/writer (from now on, locutor)

says that they reveal such a truth, it is not at all sufficient for the theory to gain credit and spread. To be successful, the locutor has to secure the interlocutor's adhesion to the theory. In order to do so, the locutor must solve two problems: first, the version in which they believe has to be perceived as plausible by the interlocutor, which is how I conceptualize legitimacy, and second, the locutor must have, or gain, credit in order to appear credible, which is how I conceptualize authority. In other words, one strategy is to minimize objection and maximize reception, which can be successful when the degree of reliability of the conspiracy theory in question is secured. In addition, not only is the truth-value of a propositional content the object of the theory, but so is the persona of the locutor, who appears as a whistleblower.

- 2 These two aspects are somewhat subsumed under what Douglas Biber and Ken Hyland, among others, call "stance" and "stance-taking", for "stance" is a more general, semantic category that includes epistemic marking. Though the two terms are mostly used in sociolinguistics, stance is a useful notion in linguistic analysis for the study of the use of epistemic markers in discourse as it essentially refers to how the locutor positions themselves with regard to discourse objects and propositional contents, that is, viewpoints, as well as to their interlocutors' reactions and expectations. In simple terms, I conceptualize stance as a process by which the locutor positions themselves regarding a private viewpoint in order to be believed and appear as reliable and by which they manage the intersubjective relation with the interlocutor.
- 3 Intuitively, one possibility for the conspiracy theorist to make their theory plausible is to appear assertive and confident regarding the viewpoint they support and present it as factual. In other words, the locutor can warrant that the viewpoint is truthful. However, the interlocutor expects some degree of balance between certainty and likelihood, as being too assertive or too tentative can both be detrimental to the spreading of one's own viewpoints in general (Hyland 1998: 354; Zou and Hyland 2019: 722), and of the conspiracy theory in question in particular. In other words, a degree of balance (or, perhaps, even an explicit distinction) between facts and opinions is expected.

- 4 The aim of this paper is not to study the construction of a particular conspiracy theory through language, but is to study the way an unequivocal conspiracy theorist constructs their legitimacy and authority. More specifically, its aim is to study the marking (or its absence) of epistemic and authoritative stance in conspiracy-theory discourses, using a specific corpus of blog posts by one conspiracy-theory author as a case study, which is part of a broader corpus of vaccine-hesitancy, pseudo-scientific and conspiracy-theory discourses, and should be viewed as a preliminary work on conspiracy-theory discourses in general. I decided to focus on authoritative and epistemic stance, because those two notions are concerned with the notions of “truth” and “reality” regarding the extra-linguistic world, whose interpretation is also a key feature of conspiracy theories.
- 5 In sum, I am interested in finding the function(s) performed by the marking of authoritative and epistemic stance, that is, the role they play in constructing one’s legitimacy and authority. I start by presenting the analytical framework I follow in this study, before presenting the analysis corpus. Then, I present the general quantitative results. In three longer sections, I offer detailed contextual analyses of plausibility hedges, certainty boosters and explicit authorial presence in discourse. More precisely, I examine how both plausibility hedges and certainty boosters allow the author to present his theories as plausible, probable, or even factual, and project an image of authority and credibility, that is, of a reliable source of knowledge.

1. Analytical framework and method

1.1. Stance and epistemic modality

- 6 *Stance* is a broad term, which is defined by Biber as follows:

In addition to communicating propositional content, speakers and writers commonly express personal feelings, attitudes, value

judgments, or assessments; that is, they express a “stance”. (Biber *et al.* 1999: 966)

7 At first glance, *stance* appears to be yet another term for (linguistic) modality. However, I prefer the term *stance* for it is, by definition, concerned with interaction and the way the locutor manages their audiences, while modality is mainly concerned with “the status of the proposition” (Palmer 2001: 1) and the locutor’s “attitude” towards the propositional content.

8 In this paper, I follow Hyland’s stance framework (Hyland 2005), which can be summarized as follows:

Stance [...] is an attitudinal dimension of interaction and concerns how [writers] stamp their personal authority or perspectives on their arguments. (Hyland and Zou 2021: 3)

9 As is becoming clear from the definitions, *stance* refers to the way(s) a locutor legitimizes their discourses and constructs their authority. In other words, *stance* is concerned with the status of the propositional content, the locutor’s persona and the audience’s reaction(s). Typically, a locutor assesses the likelihood of a viewpoint, presents themselves as a reliable author and tries to secure the audience’s agreement that their viewpoint is believable. Therefore, *stance* is the position entertained by the locutor regarding both his viewpoints and his interlocutors, making it an intersubjective tool used to manage both the construction and the reception of a given viewpoint.

10 There are many devices that can express *stance*, ranging from paralinguistic and non-linguistic devices, such as gestures or pitch (Biber *et al.* 1999: 967), to linguistic devices, including lexical items, such as adjectives (“good”, “happy”, “difficult”, “important”), nouns or verbs (“love”, “need”, “want”), and grammatical markers, like *stance* adverbials (“unfortunately”, “kind of”), *stance* complement clause (“I hope/believe/think that...”, “the fact that...”), modals and semi-modals, etc. (Biber *et al.* 1999: 968–969). According to Biber *et al.* (1999: 972), there are three major semantic categories conveyed by *stance* markers: epistemic, attitudinal, and style of speaking. In particular, epistemic *stance* refers to the marking of the locutor’s

degree of knowledge (i.e. certainty, doubt, hedging) or the “marking of the source or perspective of knowledge” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 973).

- 11 Contrary to Biber, Hyland’s stance framework does not make semantic distinctions. Rather, it draws four distinctions based on devices: “hedges”, “boosters”, “attitude markers” and “self-mention” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 3). Though the last two subcategories are self-explanatory, the first two need further explanation. They are defined by Hyland as follows:

Hedges and boosters are communicative strategies for increasing or reducing the force of statements [...], conveying both epistemic and affective meanings. That is, they not only carry the writer’s degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition, but also an attitude to the audience. (Hyland 1998: 350)

- 12 Though the two frameworks are not exactly the same, they share similarities, especially regarding the expression of “epistemic stance”. More specifically, a limited view is adopted here, following the merging of the two frameworks. Thus, epistemic stance can be marked by hedges and boosters (in Hyland’s framework), which correspond, respectively, to doubt/likelihood and certainty/actuality in Biber’s framework, though hedges and boosters do not only express certainty or doubt. More precisely, boosters, in Hyland’s framework, whether they are verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs or other grammatical structures, have an intensifying function, which should be understood in a non-technical way, which will be the case throughout this paper. On the other hand, the main function of hedges is to weaken the locutor’s claim, so that they appear less assertive and more cautious. In order to illustrate how hedges and boosters¹ work, I will use extracts taken from the analysis corpus.

(1) Interestingly, as depicted in the table below, the total decrease in deaths by other causes **almost** exactly equals the increase in deaths by COVID-19. This suggests, according to Briand, that the COVID-19 death toll is misleading. Briand believes that deaths due to heart diseases, respiratory diseases, influenza and pneumonia may instead be [may have been] recategorized as being due to COVID-19. (johns-hopkins-study-explodes-covid-death-hoax²)

- 13 In this extract, the adverb “almost” can be described as a downtoner, which is a category of items mainly comprising adverbs and which “are used to mitigate the intensity of a statement” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 6). In so doing, the author avoids making a categorical assertion on the number of deaths by Covid-19.

(2) A study undertaken in 1979 at the University of California, Los Angeles, under the sponsorship of the Food and Drug Administration, and which has been confirmed by other studies, indicates that in the U. S. A. **approximately** 1,000 infants die annually as a direct result of DPT vaccinations, and these are classified as SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) deaths. These represent **about** 10 to 15% of the total number of SIDS deaths occurring annually in the U.S.A. (between 8,000 and 10,000 depending on which statistics are used). (how-many-of-these-vaccine-facts-do-you-know)

- 14 Here, both the adverb “approximately” and the preposition “about” are rounders, as they are “associated with lack of precision and indicate an (often numerical) approximation” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 6). his “lac of precision” should not be understood as uncertainty or doubt. Rather, the author seeks to signal that numerical precision is not what matters. Hyland and Zou (2021: 6) also suggest to regard rounders as “adding an element of informality to proceedings and reducing any possible negative effects of seeming hyper-precise”.

(3) Well, uh, we’ve said that 36, 000 people die from the flu every year in the US. But actually, it’s **probably** closer to 20. Who knows? (corona-if-they-lied-then-why-wouldnt-they-lie-now)

- 15 In this extract, the adverb “probably” is a plausibility hedge, as it is “used to signal that a claim is based on plausible assumptions rather than evidence” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 6).

- 16 Boosters can also be divided into sub-categories:

(4) These days, in 2016, things are different: meaning the authorities do better PR and propaganda. Although the **extremely** lax regulations may still be in force, the assurances of safety are broadcast more convincingly. And that’s what matters. It’s all good. Take your shot. Love your vaccine. (behind-the-massive-vaccine-scandal-in-china)

- 17 Here, the adverb “extremely” is an intensity booster, whose function is to “amplify the emotive strength of a statement” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 7) “by raising the volume rather than expressing an attitude” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8). In so doing, the author does not directly express his certainty regarding the viewpoint in question, but he does so indirectly through intensification, which tends to indicate that what he claims is relevant and valid.

(5) Dr Peter Fletcher, who was Chief Scientific Officer at the Department of Health, said if it is proven that the jab causes autism, ‘the refusal by governments to evaluate the risks properly will make this one of **the greatest** scandals in medical history’. (boom-another-vaccine-whistleblower-steps-out-of-the-shadows)

- 18 In this extract, it would be tempting to regard the superlative “the greatest” as an intensity booster amplifying the degree expressed by the adjective “good”. Yet, it is best described as an extremity booster in so far as it “emphasise[s] the upper edge of a continuum” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8). Intensification is also at play here, as extremity boosters “help remove any doubts about statements” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8) by “emphasis[ing] the significance, uniqueness or originality of [the] arguments without the need for elaboration” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8).

(6) Many persons and organizations within the medical system contribute to the annual death totals of patients, and media silence and public ignorance are **certainly** major factors, but the FDA is the assigned gatekeeper, when it comes to the safety of medical drugs. (225000-us-patients-die-in-doctors-hands-silence-of-the-lambs)

- 19 Finally, here, the adverb “certainly” is a certainty booster, as it serves to “indicate the writer or speaker’s epistemic conviction” regarding the truth-value of the propositional content (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8).
- 20 In this paper, I first and foremost focus on epistemic stance markers, that is, on plausibility hedges, which are “used to signal that a claim is based on plausible assumptions rather than evidence” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 6), and certainty boosters, which “indicate the writer or speaker’s epistemic conviction” (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8), because

both directly express the locutor's degree of confidence regarding the truth-value of their viewpoints and anticipate the interlocutor's reaction to the viewpoints.

- 21 Another aspect of stance markers is that they can be divided according to the "source" of the stance, as they can express an explicit, implicit or ambiguous "attribution of stance to the speaker or writer" or to "some third person" (Biber *et al.* 1999: 976). More precisely, stance is explicitly attributed to the locutor in cases where first person pronouns or determiners are used: "I think", "I know", "My impression is that", "I am sure", etc. (Biber *et al.* 1999: 976). Implicit attribution refers to the use of impersonal structures (like cleft or extraposed structures), modal verbs or adverbials. Passive structures as well as stance nouns followed by a complement clause or a prepositional phrase, but not determined by a first-person determiner, are considered to be ambiguous in their attribution of stance, as it is not clear "whether they mark the stance of the speaker/writer or that of some third party" (Biber *et al.* 1999: 977).

1.2. Corpus analysis method

1.2.1. Corpus identification

- 22 In order to study the epistemic marking of stance, I built an analysis corpus, which is part of a broader corpus used in the PhD thesis I am currently working on and which is concerned with anti-vaccine, pseudo-scientific and conspiracy-theory discourses. The corpus consists of articles written by Jon Rappoport on his personal blog (<https://blog.nomorefakenews.com>). Rappoport introduces himself as an investigative journalist and a writer who used to work for American newspapers and magazines, such as the *LA Weekly*, *Spin Magazine* (a magazine about music whose paper version was discontinued in 2012) or *CBS Healthwatch*. He is also the head of his own publishing house called *The Truth Seeker Company*.
- 23 Generally speaking, Rappoport firmly believes that the global elite³ (mainly American) has secret plans to rule the world and the peoples. He also staunchly opposes (mandatory) vaccination and, contrary to what the title of his website suggests, does not hesitate to spread false and misleading information about vaccination and Covid-19.

More precisely, Rappoport denies the existence of the SARS-CoV-2, the virus responsible for the Covid-19 disease, as well as the ensuing pandemic as suggested by the beginning of one of his articles published on May 20, 2022, and entitled “Stop Arguing About the Existence of the Virus”: “As my readers know, I’ve devoted considerable space, over the past two years, to presenting evidence that SARS-CoV-2 is a scientific fairy tale, a con, and the virus doesn’t exist.” (last access on 11 August 2023)

- 24 All of those characteristics tend to show that Rappoport is an unequivocal conspiracy theorist, as are his articles in so far as they spread conspiracy theories. In my PhD thesis, I start with such unequivocal conspiracy-theory discourses in order to characterize anti-vaccine, pseudo-scientific and conspiracy-theory discourses in the USA that are more equivocal and less easy to define, especially when the author is not as committed as Jon Rappoport is. The aim of this paper is not to determine what makes a conspiracy-theory discourse, in terms of discourse genre, nor does it aim to discuss whether such a genre actually exists. But, what is certain is that one can identify a conspiracy-theory discourse by studying its contents. Indeed, conspiracy theories can be defined as follows:

[conspiracy theories are] the belief that events are secretly manipulated behind the scenes by powerful forces (COMPACT)

“Conspiracy theories” are attempts to explain the ultimate causes of significant social and political events and circumstances with claims of secret plots by two or more powerful actors. [...] While often thought of as addressing governments, conspiracy theories could accuse any group perceived as powerful and malevolent (Douglas et al. 2019: 4)

- 25 Those definitions will serve as the basis for the selection of the analysis corpus, which I shall now explain.

1.2.2. Corpus selection

- 26 The corpus was compiled using a method called web-scraping, which consists in downloading and parsing web pages. An algorithm written in *Python* was developed specifically for this corpus. All of the

articles belonging to the following categories of the website were first selected: “covid; vaccine-fraud; vaccinagate; covid-revisited; medical-fraud; science-fraud; government-fraud; censorship; corporate-fraud; autism; press-fraud”⁴. I chose those categories because they were likely to be in accordance with the two definitions of conspiracy theories retained for the present issue. Indeed, behind the term “fraud” lies the notion of deception; when combined with “medical”, “science”, “government” or “corporate-fraud”, it is very likely that the articles in those categories deal with the intentional deception of the people by scientists, the press, the government or pharmaceutical companies. The “covid” category was also selected in order to include articles written during the pandemic, some of which conveying conspiracy theories regarding the intentional creation of the Sars-Cov-2 virus or of the pandemic in order to control the world population.

- 27 Once all of the articles were downloaded and parsed (that is, when only the metadata and the body of the article had been extracted), a list of keywords was drawn, using the above definitions as a base (see Appendix A). Such keywords include “control; power; cover; psy-op; story; government; fake; proof; scam; fraud; truth”. Eventually, only the articles which contained at least five of those keywords were retained. It is not uncommon for Jon Rappoport to copy and paste his own content from one article to the other. In order to remove duplicate articles, I coded a *Python* script that compares the title of the articles as well as their contents, in both cases using the Levenshtein distance. When two articles were very similar, I only kept the longest, in order to have extra contents. Besides, Jon Rappoport amends his own articles (for the sake of clarity, to correct mistakes, or to rephrase his opinion); so, I only kept the version that presented the most significant changes. When in doubt, I used an online tool (*DiffChecker*) to visually highlight the differences between the texts and choose which one to keep.
- 28 Finally, a little cleaning was needed in order to remove URLs, personal data (phone numbers, addresses, etc.; this process was necessary to comply with the European GDPR), “references/sources/bibliography” sections, autobiographical sections, etc.

29 In total, there are 831 articles⁵ written between 2009⁶ and 2023 (the collect of the data ended on February 2nd, 2023), with great discrepancies between the years (with 2020 and 2021 being the most “productive” years, very likely due to the Covid-19 pandemic), as can be shown in the following table:

Table 1: Number of articles per year in the analysis corpus since 2009.

Year	Nb of articles	Year	Nb of articles	Year	Nb of articles
2009	3	2014	63	2019	18
2010	3	2015	61	2020	143
2011	6	2016	76	2021	108
2012	54	2017	104	2022	49
2013	88	2018	49	2023	3

30 Below is a summary of the size and composition of the analysis corpus.

Table 2: Corpus size and composition.

Corpus	Number of files	Tokens	Types	Lemmas
Analysis corpus (JR)	831	1,113,351	35,756	32,906

31 As stated before, the aim of this paper is not to study the construction of a particular conspiracy theory; that is why the analysis corpus comprises articles dealing with various conspiracy theories in which Jon Rappoport believes. Nonetheless, there are similarities and unifying themes from one theory to the other.

1.2.3. Main themes

32 In order to find out the main themes developed by Jon Rappoport in his articles, a keyword list was drawn from the titles and the contents of the articles. Collocations and collocation networks of those keywords were then identified (using #LancsBox and its GraphColl tool⁷) and analyzed in context (i.e. by analyzing concordance lines).

- 33 The analysis of Jon Rappoport's articles reveals that, even though some themes are specific to one given conspiracy theory, there are, in fact, unifying themes which help Rappoport develop a consistent view of the world.
- 34 Generally speaking, he opposes groups, people, or powerful organizations and institutions, which I will call "the elite" from now on. According to him, the elite is not trustworthy and has malevolent and secret plans, which makes him an unequivocal conspiracy theorist. The media, and especially the news media and social media, are accused of playing into the hands of the (American) government or companies, in particular pharmaceutical companies, by spreading their ideology and shutting down dissident voices by means of censorship (for instance, Jon Rappoport accuses them of violating people's fundamental right to free speech under the pretext of preventing the propagation of online misinformation), or even by spreading falsehoods. As for the American government, the federal agencies (among which are the CDC, the FDA, the FBI and the CIA), and the pharmaceutical or technological companies (often referred to as "Big Pharma" and "Big Tech" respectively), they are accused of lying to the people, manipulating them or taking action against them (it is not uncommon to find words relating to war, confrontation or death). In addition, pharmaceutical companies are accused of influencing the government as well as the writing, the vote or the rejection of laws.
- 35 The overarching idea in which Rappoport believes is that the elite has mainly one goal: to control the people (not just the American people, but the world population). Such control takes on a variety of forms: intellectual indoctrination in school curricula and in the media, restriction of civil liberties, tracing, censorship, or even depopulation. This can be achieved through various means, with public lies and medical treatments and drugs being the preferred means. For example, according to Jon Rappoport, almost all of the aspects of the Covid-19 pandemic serve the elite's interests. Thus, he explains that the pandemic and the SARS-CoV-2 virus (as well as the Ebola / Zika / HIV / flu viruses and any pandemic) do not exist or have been invented in order for the elite to reach their goals; that vaccines are dangerous (especially for children) and ineffective, can cause autism or alter human DNA; that 5G aims to control and trace the population, while being a health hazard whose symptoms are

attributed to the Covid-19 disease (e.g. he believes that the Chinese government invented the Covid-19 disease in order to hide the health problems posed by 5G). For Jon Rappoport, science and scientific data are manipulated and tampered with in order to conceal the elite's schemes and allow them to spread their ideology through propaganda.

- 36 In writing his articles, Jon Rappoport poses himself as an investigative journalist whose aim is to reveal the elite's secret schemes or offering "alternative facts", as suggested by many of his article titles which include the following terms: "fake; real; truth; expose; lie; story; hidden; secret; fraud; stage; say; tell; prove; know; speak; hide". In addition, the adverbs "how" and "why" are two of the most used adverbs in titles, which is not surprising as they help Rappoport put forward a dissident viewpoint, that is, a counter-discourse.
- 37 The analyses of the main themes pervading Jon Rappoport's articles chosen by the selection algorithm I coded support the claim that the author is an unequivocal conspiracy theorist. Still, the analysis of the contents of those discourses is necessary to identify them as conspiracy theories.

1.2.4. Method and procedures

- 38 Using Biber (2004), Biber *et al.* (1999) and Hyland (1998), a list of stance markers and structures was devised before being searched for in the corpus (see Appendix B). The markers were classified as expressing either "certainty/actuality" or "doubt/likelihood". Evidential devices marking the source of knowledge (like the verbs "to infer; to guess; to conclude; to demonstrate" or the adverbs "apparently; evidently; obviously") were also included since a locutor can be more or less certain of what they say depending on the source of their knowledge. In total, 210 markers (79 markers of likelihood/doubt; 131 markers of certainty/actuality; modal auxiliaries excluded) were identified. An inter-rater agreement test was also conducted to ensure that the categorizing was relevant. In total, four independent annotators took part in the test: the author of the present article as well as three other linguist colleagues. They were tasked with classifying each marker into three categories: "certainty/actuality", "doubt/likelihood" and "don't know". Fleiss's

kappa formula was used and showed substantial agreement between raters ($\kappa = 0,69$).

- 39 TXM⁸ was used to search for the devices identified as marking epistemic and authoritative stance. A list of all the queries used is available in Appendix C.

2. General results

- 40 Table 3 summarizes the absolute and relative frequencies of plausibility hedges and certainty boosters in the analysis corpus.

Table 3: General results of the use of plausibility hedges and certainty boosters in the analysis corpus.

Semantic category	Absolute frequency	Relative frequency (per 100,000 words)
Plausibility hedges	1,566	140.65 ^a
Certainty boosters	3,231	290.20
a. Relative frequency results are truncated to two digits right of the decimal point.		

- 41 Overall, I found 1,566 occurrences of hedges and 3,231 occurrences of boosters in the analysis corpus¹⁰. Even if the list of boosters in Appendix A shows almost twice as many boosters as hedges, there still is a clear overuse of certainty boosters by Jon Rappoport, which suggests that he favours an authoritative and assertive style in his articles and chooses to present his viewpoint as certain, that is, as “the truth”, or, at least, as the most probable description of reality. On the other hand, he does use hedges, which seems to contradict the previous claim. Therefore, a contextual analysis of the occurrences is absolutely necessary to account for his uses of hedges and boosters.

- 42 Note that the results do not include modals. If included, the results are quite different: I counted 12,294 hedges and 8,558 boosters. This is mainly due to an overuse of two modals, “can” and “would”, which are usually categorized as hedges. However, I disagree, to some extent, with this view. There are many cases where those modals can, in fact, be categorized as boosters as they enable the locutor to express a dissenting and/or a self-evident viewpoint, while heavily relying on the interpersonal nature of those modals. To learn more,

see Douay (2003) and Douay and Roulland (2023). I also develop this analysis in my upcoming PhD thesis (2024).

43 Still, the overall results hide great discrepancies in the use of the devices that mark epistemic stance, as suggested by the detailed results in Appendix D. For example, Jon Rappoport favours adverbials and verbs with first person pronouns as their subjects and complemented by a THAT- or ZERO-clause over adjectives followed by a complement clause. As far as nouns followed by a complement clause are concerned, he tends to use the pattern “DET + N + CC” more than any other pattern. This is not really surprising as those stance markers are relatively common in both oral and written registers, according to Biber *et al.* (1999: 979). Yet, “Overall, adverbial stance markers are considerably less frequent than the other grammatical categories” (1999: 979), even though “Single adverbs are the most common category of stance adverbial in all registers.” (1999: 981) The authors also find that “Stance adverbials are most plentiful in conversation, especially single adverbs [...]. The large majority of single adverbs are epistemic, with the forms *actually*, *really*, and *probably* being particularly frequent” (1999: 982). Therefore, the overuse of adverbials by Jon Rappoport can be explained by at least three reasons: first, there is a diachronic evolution in favour of adverbials in registers other than conversation (but a diachronic analysis would be needed to confirm this hypothesis); second, he tries to adopt a conversational style in his written texts; third, specific stance adverbs and/or adverbials and their scopes are responsible for this overuse. Because it is not the aim of this paper, separate research is needed to account for adverbials as the most frequent stance markers in the corpus. Table 4 presents the 20 most frequent hedges and boosters used by Jon Rappoport:

Table 4: The 20 most frequent hedges and boosters in the analysis corpus.

Hedges	Boosters
--------	----------

Device	Abso- lute frequency	Relative frequency (per 100,000 words) ^a	Device	Abso- lute frequency	Relative frequency (per 100,000 words)
perhaps maybe idea that idea of appear to apparently possibly seem to notion that supposedly tend to probably I think notion of I hope possibility of impres- sion of impression that I thought theory of	127 111 98 88 86 80 79 77 68 50 43 40 40 39 37 30 26 24 22 19	11,41 9,97 8,8 7,9 7,72 7,19 7,1 6,92 6,11 4,49 3,86 3,59 3,59 3,5 3,32 2,69 2,34 2,16 1,98 1,71	of course actually in fact really fact that we know obviously certainly evidence that sign of clearly I know evid- ence of indeed claim that proof that surely evidence for claim of truth about	608 481 255 244 235 149 142 131 92 84 80 73 69 62 57 50 41 37 34 34	54,61 43,2 22,9 21,92 21,11 13,38 12,75 11,77 8,26 7,54 7,19 6,56 6,2 5,57 5,12 4,49 3,68 3,32 3,05 3,05

a. Results are rounded to two digits right of the decimal point.

44 As implicit attribution of stance is the most common according to Biber et al. (1999: 977), it is not surprising to find that the most used devices in the corpus mark implicit stance. Though some articles have marks of orality, the texts remain articles to be published on a personal blog; so, finding explicit attribution is not really surprising either. Moreover, even if implicit and ambiguous attributions of stance are common, this does not mean that Jon Rappoport is objective. It simply means that he minimizes his overt presence in his articles, though only from time to time in so far as some devices marking explicit attribution of stance are not uncommon. These characteristics are dealt with in the next sections.

45 As “Hedges and boosters are interpersonal aspects of language use, complex textual signals by which writers personally intervene into their discourse to evaluate material and engage with readers” (Hyland 1998: 358), and because the stance they express can be explicit, implicit or ambiguous, meaning that the locutor can adopt “a clear authorial presence or linguistically [suppress their] identity” (Hyland 1998: 358), their presence or absence in discourse can be viewed as a personal and discorsal choice “influenced by individual personality factors” (Hyland 1998: 358) as well as by the locutor’s endeavour to

legitimize and authorize their viewpoints so as to secure the interlocutor's agreement.

- 46 In order to analyze how Jon Rappoport's involvement in his discourses at the epistemic level help him construct and secure the legitimacy and authority of his theories, I shall first study his use of plausibility hedges, before turning to his use of certainty boosters and his explicit authorial presence.

3. Plausibility hedges: A cautious stance?

- 47 Hyland (1998) and Biber *et al.* (1999) agree on the definition of hedges as tools that weaken the locutor's claim. Thus, hedges can be used "to show doubt and indicate that information is presented as opinion rather than accredited fact" (Hyland 1998: 351). So, one of the functions of hedges seems to allow the locutor to state uncertain claims with caution or to indicate that the viewpoint in question is the result of the locutor's plausible or inferential reasoning rather than a reasoning based on (available) facts, as exemplified in the following extracts:

(7) But there was one major issue. **Apparently**, once again, the all-knowing and all-seeing and all-controlling controllers of the Deep State, who manage society flawlessly, as Hegelians par excellence, had screwed up royally. They hadn't talked with Hillary's doctors. These gods, who can execute the synthesis of opposites on a grand scale, who know the future decades in advance, had failed to notice Hillary was sick. Quite sick. Sick enough so that if she won the election, she might have to hide from the public for the better part of her term, and even that (absurd) tactic might not work. So **perhaps** midway through the 2016 election campaign, the Globalist gods of the Deep State decided to back off and let Trump win. (why-has-the-deep-state-gone-to-war-against-donald-trump)

(8) Again—the 2016 Orlando shooter had extensive contact with the FBI in 2013 and 2014. The FBI investigated him twice and dropped the investigations. The FBI used an informant in a previous Florida case, and that informant had the same last name as the Orlando shooter. **It's quite possible** the previous informant was told to give a false

statement which incriminated a man for terrorist acts. You can say this is a coincidence. **Maybe** it is. But **it seems** more than odd. Are the two Siddiqui men connected? (orlando-shooter-deeper-hidden-ties-to-the-fbi)

- 48 In these extracts, one can argue that Jon Rappoport uses hedges in order to make cautious assumptions and indicate a lesser degree of confidence in his beliefs. In mitigating his claims and limiting self-assurance, Jon Rappoport seems to leave room for debate while anticipating the interlocutor's objections to the actuality of the viewpoint by indicating that his reasoning is speculative.
- 49 Though this function cannot be totally discarded, I would argue that plausibility hedges first and foremost express a possibility among others, the expression of the locutor's uncertainty being a consequence of the expression of possibility. Looking at the list of the most frequent hedges used by Jon Rappoport, one can note that they all express, more or less explicitly, the general notion of possibility. This is particularly clear, of course, of the adverbs "possibly" and "probably" as well as the noun "possibility", but also of the adverbs "perhaps" and "maybe", whose definitions by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) explicitly mention "possibility":

[perhaps, adv.] 1. Expressing a hypothetical, contingent, conjectural, or uncertain possibility: it may be (that); maybe, possibly.

[maybe, adv.] 1.a. Possibly; perhaps.

- 50 In the corpus, I found two major strategies used by Rappoport to legitimize his theories and construct his authority by resorting to plausibility hedges and the notion of possibility: voicing a plausible dissenting viewpoint and downplaying the elite's discourses. I also found another, restricted strategy related to his use of the noun "impression" followed by a complement clause or a prepositional phrase.

3.1. Voicing a plausible dissenting viewpoint

- 51 The fact that plausibility hedges express possibility allows Jon Rappoport to voice a dissenting viewpoint that goes against what the elite consensually admits. Going back to the previous examples of plausibility hedges used by the conspiracy theorist, all of the markers introduce a possibility among others, which aims to give a reasonable explanation of the events referred to. This strategy is also exemplified in the following extract:

(9) “But now people in China are dying at a furious pace, suddenly.” Is this a report or a rumor? If it’s a true report, I suggest starting with the cause as something in the environment—not a virus. An escalation in the already toxic air pollution above Chinese cities. **Possibly**, the effects of deploying 5G technology widely in Wuhan. The intentional deployment of a highly dangerous chemical, whose effects would be far more predictable, in terms of intensity and duration, than a virus. (the-bio-weapon-theory-of-the-china-epidemic)

- 52 Here, the use of the sentence adverb “possibly” at the onset of the sentence is a clear indication that Rappoport’s theory is one more possibility among two others that he puts forward in order to explain the increasing number of deaths in China at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The possibilities he refers to are presented as more valid (or more “probable”) than the one put forward by the elite (that is, viral infections by the SARS-CoV-2), as suggested by the right-co-text as well as the very beginning of the article, which reads “NOTE: IF THE LATEST RUMORS SUPPOSEDLY COMING OUT OF CHINA ABOUT THE FURIOUS PACE OF ESCALATING DEATHS ARE TRUE...IF THEY ARE...AND THAT’S A VERY BIG IF...THEN LOOK TO SOMETHING OTHER THAN A VIRUS AS THE CAUSE... I’ll consider these rumors here, in this article, for the sake of covering all possible bases...I must emphasize, again, this is a very big IF...”. In so doing, Jon Rappoport does not express his uncertainty regarding the possibility put forward, nor does he show any kind of caution in his claims; rather, he expresses a possibility that contradicts the elite and refutes the existence of the virus.

- 53 This is particularly the case with all of the seven occurrences of “possibly” as a sentence adverb and of the 16 occurrences preceded by the modal “could”, which also expresses possibility. In addition, there are 7 occurrences of “quite possibly” and 24 of “couldn’t possibly”, which expresses impossibility. These are used to strengthen the plausibility of the dissenting view put forward by Jon Rappoport or to completely rule out the elite’s theories, thus reinforcing Rappoport’s in return.
- 54 Analyzing plausibility hedges as tools that explicitly mark that a given viewpoint is a possibility, and not, in the first place, the expression of the locutor’s uncertainty or a lesser degree of confidence in what they say, can also explain why there are occurrences where those hedges are modified by other lexical tools, such as adverbs, so that the degree of plausibility is increased. One could still argue that this is to strengthen the locutor’s certainty while still indicating that the viewpoint is not completely factual. Instead, I would argue that this is to give credit and legitimacy to the viewpoint, as exemplified in the following extracts:

(10) Scenario two: Let’s be generous and **assume** the researchers did bother to look at electron microscope photos, derived from only a few patients, not hundreds of patients, as they should have. What did they actually see in the photos? **Maybe** they saw a few particles that looked similar to each other, BUT quite possibly these virus-like particles were just passengers that ordinarily live in the body and cause no harm. However, the researchers jump up and down and say, THIS IS IT. THIS IS THE NEW KILLING VIRUS. AND WE WILL NOW ASSEMBLE ITS GENETIC SEQUENCE. (how-to-stage-a-fake-epidemic-and-brainwash-billions-of-people)

(11) In my article, “Vaccine damage, hidden truth: not on the evening news,” I examine the **probable** numbers of significant adverse reactions to vaccines in the US. There are no official figures. Barbara Loe Fisher, head of the National Vaccine Information Center, a private group, makes a strong case for at least 120,000 a year, with **the distinct possibility** of as many as 1.2 million. (the-vaccine-mafia-and-its-jury-of-thugs-your-rulers)

- 55 In the first extract, the noun phrase “Scenario two” unambiguously indicates that the author’s theory is a possibility among others. More precisely, in his article, Jon Rappoport tries to answer this question: “If a group wants to stage a fake and frightening epidemic, how would they do it?” For an epidemic to occur and spread, he imagines the emergence of a virus, which would then be discovered and characterized by scientists. The second scenario in question deals with the latter process. The use of the adverb “maybe” marks the viewpoint as a possibility, and can be paraphrased as follows: “there is a possibility / it is possible that they saw a few particles that looked similar to each other”. It does not express the author uncertainty (rather, it would be that of the scientists) and it even has, to some extent, a concessive meaning, as it acknowledges the existence of another possibility. However, this possibility is immediately challenged, first by the coordinating conjunction “but” (in capital letters), which marks contrast, and second, by the adverb “quite” that modifies the adverb “possibly” and which allows the author to offer a more valid or plausible possibility, thus rejecting the other ones.
- 56 In the second extract, Jon Rappoport indirectly states that the “numbers of significant adverse reactions to vaccines in the US” he is about to give are the most accurate ones but were intentionally concealed by the elite (“probable”, “hidden truth”). In addition, he quotes Barbara Loe Fisher, head of the *National Vaccine Information Center* (NVIC), a non-profit organization that is, contrary to what its name suggests, vaccine-hesitant¹². He qualifies her claims as “a strong case”, which suggest that he believes the figures she gives are accurate. Finally, the use of the noun phrase “the distinct possibility”, complemented by a preposition phrase introduced by “of”, seems to indicate that he does not exclude the possibility that as many as 1.2 million Americans suffer from significant adverse reactions to vaccines. Because this possibility cannot be ruled out and because the co-text indicates that the figures are reliable, Jon Rappoport’s theory gains credit and legitimacy.
- 57 In sum, instead of marking doubt, uncertainty or caution, Rappoport uses plausibility hedges to give reasonable explanations of what happens in the extra-linguistic world. In addition, by expressing contrast and opening up debate about possibilities that cannot be ruled out, hedges present the issues at stake as debatable

controversies, thus rejecting consensus and implying that the viewpoints of the elite are also possibilities among others, not necessarily truer than those of Rappoport. This pertains to what I refer to as “relativization of truth”, meaning that truth is dependent on the locutor’s beliefs¹³. As only the contents of the beliefs can be described as true or false, in very much the same way as a theory or a claim can be deemed true or false, it is impossible to negate that someone believes what they believe. Therefore, Jon Rappoport, and perhaps conspiracy theories in general, relies on the fact that as long as a possibility is believed by someone, whether it is himself or someone else, this possibility cannot be ruled out, which is the basis for legitimizing his viewpoints. More precisely, I would suggest that such a strategy pertains to what I refer to as “necessary possibility”¹⁴. I conceptualize this notion as the strategy by which a locutor presents their viewpoints as possibilities that are necessarily true. In other words, the locutor expresses that something is possible, which entails that it is necessarily possible. I develop this notion in my upcoming PhD thesis.

3.2. Downplaying the elite’s discourses

- 58 Among the most used hedges by Jon Rappoport, some are used to downplay the elite’s discourses and legitimize his own theories. This is the case of the adverbs “supposedly” and “apparently”, as well as stance nouns complemented by a complement clause or a prepositional phrase.
- 59 A contextual analysis reveals that the author does not always use “supposedly”¹⁵ to hedge his own statements, but attributes the source of the claim to the elite in order to assert that the elite’s theories or the scientific consensus, are, contrary to what they claim, uncertain or precarious and dubious:

(12) These researchers create a soup in a dish in a lab. They put toxic chemicals and drugs in the soup. They put monkey and / or human cells in the soup. There is much other genetic material in the brew—including, **supposedly**, the virus. (meet-the-medical-cia)

(13) If the experts are going to claim a particular virus causes a particular disease—how do they know that virus exists in the first

place? For example, the **supposedly** new coronavirus in China. For example, Ebola. For example, HIV. For example, the coronavirus **supposedly** causing SARS (2003). How do researchers know these viruses exist? (how-are-viruses-discovered-and-identified-in-the-first-place)

- 60 In those two extracts, the author uses “supposedly” to reject the claims that the viruses referred to actually exist or cause certain diseases, casting doubt on the actuality of the elite’s theories. In so doing, he voices a dissenting view, which contradicts consensual theories, and reinforces his persona as a free thinker and a whistleblower. In addition, the claims of the elite are downplayed as opinions (or, as “propaganda”) rather than facts supported by evidence or probabilities.
- 61 This downplaying of the elite’s viewpoint is a reinterpretation by Jon Rappoport of the truth-value and validity of the elite’s discourses. In the corpus, such a process is one of the main reasons why the author uses stance nouns with a complement clause or a prepositional phrase.
- 62 As highlighted earlier, the most used hedge nouns are “idea”, “notion” and “possibility”. They are found in two types of structures that serve the same purpose: the two structures comprise a head noun that either controls a subordinate complement clause or is complemented by a prepositional phrase which both specify what the noun refers to. As explained by Issa Kanté (2010: 125) (though he only deals with stance nouns that control a subordinate clause), “The semantic function of this construction is to express the speaker’s stance towards a proposition, an event, or a state which has already been expressed mentally or verbally”. In other words, “the *that*-clause reports a proposition, while the head noun reports the author’s stance towards that proposition” (Biber *et al.* 1999: 648). Some of these nouns can be described as “metadiscursive nouns”, as they are used by the locutor to comment reflexively on their, or someone else’s, viewpoints (Jiang and Hyland 2017). The rhetorical force of this structure partly lies in the fact that the reference of the noun is presupposed, hence the numerous occurrences of the structure with the definite article “the”.

- 63 Even though they are used by Rappoport, it is not uncommon for hedge nouns to actually refer to the elite's viewpoint which the author designates as "assumption", "hypothesis", "idea", etc. For example, all of the 13 occurrences of "assumption that + CC" designate the elite's assumptions with which the author disagrees, as indicated by the adjectives "false; naked; unfounded; unwarranted" that modify the noun "assumption" in a little bit more than 50% of the occurrences (7/13 occurrences):

(14) AND both tests rely on **the unwarranted assumption that** a virus actually causing illness—VX-20—was truly discovered in the first place. (how-to-stage-a-fake-epidemic-and-brainwash-billions-of-people)

(15) And furthermore, don't make **the false assumption that** all these reported coronavirus cases are the result of NEW disease or never-before-seen disease. Where people are genuinely ill, many or most of them have the same health conditions that have been affecting humans for a long, long time—now recycled and re-labeled CORONAVIRUS. (how-many-people-have-coronavirus)

- 64 Other examples of stance nouns modified by an adjective and implying that the author disagrees with the elite include: "misapplied scientific / fatuous / crazy / illogical notion" (1 occurrence each) or "mindless / foolish / phoney idea" (1 occurrence each).

- 65 The noun "notion" is mainly used to characterize the elite's viewpoints and question them: out of the 64 occurrences of "notion that" used by Rappoport, 55 refer to the elite's viewpoints, including 27 occurrences relating to conspiracy theories. Characterizing the elite's discourses as "notions" is a way of indirectly legitimizing the author's own viewpoint:

(16) Finally, in the summer of 1987, I found several researchers who were rejecting **the notion that** HIV caused AIDS. Their reports were persuasive. (does-hiv-exist-explosive-interview)

(17) First of all, **the whole notion that** COVID-19 is one health condition is a lie. COVID IS NOT ONE THING. This is both the hardest and simplest point to accept and understand. Don't reject

the existence of the virus and then say, “So what is THE cause of people dying?” There is no ONE CAUSE. There is no one illness. There is no “it.” (covid-if-there-is-no-virus-why-are-people-dying-why)

- 66 In the two extracts, the noun “notion” is complemented by a subordinate THAT-clause which specifies a viewpoint (that “HIV causes AIDS” and that “Covid-19 is one health condition”). The choice of the noun “notion” is deliberately made by Jon Rappoport (hence my argument that this is an act of reinterpretation) in order to weaken the elite’s viewpoint and cast doubt on the solidity of the consensus regarding the two viruses and the conditions referred to. More precisely, by using “notion” to designate the elite’s viewpoints, Jon Rappoport implies that the elite’s interpretation of the extra-linguistic world is but a paradigm¹⁶, which, in turn, implies that other paradigms exist and are also valid representations of the world. In the two extracts above, Rappoport offers an alternative view of the world, supported by other “researchers” in the first extract.
- 67 The same reinterpretation process is at work, in the corpus, with several uses of “idea”: out of the 82 occurrences used by the author, 57 refer to the elite’s viewpoints, including 34 clearly referring to conspiracy theories. Those latter uses designate the elite’s viewpoints with which the author disagrees, as exemplified in the extract below, where the scientific consensus regarding the safety and efficacy of vaccines is reinterpreted by the author as “an idea”, rather than a fact, and where “vaccination” as a whole is designated as “a theory”, questioning the solidity of the consensus and the validity of the scientific theory:

(18) I’ve placed these lies in the context of a Q & A: Q: Let’s say I accept **the idea that** vaccines create protection against disease. Vaccines create immunity. What’s the problem? Why should I worry? Why should I go outside the mainstream for information? A: Well, let’s start here. **The theory of** vaccination states that the shots cause a person’s immune system to swing into action against a particular germ that is placed in the vaccine. (enormous-basic-lies-about-vaccination)

- 68 In the following extract, the author takes full advantage of the structure “DET + N + THAT-CC” to legitimize his viewpoint and delegitimize that of the elite:

(19) These are embellishments on the basic story, promoted to hide **the fact that** the cover story is a lie. The aim in 2020 is: get people arguing about the nature and origin and composition of the virus. Why? Because as long as people are arguing about these issues, they are re-enforcing **the idea that** the virus exists and is dangerous. Thus, the basic cover story is strengthened. (covert-op-the-virus-as-cover-story)

- 69 Here, “the fact that” acts to foreground and assert the author’s viewpoint (i.e. there is a cover story and it’s all about lies) while “the idea that” is the author’s interpretation and naming of the elite’s viewpoint (i.e. the virus exists and is dangerous). In this extract, his use of “idea”, instead of a booster noun, discredits the elite’s viewpoint, as it implies that it is based on opinion or imagination rather than on scientific evidence and research, while giving credit to his own theory.
- 70 In addition, when “idea” actually refers to the author’s viewpoint (25 occurrences, that is, less than a third of all the occurrences he directly uses), the structure helps Jon Rappoport to present a dissenting possibility worth investigating, or taking into account:

(20) There are still many people who blithely believe the medical establishment is making great progress in curing the brain damage labeled “autism.” For such people, it’s all about “finding genetic factors” and “chemical imbalances.” They discount entirely **the idea that** vaccine-caused trauma / damage is one major and direct cause, among others. They believe the spoon-fed propaganda they receive on the news. They believe the outraged experts who bray about the “anti-vaccine forces.” What about a vaccine manufacturer who admits his own product has significant dangers? (what-cdc-whistleblower-william-thompson-needs-to-do-now)

- 71 In this extract, one can argue that “the idea that” mitigates the author’s claim that vaccines can cause autism. Still, the co-text (“what about...?”) tends to indicate that “the idea that”, here, serves to introduce a plausible alternative explanation to what causes autism.

- 72 In short, these extracts support the analysis according to which hedge nouns (especially “idea” and “notion”) are used by Rappoport to imply that the elite’s theories are no more valid or relevant than his and his supporters’ theories, which gain credit by downplaying the actuality of the elite’s viewpoints.

3.3. Exposing the elite’s manipulation of events

- 73 Interestingly, all of the 24 occurrences of “impression that” used by Jon Rappoport do not designate his own viewpoints, but are used to characterize the elite’s actions, and, more specifically, those of the media (20 occurrences). Indeed, the most used verbs whose direct objects are the noun phrase “the impression that...” are “impart” (6) and “give” (12), with 2 occurrences of “create” and 1 of “deliver”, while all of the subjects refer to the elite (“Television/It” (5), “the (elite) anchor” (3), “FBI agent” (1), “CIA” (1), “CBS” (1)):

(21) Author Spector points out how researchers can manipulate results to create the impression that cancer treatment is becoming more successful (trump-seeks-to-slash-6-billion-from-govt-medical-research-why-not-more)

(22) In my previous article, I mentioned how, according to the latest WikiLeaks CIA data dump, the CIA can fabricate, yes, fabricate the “fingerprints” of Russian government hackers and create the false impression that Russians hacked the US presidential campaign of 2016. (trust-cia-hackers-who-hack-frances-election-campaign)

- 74 In all of the 24 occurrences of “impression that”, therefore, Rappoport’s aim is not to hedge his own statements or claims, nor to downplay the elite’s viewpoints *per se*, but to express the idea that the elite intentionally manipulates reality or create an “alternative reality”, thus lying and deceiving the people. Those are clear examples of a conspiracy-theory discourse as far as the contents of the discourses are concerned.
- 75 As for “impression of”, none of the 26 occurrences used by Jon Rappoport qualify his viewpoints. Instead, 16 occurrences of the noun “impression” relate to a feeling (the impression a situation or

someone has on a person), so those occurrences are not real hedges. As with “impression that”, the other 10 occurrences refer to the elite’s actions (4) or the media’s (4), while 2 refer to the interpretation of the results of PCR tests.

(23) In my investigations of official science and medicine over the past 35 years, I’ve seen this strategy deployed time and time again: “The science is settled ...” “The evidence is overwhelming ...” “Credible researchers all agree ...” This is how the press creates a fake impression of consensus. News outlets issue identical stories, inventing an echo chamber. Don’t buy in. Crack the illusion. (australia-weather-experts-falsify-climate-change)

- 76 As Jon Rappoport writes, the use of the noun “impression” serves to indicate that the elite intentionally and, perhaps, secretly and malevolently, creates an “illusion” of reality. Therefore, in such cases, the stance noun cannot be described as a hedge. Rather, it is used in assertions to claim that the elite have secret plans and that they lie and manipulate reality and the people. That is why the only adjectives that modify the noun “impression” are “false” (6 occurrences) and “fake” (2 occurrences).
- 77 To summarize the above analyses of the uses of plausibility hedges by the author, it appears that, if some uses can be described as actually hedging the writer’s positions, Jon Rappoport resorts to hedges to legitimize his theories and construct and strengthen his authority as a reliable source of knowledge in, at least, three ways: by voicing a dissenting viewpoint, that is, a possibility that cannot be ruled out; by downplaying the elite’s discourses, that is, presenting their viewpoints as subject to doubt; and, finally, by claiming that the elite, especially the media, manipulate reality.

4. Certainty boosters

- 78 With certainty boosters, Jon Rappoport is able to express his certainty and commitment towards a given viewpoint (Hyland and Zou 2021: 8). In other words, the author relies on certainty boosters to support his argument and theories. In addition, by using certainty boosters, the author indicates explicitly where he stands in relation to the viewpoints and seeks to convince his readers that he and his

beliefs are truthful. In so doing, his theories gain credit and he appears as a reliable source of knowledge. In the corpus, I found three strategies to attain such goals.

4.1. Shutting down opposing views

79 The first strategy the author resorts to consists in expressing his certainty and showing his confidence in his theories, that is, he commits himself to the truth-value of his viewpoints. This is to shut down opposing views, as exemplified in the following extracts:

(24) Kennedy states that President Trump has appointed him to head up a task force investigating vaccine safety. The above quote indicates Kennedy, would, if given the green light, probe much more than the use of mercury in vaccines—his main topic of interest thus far. This would be a very good thing. The CDC is most certainly an edifice of fraud. It has concealed many of its crimes over the years. (robert-f-kennedy-jr-cdc-an-edifice-of-fraud)

(25) Coming up to the present, recent revelations about the Bill Gates-sponsored polio vaccine in India are quite staggering. 47,000 cases of paralysis from the vaccine. They're calling these "non-polio paralysis," but it's clear the vaccine has been doing the damage. Don't worry. Bill is still smiling. (cnn-goes-psychotic-on-bin-laden-vaccines)

(26) Well, you see, it's true that in the US, the federal database contains more than a million reports of injuries from COVID vaccines; and it's true that this number is a gross understatement; but the solution is more vaccinations and more boosters ... (truckers-forever)

80 It would be tempting to claim that certainty boosters are used to avoid developing one's arguments. Though it is not impossible, the extracts above show that the author elaborates on his theories and that, instead, certainty boosters are used as argumentative tools to indicate that the author's viewpoints, arguments or beliefs are right and to commit himself to their truth-value, that is, to comment, in a metadiscursive way, on their validity. In addition, the author also uses other booster items, which I underlined (some of which are analyzed

in the next sections, though they still are certainty boosters) or categorical assertions (as in extract (24) “It has concealed many of its crimes over the years.”) to support his claims and strengthen his commitment to them.

- 81 By using adjectives, adverbs and verbs in this way, the author relies on their implicit marking of stance, which allows him to comment impersonally on the validity of his viewpoints, perhaps in order to imply that his theories are shared by other people, increasing even more their validity.
- 82 Though adverbs are very frequently used by Jon Rappoport, impersonal or passive structures, like the ones in the extracts above, are not (see Appendix D). However, stance nouns, which express an ambiguous attribution of stance when not determined by a possessive determiner, are quite frequent in the corpus. As indicated in Table 4, the most used stance nouns are “fact” (235), “evidence” (198), “sign” (84), “claim” (91), “proof” (50) and “truth” (34). That they are among the most used certainty boosters can be explained by the fact that they are “a powerful persuasive device as the choice of noun foregrounds an author’s assessment of the reliability of what follows and indicates to readers how the material should be understood.” (Jiang and Hyland 2015: 532)
- 83 Interestingly, almost all of the occurrences of “the claim that” (20/23 occurrences) used by Rappoport himself refer to the elite’s theories which the author designates as “claim”, either because they were presented as such by the elite themselves or because this is how the audience may perceive the elite’s discourses. In choosing “claim” to designate the propositional content of the elite, Jon Rappoport paradoxically questions the factual character of their discourses, especially when the noun is modified by adjectives like “false”, “fatuous” or “unproven”:

(27) Throughout this false pandemic, I’ve been listing and explaining the falling dominos: The **false claim** that a virus exists. (the-virus-that-doesnt-exist-lies-and-consequences)

(28) Chinese criminals launching an opioid war against many countries from Wuhan is ANOTHER fact covered up by the **fatuous claim** that a pandemic caused by a virus started in

Wuhan. (wuhan-back-to-the-beginning-where-the-whole-fraud-started-buried-revelations)

- 84 In addition, the use of a noun like “claim” to indirectly report the elite’s viewpoint is a way for the author to strengthen his authority and express, somewhat indirectly, his stance towards this viewpoint (Barton 1993: 751). By choosing “claim”, indeed, the author points the unscientific, subjective and biased arguments of the elite, thus reinforcing his persona as a serious, objective and unbiased journalist. Even though “claim” does not refer to the author’s viewpoint, the way it is used by Jon Rappoport acts to give credit to his theories.
- 85 On the other hand, the other frequent stance nouns are often more used to designate the author’s own viewpoints: 32/42 occurrences of “evidence that”¹⁷, 11/35 occurrences of “evidence of”, 11/17 occurrences of “evidence for”, 24/34 occurrences of “truth about”, 6/10 occurrences of “proof that”, 10/29 occurrences of “sign(s) of”¹⁸ and 198/203 occurrences of “fact that”.
- 86 One of the advantages of this type of structure is to put the noun before the complement clause. In other words, the structure first expresses the author’s stance or position towards the viewpoint in the complement clause. In so doing, the author relies on presupposition (marked by both the definite article “the” and the choice of noun) to impose his views. Indeed, “the reader is asked to accept it as a given, thus attempting to forestall disagreement and gain acceptance of the perspective.” (Jiang and Hyland 2015: 533) Such a strategy is exemplified in the following extracts:

(29) But there is **further evidence that** huge numbers of published studies of drugs are fraudulent. We actually have statements from medical insiders. That’s right. For example, here is one, and it comes from a devastating source, a woman who edited the most famous medical journal in the world (how-medical-criminals-are-faking-medical-science-every-day)

(30) GERMS ARE A COVER STORY. What do they cover up? **The fact that** immune systems are the more basic target for depopulation and debilitation of populations. (germ-theory-and-depopulation)

- 87 The use of “(the) fact that”, the most used stance noun in the corpus, is quite particular. Indeed, it ambiguously attributes stance, meaning that it is not always clear to determine whether the viewpoint characterized by the noun is that of Jon Rappoport or someone else’s. Compare the two extracts below:

(31) Many mainstream researchers, doctors, and even public health officials were exposing **the fact that** the pandemic was no pandemic at all. The adjusted case and death numbers didn’t warrant excessive concern. (covid-19-and-riots-the-operational-connections)

(32) In previous articles, I’ve established **the fact that** the existence of the SARS-CoV-2 is unproven (the-virus-that-isnt-there-and-the-sales-job)

- 88 In the first extract, the viewpoint “the pandemic was no pandemic at all” is clearly that of “Many mainstream researchers, doctors, and even public health officials” as indicated by the author. But it is ambiguous whether it is also that of Jon Rappoport or not. In the second extract, however, it is clear that “the fact that” introduced Rappoport’s viewpoint that “the existence of the SARS-CoV-2 is unproven”. Yet, even when the attribution of stance is ambiguous, it can be argued that Jon Rappoport agrees with the viewpoint in question. Therefore, in such cases, the stance is also attributed to Jon Rappoport, as he agrees with the choice of the noun “fact” to designate the viewpoint introduced by the complement clause. Such a claim is supported by the following extract, where the author uses “the fact that” to designate the viewpoint “the cover story is a lie” while he uses “the idea that” to designate the viewpoint “the virus exists and is dangerous”:

(33) There is another routine element in covert operations: FALSE TRAILS. These are embellishments on the basic story, promoted to hide **the fact that** the cover story is a lie. The aim in 2020 is: get people arguing about the nature and origin and composition of the virus. Why? Because as long as people are arguing about these issues, they are re-enforcing **the idea that** the virus exists and is dangerous. Thus, the basic cover story is strengthened. (covert-op-the-virus-as-cover-story)

- 89 Given that Jon Rappoport does not believe that the SARS-CoV-2 has ever been proven to exist and that the ensuing pandemic is a “cover story” for imposing “universal lockdown”¹⁹, it is unambiguous that “the fact that” serves to designate and introduce a viewpoint with which the author agrees, while “the idea that” is used to downplay the validity of the viewpoint attributed to the elite and to question the actuality of the existence of the virus.
- 90 That almost all of the direct uses of “(the) fact that” (198/203) can actually be described as referring to Jon Rappoport’s theories or a viewpoint with which he undoubtedly agrees is no surprise as to why the structure is frequently used. As the noun suggests, “the fact that” helps the author present his viewpoint as factual, actual or real. The definite determiner “the” is the most used item in front of “fact that” (in 221 of all the 235 occurrences of the structure “X fact that”). The construction is also modified by several adjectives, whose functions are to emphasize the truthfulness and/or relevance of the viewpoint considered as a “fact”: “basic” (2), “unpleasant” (2), “devastating” (1), “glaring” (1), “naked” (1), “obvious” (1), “remarkable” (1), “simple” (1), “stark” (1). The structure acts as a categorical assertion, which aims at shutting down possible dissenting voices. In addition, the absence of subjective markers within the structure itself (but not necessarily in context) helps the author present his viewpoint as objectively factual, even when it is not:

(34) Therefore, their conclusion was a cover-up of **the naked fact** that they DID discover a significant association between mercury in vaccines and neurological damage. (cdc-whistleblower-also-a-player-in-the-vaccine-mercury-autism-fraud)

(35) Anyone with a grain of common sense could connect the dots: the CDC was lying to cover up **the fact that** Swine Flu, at best, was a very light non-epidemic, and all the fear-based hype was empty. The push for everyone to get vaccinated was venal and stupid. (medical-reporters-are-destroyng-our-knowledge-about-medicine)

(36) Let’s go deeper. In general, so-called contagious diseases are caused, not by germs, but by IMMUNE SYSTEMS THAT ARE TOO WEAK TO FIGHT OFF THOSE GERMS. When we put the cart and the horse in proper alignment, things become clear. I fully realize this

isn't as sexy as talking about bio-engineered gene sequences in viruses, but the cart and horse must be understood. GERMS ARE A COVER STORY. What do they cover up? **The fact that** immune systems are the more basic target for depopulation and debilitation of populations. (germ-theory-and-depopulation)

- 91 In those extracts, the author's categorical assertions are emphasized and legitimized by "the fact that", though no actual evidence supporting the claims is provided, at least not close to the structure (of course, some articles try to argue in favour of the claims). Instead, as it is a marker of actuality, rather than simply a marker of certainty, the structure is used to prove the author right only on the rhetorical level.
- 92 Obviously, using "the fact that" is not always a manipulative device. It can be used when the fact in question is, indeed, an objective fact, as in "For Emergency Use Only' refers to **the fact that** the FDA has certified the PCR test under a traditional category called 'Emergency Use Authorization.'" (a-strategy-for-defeating-the-covid-narrative). But in all instances, it always acts to legitimize the locutor's viewpoint by giving it credibility and the guise of objectivity. In addition, the author relies on the fact that "the fact that" is impersonal and ambiguously attributes stance, which implies that the factual character of the viewpoint is presupposed and is presented as shared knowledge. In other words, on the intersubjective level, the structure acts to mark that the author presupposes that the readers agree and does not expect them to disagree.

(37) **The fact that** no one is stepping up to the plate with a fast repeal is proof that multiple parts of the federal government are, in fact, tacitly supporting the opioid crisis and its devastating impacts on human life. (opioid-drug-crisis-could-the-whole-us-congress-be-impeached)

- 93 In this extract, the author accuses the "Ensuring Patient Access and Effective Drug Enforcement Act of 2016" of preventing the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) from freezing the shipments of opioid pills to US pharmacies and clinics. He presents the members of the US Congress's inertia in trying to repeal the law they passed as a fact and a proof of the malevolent intentions of the elite and the links

between the government and pharmaceutical companies. In addition, the adverbial “in fact” emphasizes both the actuality and the contrasting nature of the viewpoint. Taken together, the three devices enable Jon Rappoport to voice a dissenting view and shut down opposing views by asserting and legitimizing his viewpoint rhetorically as well as logically.

- 94 In sum, whether they are used to designate the elite’s viewpoints or the author’s, head nouns controlling a complement clause or complemented by a prepositional phrase act to legitimize the author’s theories, project an image of authority and gain support for his viewpoints from the readers (Jiang and Hyland 2015: 533). By using a head noun, the author can reinterpret the status of the elite’s viewpoints, mainly to reject their actuality, or to strengthen his persona as an investigative journalist and a whistle-blower who knows what is true. In addition, the ambiguous attribution of stance enabled by the “DET + N + CC/PP” structure as well as the presupposition conveyed by the definite determiner and the head noun help the author to seek, or even impose, the interlocutor’s agreement. This is possible because the act of naming things and ideas is the author’s responsibility: by the act of naming, he presents himself as the source of truth and imposes his own interpretation of reality on his readers. This act is also, to a certain extent, performative as it enables the author to create a reality that first and foremost exists in his discourse (Guilbert 2007: 154).
- 95 While the uses of certainty boosters in this section showed that they mark the author’s stance and commitment towards viewpoints, by seeking to convince the reader that both the author and his viewpoints are truthful, all of this in order to gain reader’s acceptance of the claims, some certainty boosters are used to express what I shall call “the indisputable and consensual truth”, thereby building a sense of community between the author and his readers and presenting subjective interpretation as self-evident truths.

4.2. The indisputable and consensual truth

- 96 Among the most frequent certainty boosters, the adverbial “of course” and the adverb “obviously” are the two items that both

convey the actuality of the viewpoint and act on an intersubjective level in so far as the locutor assumes that their readers share the same ideas or have come to the same conclusions (Hyland 1998: 368):

(38) But no, this was never done. In fact, there were, and are, many places around the world where people are still living free of COVID measures. Public health agencies don't report convincingly on their health status. Why not? **Obviously**, because if such a group, or several groups, remained healthy, the whole mad notion of the pandemic would begin to collapse like a house of cards. (coronavirus-island-x-24)

(39) The use of the term "quantified" in that phrase means: the CDC has no virus, because it is unavailable. THE CDC HAS NO VIRUS. One of the two most powerful public health agencies in the world can't obtain the virus from anywhere. Why? **Obviously**, because no one has it. (the-sars-cov-2-virus-was-never-proved-to-exist)

97 The OED defines the adverb "obviously" as follows: "1. In a clearly perceptible manner, evidently, plainly, manifestly; naturally, as might be expected from the circumstances." The adverb, therefore, means that what it modifies both is factual and imposes itself to reason. In those two extracts, Jon Rappoport uses it to claim that his viewpoint is the right interpretation of reality, but also that he is not really responsible for the reasoning, as the explanation referred to is self-evident.

98 The phrase "of course" (582 out of the 608 direct occurrences by Jon Rappoport) also tends to express a self-evident truth with which the author does not expect the reader to disagree. In so doing, he imposes his own construal of reality, presenting it as a plain fact, while assuming that the factual character of the viewpoint is shared by the interlocutor, as can be seen in the following extracts:

(40) Can you name a single large mainstream news outlet that has devoted time and space to a complete and rational debate about vaccine safety and efficacy, representing both sides of the issue fairly? Can you? **Of course not**. Does this seem reasonable? "The science is settled." Only fools and unthinking minds would accept that position. Who is the culprit here? Critics of vaccination, or the

delinquent imperious press? (basic-vaccine-lies-in-the-world-of-fake-news)

(41) For decades, elite Globalists have been asking themselves the question: How do you kill billions of people and get away with it? One of their prime answers has been: pandemics. **Of course**, the true pandemic is the response to the fake pandemic: vaccines. If, in the long-term, vaccines can induce the inability to produce children, the genocide would be invisible. (covid-vaccines-designed-for-depopulation)

99 In the first extract, “of course” follows a series of rhetorical questions providing an obvious answer (“of course not”) to those questions, an answer that the reader may very well have given, or at least thought of, while reading the article. In using rhetorical questions, the author also engages with his readers and presupposes that they share the same views as him. Such a strategy is not rare in the corpus (83 occurrences out of all the 706²⁰ occurrences of the adverbial) and can also be found with “obviously” (in 10/169 occurrences), as can be seen in extracts (38) and (39) above.

100 With other instances of “of course”, not only does the author assume that the interlocutor agrees with his viewpoint, but he also appears to be himself an interlocutor who agrees with a viewpoint that he is not the first to express, thus strengthening the sense of commonality he weaves in his articles. As a result, the validity of the viewpoint is even more increased:

(42) **Of course**, pharmaceutical companies, who manufacture highly toxic drugs to treat every one of these “disorders,” are leading the charge to invent more and more mental-health categories, so they can sell more drugs and make more money. (a-whole-branch-of-science-turns-out-to-be-fake-2)

101 In this extract, the adverbial “of course” at the onset of the first sentence serves to indicate both that the viewpoint “pharmaceutical are leading the charge to invent more and more mental-health categories” is truthful and that it is presupposed, that is already known by the interlocutor (or presented as such); in such a case, Jon

Rappoport appears to act as a messenger of all those who share his views.

- 102 Interestingly, there are several cases of “of course” which are not certainty boosters expressing the author’s conviction, but rather that of the elite or of the people who believe in what the elite claims. Such cases were found in 30 occurrences of (sometimes invented) reported speech by the elite or of ironical uses:

(43) The elite strategy is in for a penny in for a pound. “Well, **OF COURSE** the virus exists. So it’s a question of how serious and deadly it is. Now, the official figures suggest it was weakening by June 15th, but then the Variant emerged. That was a game changer. The latest measurements of antibody production against the Delta Variant indicate ...” Zzzzzz. (covid-madness-and-mass-conformity-vs-the-life-force)

(44) The rabid defenders of the virus twist and distort science to fit their agenda—and then claim **OF COURSE** everybody knows the virus exists. (a-new-point-about-the-missing-virus)

- 103 Such a strategy is pushed to its extreme in the two occurrences below, where “of course” is part of a complex noun phrase characterizing those who believe in the elite’s “propaganda”:

(45) “Some of the **OF COURSE VIRUSES EXIST** people are new to the way blogs and videos work. [...] these **OF COURSE** people are annoyed and irritated.” (stop-arguing-about-the-existence-of-the-virus)

- 104 Uses like those above are rhetorically persuasive as they act to question, and even denounce, the elite’s (and other people’s) blind faith in a variety of theories, like the existence of the SARS-CoV-2, which the author rejects.

- 105 While certainty boosters may express one’s own commitment to the actuality of a claim, whether by indicating that the viewpoint in question is truthful and/or that the author is trustworthy, or by imposing a self-evident truth, another way that they are used in the corpus is to express what I shall call a “contradictory alternative”, that

is, a viewpoint that explicitly refutes or corrects the elite's viewpoints.

4.3. The contradictory alternative

106 According to Hyland and Zou (2021: 8), certainty boosters can be used to “sidestep possible alternative views”. In the list of the most frequent certainty boosters, the expression of a contradictory alternative is performed by adverbs like “really” and “actually” or by adverbials like “in fact”:

(46) What CDC / WHO **really** want is a fake epidemic in which the chimerical virus is said to affect brain function. That's the Holy Grail. Then words and thoughts will constitute de facto diagnostic evidence. (political-battle-over-covid-vaccine-your-health-is-of-no-concern)

(47) First of all, notice the CDC stopped reporting complete case numbers on a daily basis, for two and a half months. Remember that. I'll cover a more egregious CDC stoppage in a minute. But here is the main event: The Atlantic fails to mention the true outcome of this “test-combining mistake” at the CDC—which, **in fact**, is a purposeful maneuver. (mr-trump-deliver-knockout-blow-to-traitorous-cdc)

(48) The situation is even more stunning than that. All over the world, there are scientists in labs of various kinds who believe they're working with “the virus” when they're working with a cobbled-together IDEA of the virus. So, for the most part, in this COVID operation, the key players are only aware that researchers could arbitrarily choose one virus over another as the “cause of the pandemic.” They're not aware that the choice is **actually** a fake virus. The choice of a new coronavirus was made for a simple reason. The diagnostic test would turn up huge numbers of false positives, thus jacking up case numbers and providing the rationale for the lockdowns and the economic devastation. Which were, all along, the real aims of the operation. (the-virus-that-isnt-there-and-the-sales-job)

107 In those three extracts, the adverbs and adverbials can be paraphrased by “contrary to what X says/believes”, where X

represents any group or person related to the elite: “contrary to what the CDC / WHO claim, they want a fake epidemic...” (in the original, the author uses a pseudo-cleft structure to topicalize and assert the CDC/WHO’s supposed plans), “contrary to what the CDC claims, the outcome of the test-combining mistake is a purposeful maneuver” (note that the author first contradicts another source, *The Atlantic*, and asserts and commits to the actuality of his viewpoint by using the adjective “true”), “contrary to what those scientist believe, the choice is a fake virus”. As the paraphrase suggests, the author offers an alternative interpretation that contradicts what is admitted or assumed by the elite. In addition, the three items also assert the actuality of the viewpoints referred to.

108 This double function is clear in their respective definitions, as found in the OED:

[really, adv.]: 1.a. In reality; in a real manner. Also: in fact, actually. [...] 1.b. Truly, indeed; positively. In later use also as an intensifier: very, thoroughly.

[actually, adv.]: 1. In action; in fact, in reality, really. Opposed to possibly, potentially, theoretically, etc. [...] 5.a. As a matter of fact, in truth; indeed; even. Now somewhat *colloquial*. Used to assert the truth of a statement which seems surprising, incredible, or exaggerated. 5.b. *colloquial*. As a sentence adverb: in fact, as a matter of interest; contrary to what one might think.

[in fact, phrases]: P.2. in reality, actually, as a matter of fact. Now often used parenthetically as an additional explanation or to correct a falsehood or misunderstanding

109 Therefore, all of them have the potential either to express that a viewpoint is objectively factual or to correct a previous viewpoint, or even both at the same time. By using them, Jon Rappoport is able to assert his viewpoint, and its actuality, and appear as a credible and reliable source of knowledge. Perhaps, this is why those three adverbs and adverbials are the most used certainty boosters after the adverbial “of course” in the corpus. Not only do they express the author’s certainty and commitment towards his theories and beliefs, but they also act to introduce a dissenting and/or corrective

viewpoint, presented as closer to reality and in contradiction to the possible expectations of the audience²¹.

110 To summarize my analyses of certainty boosters in the corpus, it has become evident that they are used to express Jon Rappoport's certainty and commitment to the validity of his theories. This is done in mainly three ways: first, by indicating a clear commitment that the theory in question is trustworthy (that is, by intensifying its validity); second, by indicating that the truth-value of the viewpoint is (objectively) self-evident; third, by introducing a contradictory alternative reality that disputes or rectifies the actuality of the elite's theories and providing the interlocutor with a (supposedly) more accurate and valid interpretation of reality. In other words, from the same facts, two or more conclusions can be drawn, and Jon Rappoport favours one that is explicitly in contradiction with that of the elite or is presented as commonsensical.

111 So far, I only dealt with plausibility hedges and certainty boosters which mark either an implicit or an ambiguous attribution of stance. Yet, explicit attribution of stance can also be marked by both plausibility hedges and certainty boosters. In the next section, I explore how the author's explicit involvement in his discourses allows him to construct and reinforce his authority.

5. Strengthening authority through authorial involvement

112 While Biber *et al.* (1999: 976) refer to "explicit attribution of stance" to deal with those markers and structures that explicitly express that the viewpoint in question is that of the locutor, Hyland and Zou (2021: 10) refer to "self-mention", that is, "the extent writers/speakers intrude into their texts using first-person pronouns and possessives adjectives". By using self-mentions, "writers explicitly indicat[e] a personal attitude to their [...] positions" (Hyland 1998: 367).

113 In the corpus, it appears that the structure "I/We + V + CC" (that is, a complement clause controlled by a verb whose subject is the pronouns "I" or "we") is the prevailing device used to explicitly attribute stance to the speaker/writer. On the other hand, there are far fewer (or even none at all) occurrences of structures including

possessive determiners (“my/our + N + CC” in extraposed structures or not) or object pronouns. Jon Rappoport seems to favour explicit attribution of stance, especially with the “I/We + V + CC” structure, in order to express his certainty or the actuality of his viewpoint.

- 114 With the latter structure, it is more common for epistemic verbs to be followed by a complement clause introduced by the zero complementizer than to be followed by a THAT-clause. As far as hedges are concerned, “think” (40), “hope” (38), and “guess” (17) are the most used verbs, all with the first-person singular pronoun (that is, in the “I + V + CC” configuration), while “know” (283), “discover” (22) and “believe” (17) are the most used booster verbs. Interestingly, and contrary to hedge verbs, “know” is far more used with the first-person plural pronoun (186 occurrences) than with the first-person singular pronoun (97).

5.1. Booster verbs

- 115 Booster verbs are epistemic verbs expressing the author’s certainty, confidence or commitment towards the viewpoint in the complement clause. By using them with a first-person pronoun, Jon Rappoport is able to unequivocally express his viewpoint while managing his persona. The use of the first-person pronoun “I” highlights his own contribution to the construction of the conspiracy theories he develops in his articles. Together with a booster verb introducing a complement clause, the structure helps Jon Rappoport strengthen his authority and credibility by highlighting his (supposed or self-attributed) knowledge. As a result, he reinforces his role as an investigative journalist and a whistle-blower who reveals hidden truths.

(49) **I know** major media won’t investigate medically-caused death numbers, because I’ve published reports for years, and I’ve contacted news people with the facts; and nothing happens. (who-pushes-the-idea-of-an-epidemic-what-are-their-crimes)

- 116 In this extract, the booster verb “know” enables Rappoport to categorically assert that the media are complicit of the elite and hide their misdeeds or plans (in the extract below, the noun “crimes” is even used). Though the source of knowledge is explicitly attributed to

Jon Rappoport himself, the structure “I + booster verb + CC” first and foremost reinforces the strength of the claim being made.

(50) I then went on to study every so-called high-risk group for AIDS. **I found that** in each group, all the “AIDS symptoms” could be explained by non-viral causes. At that point, **I realized** I was looking at a classic intelligence-agency-type covert operation, applied within the medical universe. The virus was the cover story. It was being used to hide ongoing government and corporate crimes. For example—forced starvation. (turning-flu-cases-into-covid-through-manipulation-easy-as-pie)

(51) When I wrote my first book in 1988, AIDS INC., **I showed that** HIV was not the cause of AIDS. In fact, there was no AIDS. That was a label slapped on a variety of health problems all stemming from lowered immunity. (the-fixation-on-the-one-and-the-obsession-with-a-virus)

117 In these extracts, the three booster verbs serve two purposes: highlighting Rappoport’s efforts in seeking and revealing what he sees as hidden truth, as the three verbs reinforce his role as an investigative journalist and as a whistle-blower; and presenting his viewpoint as valid, if not as “the one and only truth”. Of course, the context also helps reinforce the legitimacy and truthfulness of the viewpoints, as is the case with the adverbial “In fact” followed by an unmodalised and categorical assertion denying the existence of AIDS in the second extract and as is also the case in the first extract with the categorical assertion “the virus was the cover story”, which has a conclusive force.

(52) For the past year, **I’ve been demonstrating that** the SARS-CoV-2 virus is a fake. No one has proved it exists. Now let’s enter the bubble where people assume the virus is real, and examine a few of the major crimes and contradictions that exist inside that lunatic bubble. (covid-vaccine-revelation-sinks-like-a-stone)

(53) First of all, I have to re-emphasize a point I’ve made many times: SARS-CoV-2 doesn’t exist. **I’ve been proving** that for over a year. (fda-knew-there-would-be-many-covid-cases-among-the-fully-vaccinated)

118 In these two extracts, not only do the two verbs reinforce the truthfulness of the viewpoints, presented as demonstrable facts, but the use of the BE + -ING aspect also acts as a booster emphasizing the involvement of the speaker in the demonstrations he puts forward, thus reinforcing, yet again, his authority as an investigative journalist, a whistle-blower and a reliable source. In so doing, the author strengthens his persona by highlighting his contribution to the construction of the theory.

119 In addition, the use of the first-person plural pronoun “we” is almost exclusively found with the booster verb “know” (185 occurrences of “we X Y Z know/knew + CC”²² out of the 195 occurrences of “We X Y Z + V + CC”), which is a way for Rappoport to present himself as belonging to a community of people sharing the same views, or to present his viewpoint as being validated, accepted or agreed upon by other people (that is, as a shared knowledge), or to present his viewpoint as an obvious fact whose evident nature is known by all. In any case, Rappoport’s authority and discourse legitimacy are strengthened.

(54) My readers know I’ve spent a great deal of time exposing the destructive dangers of medical drugs, but now I’d like to home in on them from another angle. We’re so used to their presence, we now take them for granted. Everyone ingests them. Many take them in combinations. [...] **We know** about the enormous profits to be made by the pharmaceutical companies. **We know** these companies exploit and create markets. **We know** they also invent diseases in order to sell the drugs. **We know** many people use the drugs as a crutch. (the-bio-chemical-matrix)

120 Here, all of the occurrences of the pronoun “we” are inclusive. Together with the booster verb “know”, they strengthen the degree of actuality of the viewpoints specified by the complement clauses, as they are presented as shared knowledge, thus reinforcing the strength of the claims themselves. In addition, the inclusive nature of “we” creates a sense of commonality between Jon Rappoport and his readers, whom he sometimes explicitly addresses, reinforcing the sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people.

121 On an intersubjective level, the first-person pronoun also plays a role in legitimizing and strengthening Rappoport’s authority. The

contrasting nature of the first-person singular pronoun (which only excludes everyone else but the author) enables him to voice a dissenting view and project an image of reliability and credibility, which also relies, to a certain extent, on the fact that “the truth” is presented as actual, though relative to the author’s construal. In addition, the inclusive use of the first-person plural pronoun enables him to impose a sense of shared agreement with the reader, in an attempt to shut down opposing views.

5.2. Hedge verbs

122 While booster verbs express the locutor’s conviction and commitment towards a viewpoint, hedge verbs express likelihood or doubt. It would be tempting to analyze hedge verbs as a way for a given locutor to appear more tentative, that is, less assertive. Such a rhetorical strategy can, indeed, be beneficial, as it leaves space for debate, as exemplified below:

(55) Because Trump was attacking CNN and other media as fake, CNN claimed THAT was making life more physically dangerous for journalists in war zones and at home. Wow. **I guess** the takeaway is: don’t criticize mainstream news, keep your mouth shut and stay hypnotized ... (rise-and-fall-of-cnn-the-most-busted-name-in-news)

(56) **I’m estimating that** for less than \$5 million, the whole program can be launched—as opposed to the hundreds of millions of dollars that have been poured down unaccountable “investment” rat holes. (charlottesville-black-and-white-conflict-in-america)

123 In the first extract, the two verbs (“guess” and “claim”, though not a hedge verb) are, indeed, used to downplay the author’s assertiveness. In the second extract, the hedge verb “estimate” expresses a conjecture, or a personal evaluation (though barely based on evidence), but the estimation is not about a conspiracy-theory viewpoint. In fact, although all of the occurrences can be qualified as hedge verbs, as they express the author’s uncertainty, or lack of commitment, or even his tentativeness, the majority of the occurrences are not used to introduce a conspiracy-theorist viewpoint. For example, 10 occurrences of the verb “guess” (out of all

the 17 occurrences) are used to offer an explanation of or to question the elite's discourses, thus presenting their discourses as cryptic or ridiculing them.

- 124 Though hedges mainly act to downplay the author's commitment to the truth-value of the viewpoint or to express his uncertainty, they still are quite powerful tools to legitimize the author's discourse and reinforce his authority. By appearing not too assertive, the author's viewpoint may become more acceptable for the reader. Though they also allow room for debate, hedge verbs like "I think" and "I suggest" are used to introduce and defend a dissident viewpoint, rather than to express the author's doubt or uncertainty:

(57) I want to correct an inadvertent impression about the FDA story. I have no reason to believe the FDA is admitting to its own crimes or that it is thumbing its nose at the public by allowing its web page to remain standing. **I think** someone at the FDA made a serious mistake (or was trying to get word out) by posting that web page. It was placed online as a come-on for an educational module about adverse drug effects. The module link no longer works. (when-mass-medical-murder-is-acceptable)

- 125 In this extract, the verbs "correct" and "believe" as well as the noun phrase "no reason", which is restrictive, pave the way for an alternative view (introduced by the hedge verb "think") that is presented as the true explanation of the real-world event referred to. In such a context, "I think" does not mitigate the author's claim; rather it focuses on his role as a free thinker whose viewpoint is relevant and trustworthy.

(58) If they are, I would suggest investigating whether the rollout of new 5G wireless technology at 60GHz is occurring in those locales. It is possible 5G is causing oxygen deprivation, among other serious effects. And rather than an engineered virus—which has unpredictable effects owing to its rapid mutation—if we're looking for sinister operations, **I suggest that**, to cause sensational alarm and bafflement and "proof" that a mysterious event is underway, the intentional seeding of locales with little-known toxic chemicals would be the action undertaken. The effects of chemicals are far more predictable in terms of intensity and duration, and if no one

is specifically looking for them, they are undetectable. (people-dying-equals-coronavirus-an-engineered-virus)

- 126 In this example, the first occurrence of “suggest” is not a stance verb, which is not uncommon in the corpus (of all the 89 occurrences of “guess” as a verb, only 17 are stance verbs). The second occurrence, on the other hand, is a hedge verb of stance used by the author to put forward an alternative viewpoint. The author writes that the explanation he offers is only a possibility (as emphasized by the extraposed structure in the left co-text: “It is possible 5G is causing...”, as well as the preposition “rather than” meaning “instead of” and introducing a contrary choice). But even though he does not seem absolutely certain of what he writes, the context acts to present this possibility as a probable alternative scenario. The viewpoint put forward (i.e. 5G technology is what caused the Covid-like symptoms) is clearly stated at the beginning of the article, which then endeavours to prove the writer right: “Anything is possible, but so far, what I see is this: when I add up all the reasons people are sick and dying, I don’t see a new germ as the basis.”
- 127 That hedge verbs explicitly attribute stance to the author so as to help him express a strong dissenting viewpoint is supported by the presence of boosters of certainty or actuality in the co-text, thus reinforcing the plausibility of the author’s viewpoint, so much so that the hedge verb can barely be described as downplaying his commitment:

(59) I don’t believe governments are telling the truth about how many people have taken the COVID shot. **I think** they’re lying. Inflating the numbers because they’re desperate; far more people than advertised are refusing the vaxx. In every war, spies and other hired hands try to demoralize the enemy. This is standard operating procedure. Inflating key numbers is one strategy. In this vaccine war, the ace in the hole is obvious: if enough people say NO to the shot, it’s over. A tidal wave will engulf the governments and their corporate allies. (the-vaccine-war-who-really-has-the-upper-hand)

- 128 In this extract²³, the verb “think” explicitly introduces a contrasting viewpoint: at the beginning of the extract, the author states that he does not believe that “governments are telling the truth about how

many people have taken the COVID shot". The verb "think" signals that the viewpoint is a possibility while the first-person subject pronoun "I" attributes the reasoning leading to this possibility to the author himself. The possibility that the elite lies is presented as the most probable possibility, almost as a fact: the progressive aspect in "they're lying" emphasizes the assertion that it is indeed the case, while the comparative structure "far more...than", which expresses high degree, as well as the progressive aspect increase the force of the argument.

- 129 In such contexts, it appears that what matters is not so much objective actuality or the accuracy of the expressed viewpoints than the author's "involvement in knowledge construction" (Hyland 1998: 363), thus strengthening his authority as an investigative journalist and a whistle-blower, that is, as a reliable source who knows hidden truths. In addition, hedge verbs used with a first-person singular pronoun are useful devices to legitimize the author's discourse by voicing a personal, dissenting view and highlighting the relevance and trustworthiness of the viewpoint in question.
- 130 To summarize the above analyses of explicit authorial presence in Jon Rappoport's discourses, it appears that both booster and hedge verbs with a first-person pronoun as their subject are used to legitimize his theories and strengthen his authority as a reliable source of knowledge. Booster verbs are used to indicate that the viewpoint introduced in the complement clause is certain or factual while the first person-pronoun highlights the personal contribution of the author to the construction of the theory in question or his inclusion in a community of like-minded people. Hedge verbs explicitly indicate that the viewpoints in question are plausible alternative interpretations of reality, and even more probable ones as hedge verbs are sometimes found in combination with boosters of various kinds.

Conclusion

- 131 The analysis of Jon Rappoport's articles revealed that he uses significantly more certainty boosters than plausibility hedges. Yet, more than a quest for nuance and balanced assertions, the use of both boosters and hedges help him legitimize his theory and

strengthen his authority as a reliable source of knowledge, an investigative journalist and a whistle-blower.

- 132 In section 3, I showed how plausibility hedges are not really used to mitigate the author's claims. Rather, they are used in three ways: to voice a plausible dissenting viewpoint (and this is from the expression of "plausibility" or "possibility" that the expression of doubt arises) that cannot be ruled out; to downplay the elite's discourses, that is, to reinterpret them as possibilities among others, as valid (if not less) or speculative as the author's discourses; to explicitly designate the elite's discourses as attempts at manipulating truth.
- 133 In section 4, I showed that certainty boosters do serve to express the author's confidence in his claims, which is achieved in, at least, three ways: by shutting down opposing views in committing to the actuality of the viewpoints; by presenting the theories as self-evident truths and consensual or shared interpretations of reality; by providing a contradictory alternative interpretation that explicitly clashes with the elite's discourses or corrects them.
- 134 In section 5, I studied the explicit presence of the author in his discourses through the use of booster and hedge verbs whose subject is a first-person pronoun (either plural or singular) followed by a complement clause. The contextual analyzes show that both booster and hedge verbs are used to legitimize the author's theories by intensifying their validity and, more importantly, to strengthen the author's authority as a reliable source of knowledge, by explicitly attributing his personal and "scientific" (in terms of investigative methods) contribution in the construction of the theories in question or by indicating supposedly shared or consensual knowledge.
- 135 In any case, Jon Rappoport takes advantage of the intersubjective nature of both hedges and boosters in so far as they act to shut down dissident voices, secure readers' agreement and present his viewpoints as factual and as the only valid alternative views to the elite's discourses. In sum, they are used to manage both the author's positions regarding viewpoints and interlocutors, that is, they help him maximize agreement and reduce opposition.
- 136 Though I only analyzed the discourses of an unequivocal conspiracy theorist, meaning that I cannot conclude on conspiracy-theory

discourses in general, this case study can be viewed as a preliminary work on such discourses, as I highlighted strategies that can possibly be used by other conspiracy theorists, especially those that tend to offer alternative interpretations of reality or oppose the elite's viewpoints.

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Analysis corpus

The analysis corpus is not publicly available, especially due to law issues. The political opinions in the texts are considered to be "sensitive" by the European GDPR, even though the articles are publicly available. Therefore, safety measures have to be taken in order to process, store and share the data; this work is still in progress. In addition, and to put it simply, my algorithm copies and pastes web pages, before parsing them. As far as the texts are copied for private use, this is legal. Yet, sharing such copy-paste contents breaches author's rights. As a consequence, the sharing of the texts cannot be done. As a matter of compromise, all the post URLs of the texts used to build the analysis corpus are provided in Appendix E. As of January 11th, 2024, all of the web pages were still accessible.

- 1 Note that Hyland's terminology is not exactly the same as Quirk *et al.* (1985). The latter authors use the terms "downtoners" (which corresponds to Hyland's hedges) and "amplifiers" (which can be "maximizers" and "boosters"). For Hyland, "boosters" are more or less equivalent to Quirk *et al.*'s "amplifiers". Though they do not include "focusing subjuncts" (Quirk *et al.* 1985: 604) and "content disjuncts", which are concerned with the truth-value of a propositional content ("degree of truth", Quirk *et al.* 1985: 620), such tools are included in Hyland's boosters.
- 2 The metadata between parentheses is the unique ID of the text in the corpus, used to identify each text.
- 3 In this paper, I will use the terms "elite(s)" for the sake of simplicity, as this allows me to use one word to refer, in a general context, to all the groups Jon Rappoport opposes (the mainstream media and politicians, pharmaceutical companies, US government agencies, etc.).
- 4 There were many other post categories on the website, but only those that were most likely to comprise conspiracy-theory articles were selected. The following is a list of some of the discarded categories: "X massacres" (where X is a year ranging from 2012 to 2017), "Americanism", "Bordergate", "Coaching", "Entrepreneurs", "Freedom", "Free speech", "ISIS", "Law of attraction", "Matrix Revealed", "Marijuana", "Nanotech", "Socialism", "Transhumanism". Note that a given post can belong to multiple categories.
- 5 A list of the URLs of all the articles in the analysis corpus is provided in Appendix E.
- 6 Jon Rappoport had written other articles prior to 2009, but only those from 2009 on are available, as well as some from 2001.
- 7 Brezina, Vaclav, P. Weill-Tessier & Tony McEnery. 2020. #LancsBox. <http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/lancsbox>.
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- 10 Not all of the occurrences of the devices in Appendix A are used by Rappoport, as he quotes other locutors, who can be conspiracy theorists,

dissenting scientists or politicians, or people I call “the elite” (mainstream scientists, politicians, journalists, etc.). Only adverbs and adverbials were counted individually to find those actually used by Jon Rappoport (as their uses were the entry point of this paper). Other than that, the frequencies of the devices in Appendix A are raw frequencies. Yet, later in the paper, I give the frequencies of some devices actually used by Jon Rappoport.

12 More precisely, the organization defends free choice and informed consent, but as a way to convince people (especially parents) to refuse vaccination. Their “Our mission” page, for instance, states: “The National Vaccine Information Center (NVIC) is dedicated to preventing vaccine injuries and deaths through public education and advocating for informed consent protections in medical policies and public health laws. NVIC defends the human right to freedom of thought and conscience and supports the inclusion of flexible medical, religious and conscientious belief exemptions in vaccine policies and laws.” (<https://www.nvic.org/about/mission-vision>, last accessed on January 11th, 2024). See also *The Anti-vaxx Playbook*. Center for Countering Digital Hate. <https://counterhate.com/research/the-anti-vaxx-playbook/>.

13 The adverb “perhaps” is, in the corpus, particularly useful for that. Though there are cases where Jon Rappoport writes “perhaps, I don’t know”, thus clearly expressing his uncertainty/doubt, the adverb first and foremost allows for the expression of a possibility, no matter the truth-value of the propositional content. As a result, Rappoport’s theories become more legitimate by the simple fact that they are presented as real possibilities. To oversimplify, I would say that, in “conspiracy theory worlds”, the viewpoint in question is a possibility that cannot be ruled out, or even a necessity (that is, the only valid interpretation of the world), while it is rejected as such in the “elite’s world”.

14 Or “la nécessité du possible” in French, which is an expression I borrow from the French translation of Umberto Eco’s *Foucault’s Pendulum*.

15 In fact, only 2 occurrences can be described as hedging Rappoport’s viewpoint. 42 occurrences attribute the source of the viewpoint to the elite, mainly when dealing with viruses causing epidemics or with the benefits of vaccination.

16 One of the definitions of “notion” according to the OED is: “I.2. A belief, opinion, theory, or view, held by a person or (now more usually) a group of people.” Another one is: “I.4.a An idea in a person’s mind; a person’s conception or understanding of something.”

17 As with the other nouns, I excluded negative contexts like “there is no evidence that...” and questions, as well as cases where “that” is a relative pronoun. When I write “32/42”, this means that 32 is the number of occurrences actually used by Rappoport to designate his viewpoint while 42 is the number of occurrences not used in reported speech.

18 Describing “sign(s) of” as a certainty booster is, according to me, subject to caution. Indeed, it is often used to refer to physical, visual signs of a disease, which proves that a person suffers from a disease. But on an argumentative level, it is not a certainty booster in the same way as “I know”, for instance, can be categorized as such.

19 Here is an extract from the article from which the analyzed example is taken: “For months, I’ve been demonstrating that no one has proved SARS-CoV-2 exists (start here). Instead, elite planners have been selling A STORY ABOUT A VIRUS. In covert intelligence operations, this would be called a cover story. It obscures true goals. It justifies crimes that would otherwise be nakedly exposed. [...] These days, the coronavirus cover story obscures crimes according to the same general pattern. EVERYONE is considered an agent of potential infection. Therefore, a new Chinese strategy: universal lockdowns. COVID-19 is essentially an intelligence-agency type covert op. The short-term goal is wrecking economies. The long-term goal is taking the population into a new world of technocratic control. Selling this as necessary all comes back to THE VIRUS COVER STORY.”

20 “Of course” in “as a matter of course” (4 occurrences) was discarded.

21 This strategy is taken to its full advantage in the 13 occurrences of “when in fact”, all of which are used by Rappoport himself and not the elite, where the conjunction “when” means “even though; despite the fact that”, thus clearly introducing a contrasting view that goes against someone’s expectations, while the adverbial “in fact” highlights the actuality of the viewpoint and its corrective purpose, as in: “FACT: Thompson states that he and his colleagues falsified data to make it appear that the MMR vaccine has no connection to autism, when in fact the vaccine does raise the risk of autism.” (lying-australian-press-and-the-vaxxed-scandal) This extract is taken from the very beginning of the article. Note how the author bluntly and straightforwardly claims that his viewpoint is factual with the noun “fact” at the beginning of the sentence and in capital letters. Note also how the so-called “emphatic” auxiliary “does” is used to support the claim made by the author. Taken together in so short an extract, one can see how Jon Rappoport uses such boosters to impose his interpretation of reality onto

the reader and shut down possible dissenting views, regardless of the actual truth-value of the viewpoint.

22 “X Y Z” are placeholders for any lexical or grammatical items. The query in TXM searched for the following pattern: a subject pronoun, zero or up to three items, a verb and a complement clause.

23 Due to lack of space, I provide another example as a side note. I underlined boosters: “So which sets of statistics should we believe? Those that pump up the numbers of people who’ve taken the shots, or those that show millions of vials going to waste? I think the latter stats are the true indicators. Officials are less likely to confess to them, unless they’re accurate. Out in front, the movie called COVID VACCINE is being hailed as a brilliant blockbuster, but at the back end, ticket sales are dropping off a cliff. There are reasons for that. One is: People are having very serious and severe injuries from the shot; they’re dying; and their families and friends know about it.” (the-vaccine-war-who-really-has-the-upper-hand)

English

What is central to conspiracy theories is the revelation of a hidden or manipulated truth. In addition, the speaker/writer who believes in a conspiracy theory and shares their views on it also seeks the listener’s/reader’s adherence to the theory. As a result, the speaker/writer must solve two problems: first, the version in which they believe has to be perceived as plausible by the audience and, second, the speaker/writer must have, or gain, credit in order to appear credible. These two aspects are somewhat subsumed under what Biber and Hyland, among others, refer to as *stance* and *stance-taking*, which correspond to the positioning of a locutor towards viewpoints and interlocutors. In order to analyze these aspects and the relations between the linguistic markers and the discursive strategies (pragmatic, argumentative, or rhetoric), this study is based on a corpus analysis of online articles written by Jon Rappoport, an unequivocal conspiracy theorist. I only focus on plausibility hedges and certainty boosters so as to study the marking of authoritative and epistemic stance in his discourses and the function(s) they perform. The results show that both plausibility hedges and certainty are used to legitimize Rappoport’s theories and strengthen his authority in various ways, depending on the devices used. Plausibility hedges are mainly used to voice a dissenting interpretation of reality, presented as a possibility that cannot be ruled out, and downplay the elite’s viewpoints. Certainty boosters are used to express the author’s confidence and commitment towards his theories, by presenting his interpretation of reality as unquestionable, self-evident or consensual. Finally, the use of first-person pronouns and booster or hedge

verbs are also used to strengthen the legitimacy of the theories and the authority of the author by explicitly indicating his contribution to the construction of conspiracy theories or to introduce and support a dissident viewpoint.

Français

Les théories du complot sont des contre-discours dont l'une des caractéristiques fondamentales est la révélation d'une vérité soi-disant cachée ou manipulée. En outre, celui ou celle qui croit en une théorie du complot et la diffuse cherche à convaincre autrui du bien-fondé de sa croyance. Ainsi, il ou elle doit résoudre au moins deux problèmes : rendre plausible la théorie à laquelle il/elle adhère et apparaître comme une source de savoir crédible. La construction de la légitimité du discours et de l'autorité du locuteur correspondent, ainsi, selon moi, à la notion de « *stance* », terme que j'emprunte à l'anglais (et notamment à Biber et Hyland). Afin d'analyser les relations entre marqueurs linguistiques et stratégies discursives, mon étude s'appuie sur l'analyse d'un corpus composé de billets de blog d'un complotiste notoire, Jon Rappoport. L'analyse montre que l'auteur recourt à la fois à des marqueurs de certitude (« *certainty boosters* ») et de plausibilité (« *plausibility hedges* ») pour légitimer ses théories et asseoir son autorité. En effet, il se montre plutôt sûr de lui et de ce qu'il avance dans ses théories, en cela qu'il présente sa vérité comme factuelle et incontestable, notamment parce qu'elle se caractérise par un certain effet d'évidence. En outre, les marqueurs de plausibilité servent avant tout à introduire une possibilité parmi d'autres, potentiellement plus valide que les interprétations des élites dirigeantes, industrielles ou scientifiques, ce qui participe de la relativisation de la vérité. Enfin, l'auteur intervient explicitement et en son nom au sein de son discours dans le but de mettre en valeur sa contribution à la construction d'une théorie du complot ou pour exposer et renforcer une interprétation alternative.

Mots-clés

épistémique, positionnement, modalité, modalisation, certitude, autorité, légitimité

Keywords

epistemic, stance, modality, certainty, authority, legitimacy

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