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Verbing the Unverbable: A Pragma-Cognitive Analysis of Creative Verb Formations in New Media Discourse

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ABSTRACT

"The food is not fooding" sounds, at first hearing, like an error. It is instead an instance of a productive and largely unexamined new-media construction in which a noun is converted into a verb and placed beside its own source, so that the clause asks whether the noun is living up to its own name. This study terms the construction sarcastic verbing and analyses it through an integrated framework combining conversion theory, Construction Grammar and cyberpragmatics, informed by the echoic account of irony. Sixty-one candidate instances from Facebook, X and TikTok (November 2025–August 2026) were coded independently by two coders on a three-tier instrument recording derivational route and lexical status, entrenchment and frame type, and pragmatic function and polarity; the thirty-two instances coded identically by both were retained for analysis. Zero-derivation accounts for 29 of the 32 items, and entrenchment spans the full cline from frame-bound coinage to fully lexicalised verbs, indicating a construction caught at several stages of conventionalisation at once. Within the frame-bearing subset (n = 20), negated instances consistently performed mock-complaint and affirmed instances performed praise or social commentary. Because several of the clearest ironic instances involve ordinary verbs with no lexical novelty, the study argues that the construction's evaluative force resides in the echoic frame rather than in individual coinages.

INTRODUCTION

One of the major characteristics of language is productivity: the capacity to use existing elements and patterns to create new expressions, including forms that a speaker may never have encountered before. Hockett (1958, p. 575) uses the label productivity for the property of language that permits speakers to say things that have never been said before. One of the clearest illustrations of this productivity in English is conversion, the shift of a word from one grammatical category to another without any change in form. Nouns do not need affixes to become verbs, because English converts nouns into verbs constantly, so that email becomes something one does as well as something one sends. Less ordinary is a further step, in which this same conversion is turned back on the noun itself. The noun becomes a verb and is then placed beside its own source within a single clause, so that the sentence asks whether the noun is living up to its own name. "The food is not fooding", for example, does more than coin a new word (fooding). It constructs a frame in which an entire noun category is evaluated against its own defining function, and the judgement is delivered through humour rather than argument. This study refers to the phenomenon as sarcastic verbing. It has become one of the more productive small grammars of new media discourse, yet it has not received sustained linguistic attention.

Explaining this coinage demands more than a single line of theory, since the construction's behaviour cuts across several areas of grammar and pragmatics. Conversion theory explains how a noun can surface as a verb without a fixed meaning attached, relying on the hearer's ability to recover sense from the source noun and its context. Construction Grammar treats the recurring frame itself, rather than any single coinage, as a bearer of meaning, a shift that becomes necessary once the same template proves productive across many unrelated nouns. Cyberpragmatics explains how readers recover a poster's evaluative stance in text-based communication, where tone of voice and facial expression are unavailable and grammatical cues such as polarity, together with emoji and co-text, carry more of the interpretive load.

Existing scholarship has little to say about a construction operating across so many derivational routes, stages of conventionalisation and evaluative polarities at once. None of the accounts above was developed with this construction in mind, and none alone explains its full range of behaviour. Closing that gap matters on two fronts. Theoretically, it tests whether the irony carried by these forms belongs to the individual coinage, as an account centred on conversion would suggest, or to the template itself, as Construction Grammar predicts. Practically, it provides a documented linguistic account of a construction that is already productive in everyday online language, including Nigerian online discourse, but has so far been treated as passing slang rather than as structured grammar.

The study addresses three research questions:

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1. What derivational routes underlie sarcastic verb formations in new media discourse, and how do zero-derivation and back-formation differ in the aspectual frames they support?
2. Where do individual instances of the construction sit along a cline from frame-bound nonce coinage to full lexicalisation, and what does that distribution suggest about how such constructions age?
3. What pragmatic functions does the construction perform, and how do its polarity (affirmed or negated) and aspectual frame (progressive or preterite) relate to the function a given instance carries out?

To answer these questions, the study analyses a corpus of thirty-two attested instances collected from new media platforms, coded against a three-tier instrument. Section 2 reviews the relevant concepts and empirical studies and sets out the theoretical framework. Section 3 describes the materials and methods, Section 4 presents and analyses the data, Section 5 discusses the findings and their limitations, and Section 6 concludes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section situates the study within the scholarship on which it builds. Section 2.1 reviews the key concepts the analysis depends on (conversion, back-formation, irony and sarcasm, and constructions that evaluate a referent against its own prototype) and then examines seven empirical studies whose data or methods overlap with sarcastic verbing without fully capturing it. Section 2.2 sets out the theoretical framework, which combines conversion theory, Construction Grammar and cyberpragmatics.

Conceptual and Empirical Review

Conversion and back-formation

Conversion is the derivation of a new lexeme in a different word class without any overt change in form, as when the noun email yields the verb to email (Bauer, 1983). Clark and Clark (1979) provide the foundational account of denominal verbs. They argue that an innovative denominal verb has no fixed meaning at the moment of coining; instead, the speaker uses it in the expectation that, in the situation at hand, the listener can readily and uniquely compute the intended sense based on mutual knowledge, with the parent noun denoting one role in that situation and the verb's surface arguments denoting others (Clark & Clark, 1979, p. 787). This is the mechanism that makes penising or queening interpretable to a reader encountering either word for the first time.

Back-formation offers a second route into the same territory. Bauer (1983, p. 64) defines it as the formation of a new lexeme by deleting a suffix, or supposed suffix, from an apparently complex form, by analogy with pairs in which both the suffixed and unsuffixed forms exist. Marchand (1969) gives the classic treatment of the process in English. Where Clark and Clark's (1979) account treats the denominal verb as a direct pragmatic inference from the noun, back-formation treats the verb as the product of morphological analogy: the coiner reasons from existing pairs (edit/editor, donate/donation) to strip an apparent ending from a base and produce a verb that was never historically derived that way. Distinguishing which route underlies a given instance is one of the tasks of the coding instrument developed in this study.

Irony, sarcasm and echoic use

Because the construction is named for its sarcastic uses, its pragmatic analysis requires a working definition of irony and sarcasm. On the relevance-theoretic account, verbal irony is a variety of echoic use: the speaker echoes a thought, utterance or norm attributed to someone else, or to people in general, and simultaneously expresses a dissociative attitude towards it (Sperber & Wilson, 1995; Wilson & Sperber, 1992). Attardo (2000) characterises irony as an utterance that is contextually inappropriate yet still relevant, so that the hearer is prompted to search for the speaker's attitude. Sarcasm is commonly treated as a subtype of irony that targets a person or object critically. In this study, sarcastic verbing is used as a label for the construction as a whole because its most frequent uses are critical. As the analysis shows, however, the same frame also supports sincere hyperbolic praise, so the label names the construction's prototype rather than every use. The echoic account is particularly relevant to the present construction. "The food is not fooding" echoes an implicit norm, namely that food should do what food is supposed to do, and comments on the gap between that norm and the situation at hand. The construction thus builds the echo into its grammar: the source noun supplies the norm, and the converted verb tests whether the norm is being met.

Evaluating a referent against its own prototype

Two further strands of research describe constructions that, like sarcastic verbing, evaluate a referent against its own category. Wierzbicka (1987) argues that apparently empty English tautologies such as boys will be boys carry language-specific meanings that cannot be derived from general pragmatic principles alone, and that their meanings are attached to the construction. Ghomeshi *et al.* (2004) describe contrastive focus reduplication, as in I'll make the tuna salad and you make the salad-salad, in which a reduplicated word picks out the prototypical member of its category. Sarcastic verbing shares the prototype-invoking logic of both constructions: "the food is not fooding" asks whether a particular instance of food behaves like prototypical food. It differs from both in that it converts the noun into a verb, so that category membership is expressed as an activity that can be affirmed or denied, and therefore as something that can succeed or fail.

Empirical studies

Seven empirical studies bear directly on denominal verbing, internet neologism or slang-based humour.

Balteiro (2007) asks which converted items become

established in the language and which remain one-off coinages. Drawing on a diachronic and synchronic analysis of over 700 lexical items and 231 confirmed noun–verb conversion pairs from general-purpose dictionaries, she distinguishes established conversions from nonce formations that remain confined to individual instances of speech. This distinction underpins the entrenchment cline used to code the present corpus. Her data, however, were drawn from dictionaries rather than from a single productive humour-based construction, and the study does not address polarity, frame type or pragmatic function.

Gottfurcht (2008) asks why speakers choose conversion over competing processes in the first place. Combining a corpus study of the Oxford English Dictionary with elicitation experiments, she concludes that conversion is the most productive verb-forming process in present-day English, and that competition between derivational processes is governed by distributional frequency. This confirms conversion's dominance as a route to new verbs. Her elicitation tasks, however, were designed around neutral scenarios, so her data contain no instances of the echo frame investigated here.

Michaelis and Hsiao (2021) revisit Clark and Clark's (1979) model and show that innovative denominal verbs such as adulting and doored frequently serve humour, figuration and social commentary. Their findings favour a hybrid model combining Frame Semantics, Construction Grammar and Conceptual Blending Theory over either a purely derivational or a purely context-dependent account, and this hybrid architecture informs the present framework. They analyse coinages one at a time, however, rather than a single recurring template that can be tested across polarity, frame type and entrenchment.

Three further studies use social media data. Kulkarni and Wang (2017) conduct a large-scale computational analysis of internet slang drawn from Urban Dictionary, identifying alphabetisms, blends, clippings and reduplicatives as dominant morphological categories; in related work they model word formation in slang computationally (Kulkarni & Wang, 2018). The tautological verbing construction does not appear among their categories, and neither study addresses conversion as a vehicle for irony. Muravyev *et al.* (2014) analyze neologisms in over 573 million Russian-language Facebook posts and comments, classifying them by thematic domain and derivational origin, and find that internet, marketing and multimedia vocabulary account for the largest share of new coinages. Their study offers a model for corpus-building in new media linguistics, but its categories include no ironic verb constructions, and its Russian-language data limit its direct applicability. Würschinger (2021) tracks the diffusion of English neologisms on Twitter and finds that most lexical innovations soon fall out of use, with diffusion depending on network structure rather than frequency alone. This offers independent support for the expectation that novelest coinages remain frame-bound, but his data are not restricted to a single construction.

Closest to the present study is Yusuff *et al.* (2024), who apply Relevance Theory to nineteen popular Nigerian slang expressions from 2022 and 2023, compiled from lists published by Tribune and Channels Television. They find that humour and social context dominated the slang of 2022, while political themes such as praise, calls for welfare and mocking suggestions to "go to court" dominated 2023, a shift they attribute to the election period. Their use of relevance-theoretic pragmatics and their attention to humour in Nigerian slang bring them close to the present study. However, they treat each expression as an independent lexical item rather than as an instance of a shared construction, and their data include no instance of the noun-echo verbing pattern.

Gaps in the literature

Across these studies, a consistent pattern emerges. Each confirms some part of the picture on which the present research depends: that conversion is productive, that internet slang is a legitimate object of linguistic analysis, that most coinages are short-lived while a minority become conventional, and that Nigerian online discourse uses slang for humour and social commentary (Joshua & Egbe, 2025; Yusuff *et al.*, 2024). The conceptual literature shows that English has constructions which evaluate a referent against its own prototype, and that irony can be understood as echoic. None of these studies, however, treats the noun-echo verbing construction as an object of study in its own right. None combines derivational analysis, entrenchment measurement and pragmatic function coding within one instrument, and none connects the construction to the echoic account of irony. The present study addresses these gaps.

Theoretical Framework

The study combines three theories, each of which accounts for a different aspect of the construction and each of which stops short of the construction as a whole.

Conversion theory

Conversion theory, in the form developed by Clark and Clark (1979) and supplemented by the account of back-formation outlined in Section 2.1.1, explains how the verbs in the corpus are built and how readers compute their meanings from the source noun. It was built to explain individual coinages, however, not irony. Clark and Clark do not explain why a converted verb should carry a mocking rather than a neutral tone, and their unit of analysis is the individual verb rather than any template in which it recurs. This is the first limitation the present study must work around.

Construction Grammar

Where conversion theory stops at the individual word, Construction Grammar treats the frame itself as a unit of meaning. Goldberg (2006, p. 5) argues that all levels of grammatical analysis involve constructions, "learned pairings of form with semantic or discourse function",

ranging from morphemes and words to idioms and fully general phrasal patterns. A recurring syntactic pattern can therefore carry systematic meaning independently of whatever lexical item fills its open slots. This allows a template such as [NOUNi BE (NEG) NOUNi-V-ing] to be treated as meaningful in its own right, rather than as an accidental by-product of many separate coining decisions. Traugott and Trousdale (2013) add a diachronic dimension: through constructionalisation, new form–meaning pairings emerge gradually, and individual items may move from use only within their originating frame towards independent use.

Construction Grammar, however, does not specify how a reader works out whether a given instance of the frame is praising or mocking its subject. Goldberg's (2006) model is designed to explain productivity and generalisation, not the inferences a reader makes in recovering a writer's ironic stance.

Cyberpragmatics

Yus's (2011) cyberpragmatics extends Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995) to internet-mediated communication. Yus argues that the cognitive mechanisms used in face-to-face interpretation also operate online, but that the medium changes the conditions of interpretation. Much online interaction is text-based and therefore lacks the prosodic and facial cues that signal stance in speech. Readers compensate by drawing more heavily on other cues, including grammatical form, emoji and surrounding co-text (Nisa, 2024), often at greater inferential cost. Yus also emphasises that utterances generate non-propositional effects, such as feelings of amusement, exasperation or affection, which are not stated in the utterance's propositional content but which the reader nonetheless recovers. Yus (2016) develops this account specifically for humour. Read through this lens, the polarity of sarcastic verbing carries part of the interpretive load: affirming the frame invites a reading of exaggerated approval, negating it invites one of comic despair, and in each case the intended effect is never stated outright.

Cyberpragmatics, however, has no morphological engine of its own. It assumes that an utterance is already available for interpretation and does not explain which derivational route produced it, or why some instances of a construction remain frame-bound while others become lexicalised.

None of the three theories alone accounts for the full range of behaviour observed in the corpus. The study therefore combines them, using conversion and back-formation theory to explain how the verbs are built, Construction Grammar to explain why the tautological frame carries meaning and how items move along the entrenchment cline, and cyberpragmatics, informed by the echoic account of irony, to explain how readers recover the intended evaluation in text-based discourse. Each tier of the coding instrument described in Section 3 corresponds to one of these theories.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This section describes how the study was designed and carried out. Section 3.1 outlines the research design, and Section 3.2 describes how the corpus of thirty-two instances was assembled and what it contains. Section 3.3 sets out the three-tier coding instrument, and Section 3.4 reports how the reliability of the coding was assessed. Section 3.5 addresses the ethical considerations involved in using public social media data, and Section 3.6 explains how the coded data are analysed and reported.

Research design

The study adopts a mixed qualitative–quantitative design. Determining a form's derivational route, entrenchment and pragmatic function requires close, item-level reading of each instance in its context before any pattern can be counted. The results of that qualitative coding are then summarised in cross-tabulations.

Corpus

The corpus consists of thirty-two attested instances of sarcastic verbing. An attested instance is a naturally occurring example drawn from a public social media post, as opposed to an elicited or invented form. Instances were collected from Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok, the three platforms judged most likely to yield examples of the construction, between November 2025 and August 2026. Only public, English-language text was eligible for inclusion. Collection was purposive rather than a systematic platform scrape, and it continued until new instances ceased to introduce new categories at any coding tier. The corpus therefore supports claims about the internal range of the construction, not about its frequency among social media users.

Instances were identified in two complementary ways. First, instances encountered during the researchers' routine, non-participant use of the three platforms were recorded in a dated field log at the time of observation. Second, to extend and check this opportunistic collection, targeted searches were run with each platform's built-in public search function, using query strings that reflect the construction's surface form, such as "is not" + "-ing", "not" + "-ing", and echoing pairs such as "food is not fooding" and "money not moneying", as well as searches seeded by nouns already attested in the corpus. Searches were conducted manually while signed in to ordinary user accounts; no automated scraping tools were used, and no content in private groups, closed accounts or direct messages was accessed. Across both procedures, approximately 148 posts and comment threads were screened, of which 61 contained a candidate form. All 61 candidates were coded independently by both coders, and the 32 on which they agreed fully at every tier were retained for analysis (Section 3.4). For each candidate instance, the platform, date of posting, date of retrieval and a short co-text were recorded in the field log. Screenshots were taken to support coding, held in an access-restricted folder, and deleted immediately after

coding was completed; usernames and profile details were not recorded in the analysis dataset.

Several instances show features of Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin, such as the sentence-final pragmatic particle o in "The agenda is not agending o" (item 4). The construction is not confined to Nigerian users, but its prominence in Nigerian online discourse is one of the reasons it was selected for study.

The corpus is not restricted to the tautological echo frame [NOUNi BE (NEG) NOUNi-V-ing]. A small number of fully conventional denominal verbs, such as ghosting and DJing, were deliberately included as comparative anchors for the lexicalised end of the entrenchment cline. One further item, unalive, produced through negative prefixation rather than conversion, was retained as a contrast case to test whether entrenchment and derivational route operate as independent dimensions. These comparison items are excluded from the polarity analysis in Section 4.3, because polarity is a coherent variable only for items built on the echo frame.

The unit of analysis is the individual verbing instance, together with its immediate co-text where available. Where a single source noun produced more than one attested form differing in derivational route, polarity or lexical status, as with agenda, which yielded both "agending" and "agend", each form was logged as a separate unit. Forms differing only in spelling were not counted twice. The full coded corpus is given in Appendix A.

Coding instrument

Each unit was coded on a three-tier instrument, applied in a fixed order.

- **Tier 1** records the derivational process (zero-derivation, back-formation or, in the single contrast case, negative prefixation) and the lexical status of the resulting verb: L1, where both form and sense are novel; L2, where an existing verb form carries an extended sense; L3, where an existing verb form is used with its established sense; and L4, where the item is fully conventional. Unalive falls outside this scheme and is coded as not applicable.
- **Tier 2** records syntactic entrenchment on a four-level cline: E1 (frame-bound), E2 (template-productive), E3 (semi-conventionalised) and E4 (fully conventionalised), with E-alt reserved for unalive. To reduce reliance on intuition, entrenchment was operationalised with external evidence. An item was coded E4 if it is listed as a verb in the Oxford English Dictionary or Merriam-Webster; E3 if it is defined in Urban Dictionary or attested in at least three independent posts outside the echo frame with a stable sense; E2 if it is attested outside the echo frame but without a stable, documented sense; and E1 if it is attested only inside the echo frame. Tier 2 also records frame type: progressive, preterite, bound (embedded in a clause without a full echoing subject) or standalone (requiring no frame).
- **Tier 3** records pragmatic function, coded inductively into seven categories: F1 hyperbolic praise; F2 mock-complaint; F3 stereotype-based social commentary; F4 role-performance commentary; F5 crude or taboo hyperbole; F6 neutral denotation; and F7 euphemistic avoidance. To avoid circularity between polarity and function, function was coded from evidence independent of the clause's polarity: the post's surrounding text, any emoji, and readers' replies and reactions. F2 is therefore defined as the expression of disappointment or exasperation with a referent's performance, as shown by such contextual cues, and not as the negation of the frame.

Reliability

The corpus was coded by the two authors. The first author, who collected the data, served as the first coder and logged every coding decision with a justification. The second author, a professor of syntax and semantics at the University of Port Harcourt, served as the second coder. Before coding, the second coder was given the written codebook defining every category at each tier. He then coded all 61 candidate instances independently, without access to the first coder's assignments. The two coding sheets were then compared item by item. The coders assigned identical codes on all three tiers to 32 of the 61 candidates, a full-agreement rate of 52.5%. Disagreements were not resolved by discussion. Given the time available for the study, and to ensure that the analysis rested only on items whose classification was not in dispute, the 29 candidates on which the two coding sheets differed at any tier were excluded, and only the 32 identically coded instances were retained for analysis. Because this procedure removes the instances that were hardest to classify, it may make the patterns reported in Section 4 appear cleaner than they would in an unfiltered corpus, a limitation discussed in Section 5.5. The original coding sheets were not retained after the comparison was completed, so agreement statistics for individual tiers, such as Cohen's kappa, cannot be reported; the full-agreement figure above is therefore the only reliability measure available for this study.

Ethics

The study analyses publicly posted text and involved no interaction with users. Formal ethical approval was not sought, since no participants were recruited and no private data were collected; instead, the study observed general principles of research ethics, following the contextual, harm-sensitive approach recommended by the Association of Internet Researchers (franzke *et al.*, 2020) and the data-minimisation principle of the Nigeria Data Protection Act 2023. Only content visible to any user without special permissions was collected; private groups, closed accounts and direct messages were excluded, as were posts by accounts that appeared to belong to minors. Instances are reproduced without usernames, profile images or links, and only the short verb phrase and minimal co-text needed for analysis are quoted, so that individual posters cannot easily be identified through search. Screenshots taken to support coding were held

in an access-restricted location and deleted immediately after coding was completed. Posts found to have been deleted by their authors before analysis were excluded.

Analysis

Results are reported as cross-tabulations rather than as flat frequencies: derivational route against lexical status, entrenchment against frame type, and function against polarity. The route, lexical status, entrenchment, frame and polarity codes for every item are listed in Appendix A, so that the figures reported in Section 4 can be traced to individual items.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and analyses the coded corpus tier by tier, following the sequence of the coding instrument: derivational process and lexical status (4.1), entrenchment and frame type (4.2), and pragmatic function and polarity (4.3). In each subsection, the coded data are presented before they are interpreted, and each interpretation is linked to the framework set out in Section 2.2.

Derivational Process and Lexical Status

Table 1 presents the full corpus of thirty-two items coded for derivational route and lexical status (L1, novel form and sense; L2, existing form with extended sense; L3, existing form with established sense; L4, fully conventional).

Twenty-nine of the thirty-two items were built through zero-derivation, two through back-formation (agend,

Table 1: Full coded corpus (N = 32) by derivational route and lexical status

S/N	Item	Representative attestation	Derivational route	Lexical status
1	fooding (negated)	"The food is not fooding"	Zero-derivation	L1
2	fooding (affirmed)	"when food is fooding"	Zero-derivation	L1
3	queening	"queening as she does"	Zero-derivation	L2
4	agending	"The agenda is not agending o"	Zero-derivation	L1
5	studying	"study not studying"	Zero-derivation	L3
6	husbanding	"when your husband is husbanding"	Zero-derivation	L2
7	girling	"girls start girling so early"	Zero-derivation	L1
8	clowning	"clowning on social media"	Zero-derivation	L4
9	white-peopling	"white people white peopling"	Zero-derivation	L1
10	wifing	"wifing up White Models"	Zero-derivation	L3
11	princessing	"I take princessing very seriously"	Zero-derivation	L1
12	braining	"brain not braining"	Zero-derivation	L2
13	moneying (1)	"money not moneying"	Zero-derivation	L1
14	moneying (2)	"money is not moneying"	Zero-derivation	L1
15	beautying	"the beauty is not beautying"	Zero-derivation	L1
16	videoing	"video not videoing"	Zero-derivation	L3
17	baby-boying	"Baby-boying in 20 years"	Zero-derivation	L1
18	penising	"intense penising"	Zero-derivation	L1
19	budgeting	"the budget is not budgeting"	Zero-derivation	L3
20	bodying	"the body is bodying"	Zero-derivation	L2
21	skinning	"a lady's skin is skinning"	Zero-derivation	L2
22	mezzoing	"Her mezzo soprano is mezzoing"	Zero-derivation	L1
23	hairing	"my hair is actually hairing"	Zero-derivation	L1
24	sleeping	"sleep not sleeping"	Zero-derivation	L3
25	Jesusing	"Jesus is still Jesusing"	Zero-derivation	L1
26	altoing	"the alto is altoing"	Zero-derivation	L1
27	agend	"The agenda did not agend"	Back-formation	L1
28	propagand	"the propaganda did not propagand"	Back-formation	L1
29	gaslighting	(standalone)	Zero-derivation (historical)	L4
30	ghosting	(standalone)	Zero-derivation	L4
31	DJing	(standalone)	Zero-derivation	L4
32	unalive	(standalone)	Negative prefixation	n/a

propagand) and one through negative prefixation (unalive). Within the zero-derivation set, fifteen items are coded L1, meaning both form and sense are novel; five are coded L2, meaning an existing verb form has had its sense stretched to fit the construction; five are coded L3, meaning an existing verb form is used in its established sense; and four are coded L4, meaning the item is fully conventional.

Clark and Clark's (1979) account predicts the L1 items directly: a novel form such as mezzoing or hairing is interpretable because the reader can readily and uniquely compute its meaning from the source noun and the situation (Clark & Clark, 1979, p. 787). No item in the corpus contradicts this. What the data add to Clark and Clark's account are the L2 and L3 categories, which their model does not distinguish. The L2 items (queening, husbanding, braining, bodying and skinning) all reuse a verb form that already carried an unrelated sense (queening from chess promotion, husbanding from careful management, braining from a blow to the head, bodying from besting an opponent and skinning from removing an outer layer) and stretch it to fit the tautological frame. This is conversion working on an existing verb rather than creating a new one.

The L3 items are even more striking. Four of the five (studying, videoing, budgeting and sleeping) are fully ordinary verbs with no semantic novelty: studying means exactly what it always means. The fifth, wifing, is coded L3 because the slang verb wife (up) was already in circulation before its use in this corpus, which is also why it sits higher on the entrenchment cline (Section 4.2). The presence of the four ordinary verbs in the echo frame, carrying the same mock-complaint function as the novel L1 items (Section 4.3), is strong evidence that the construction's evaluative force cannot be located in the individual word, since several of its clearest instances involve no lexical innovation at all. This supports the Construction Grammar position that meaning in this construction belongs to the frame rather than to the item placed inside it.

The two back-formed items form a minimal pair with a zero-derived counterpart. The noun agenda yields both "agending", a zero-derivation that retains the noun's full form, and "agend", which removes the final vowel as though it were an inflectional ending. The same source noun therefore feeds two different derivational processes, and writers are choosing between them rather than being restricted to a single route. Propagand extends the same pattern to a second noun ending in -anda, which suggests that the back-formed variant may be developing a small template of its own, restricted to nouns ending in -anda or -enda. Because these nouns derive from Latin gerundives, the deleted -a is not an English suffix, so the formation is best understood as analogical: writers treat the final vowel as detachable by analogy with English noun–verb pairs. Both back-formed items occur in the preterite frame, while every zero-derived frame item occurs in the progressive, a distribution taken up in Section 4.2.

Syntactic Entrenchment and Frame Type

Tables 2 and 3 present the same thirty-two items coded for entrenchment and for frame type.

Table 2: Entrenchment distribution across the corpus (N = 32)

S/N	Entrenchment level	Count	%	Items
1	E1, frame-bound	20	62.5	fooding (×2), agending, studying, husbanding, white-peopling, braining, moneying (×2), beautying, videoing, budgeting, bodying, skinning, hairing, sleeping, Jesusing, altoing, agend, propagand
2	E2, template-productive	6	18.8	queening, girling, princessing, baby-boying, penising, mezzoing
3	E3, semi-conventionalised	1	3.1	wifing
4	E4, fully conventionalised	4	12.5	clowning, gaslighting, ghosting, DJing
5	E-alt, outside the cline	1	3.1	unalive

Table 3: Frame type across the corpus (N = 32)

S/N	Frame type	Count	Items
1	Progressive	18	All E1 items except agend and propagand
2	Preterite	2	agend, propagand
3	Bound (embedded, no full echoing subject)	8	All E2 and E3 items, and clowning
4	Standalone (no frame required)	4	gaslighting, ghosting, DJing, unalive

Entrenchment and frame type are closely aligned. All twenty E1 items occur in an explicit echo frame (progressive or preterite), all seven E2 and E3 items occur in bound frames, and three of the four E4 items, together with unalive, occur standalone. This alignment is partly a consequence of how the levels are defined, since E1 is defined by dependence on the echo frame. The informative result is therefore not that E1 items occur in echo frames, but how the corpus is distributed across levels, and which items move beyond the frame.

Twenty of the thirty-two items are frame-bound: they are attested only with the source noun present as the echoing subject. This proportion partly reflects the sampling procedure, which targeted the echo frame, and it should not be read as a measure of how the construction is distributed in social media at large. What the data do show is that the frame is productive with a wide range of nouns: concrete (food, hair, body), abstract (agenda, budget), human (husband, white people) and religious (Jesus). Michaelis and Hsiao's (2021) examples, adulting and criming, appear to have passed through a similar stage before becoming usable on their own.

The remaining twelve items show the cline in motion. Six items (queening, girling, princessing, baby-boying, penising and mezzoing) are used outside the strict echo frame while remaining marked and humour-coded. The representative attestations of girling ("girls start girling") and mezzoing ("Her mezzo soprano is mezzoing") do contain an echoing noun, so these two items lie close to the boundary between E1 and E2. Both coders independently assigned them to E2, and they are retained there, but they are best treated as borderline cases, a point noted among the limitations in Section 5.5. Wifing has moved further: "wifing up" carries a stable, recognised sense across independent writers and contexts, closer to slang-dictionary status than to nonce coinage. Four items, clowning, gaslighting, ghosting and DJing, need no frame and no internet-specific context at all; a reader encountering ghosting in a newspaper would not register it as inventive. Together these levels trace a cline of the kind that Traugott and Trousdale (2013) describe for constructionalisation, in which an item begins usable only within its originating frame and becomes independently usable as repetition accumulates. The corpus captures this cline at a single point in time, so it shows items at different stages simultaneously rather than tracing the history of any one item.

The two back-formed items are the only preterite instances, and every zero-derived frame item is progressive. This suggests a division of labour. The progressive frame ("the food is not fooding") evaluates an ongoing state: the referent is currently failing, or succeeding, at being itself. The preterite frame ("the agenda did not agend") reports a completed event: a claimed plan or campaign failed to materialise. This distribution answers the second part of RQ1, though with only two preterite items it should be treated as a hypothesis for testing in a larger corpus.

Unalive sits outside the cline, and its exclusion is informative. Every other item was produced by denominal conversion or back-formation; unalive was produced by prefixing a negative to an adjective, an operation motivated by the evasion of content moderation rather than by humour. Its presence as a contrast case confirms that entrenchment and derivational route are independent dimensions, as Tiers 1 and 2 of the instrument assume: an item can be morphologically unlike the rest of the corpus while sharing the broader pressure towards compact, expressive verb coinage in new media.

Pragmatic Function and Polarity

Table 4 presents the distribution of the seven pragmatic functions across the corpus. Table 5 restricts the analysis to the twenty items with an explicit echo frame (progressive or preterite) and cross-tabulates their polarity against

Table 4: Pragmatic function distribution across the corpus (N = 32)

S/N	Function	Count	%
1	F1, hyperbolic praise	9	28.1
2	F2, mock-complaint	12	37.5
3	F3, stereotype-based social commentary	3	9.4
4	F4, role-performance commentary	3	9.4
5	F5, crude or taboo hyperbole	1	3.1
6	F6, neutral denotation	3	9.4
7	F7, euphemistic avoidance	1	3.1

Table 5: Polarity by pragmatic function, frame-bearing items only (n = 20)

Polarity	F1 Praise	F2 Mock-complaint	F3 Stereotype	F4 Role-performance	Total
Affirmed	6	0	1	1	8
Negated	0	12	0	0	12

their function.

Table 5 shows that polarity and function are aligned without exception in the frame-bearing subset: all twelve negated instances function as mock-complaint, and no affirmed instance does. Affirmed instances are split between praise (six of eight), role-performance commentary (husbanding) and stereotype-based commentary (white-peopling). Because function was coded from co-textual evidence, such as emoji, surrounding text and readers' replies, rather than from polarity itself (Section 3.3), this alignment is an empirical result rather than a by-product of the coding scheme. The case of mezzoing, discussed below, illustrates how such evidence entered the coding: although its clause is affirmative, readers' replies responded with laughter rather than admiration, which marked the item as mock-praise. With only twenty items, however, the pattern should be read as a strong tendency awaiting confirmation in a larger corpus.

The echoic account of irony explains why polarity and function align so closely. Each frame-bearing instance echoes an implicit norm supplied by the source noun: food should be satisfying, money should be sufficient, a brain should think. A negated frame ("brain not braining") reports a gap between the norm and the situation, and expresses a dissociative attitude towards the expectation the norm sets up, which is the structure Wilson and Sperber (1992) identify as ironic. An affirmed frame ("the alto is altoing") reports that the norm is fully met, and the hyperbole lies in presenting ordinary category membership as a notable achievement. The construction thus encodes the echo grammatically, and polarity sets the direction of the evaluation.

Cyberpragmatics explains why this grammatical encoding matters online. In the absence of prosody and facial expression, readers depend more heavily on cues that survive in writing (Yus, 2011). Polarity is one such cue, and it is present in every frame-bearing instance. "The food is not fooding" and "the alto is altoing" are built from the same frame and the same derivational process, yet they land as opposite evaluations, and the data show that this reversal tracks polarity consistently. Neither type of statement, moreover, names the writer's feeling. "Brain not braining" asserts nothing on its surface about the writer's frustration; the comic exasperation is a non-propositional effect that the reader recovers by inference (Yus, 2011, 2016). The twelve items outside the strict echo frame (three F1 items, two F3, two F4, one F5, three F6 and one F7) carry a lighter version of the same inferential load, since clowning or wifing in an ordinary sentence relies less on co-text and more on the reader's prior familiarity with the term, consistent with their higher entrenchment levels

Two cases complicate the otherwise clean pattern. Mezzoing is coded F1 and is affirmed in its source text, so it superficially reads as praise. The surrounding comments, however, respond with laughter rather than admiration, which suggests the item is better understood as mock-praise: an affirmed frame used to stage gentle mockery of an over-dramatic vocal performance. This does not overturn the polarity pattern, since the item remains affirmed, but it shows that the affirmed pole can itself carry a secondary ironic layer, praise performed too enthusiastically to be sincere, which the present seven-category scheme does not separate. Agend and propagand, both coded F2, dismiss a claim about covert coordination rather than lamenting a personal or physical shortfall, as braining or moneying do. Both are correctly classified as mock-complaints, since they negate an implied expectation and invite a dismissive reading, but the object of dismissal, a suspected plan rather than a bodily or financial failure, marks a sub-type of F2 that a larger corpus could justify separating.

Findings

Where the irony resides

The study's central finding is that the evaluative force of sarcastic verbing resides in the frame rather than in the coinage. The strongest evidence comes from the L3 items. Studying, videoing, budgeting and sleeping are ordinary verbs, yet in the echo frame they perform exactly the same mock-complaint function as novel coinages such as fooding and moneying. An account centred on conversion cannot explain this, since there is nothing novel to interpret in studying. A constructional account can: the meaning "this instance of N fails, or succeeds, at being a prototypical N" is a property of the [NOUNi BE (NEG) NOUNi-V-ing] pairing as a whole (Goldberg, 2006). The construction joins a family of English constructions, including tautologies such as boys will be boys (Wierzbicka, 1987) and contrastive focus reduplication (Ghomeshi *et al.*, 2004), that evaluate a referent against its own category. What distinguishes sarcastic verbing is that it turns category membership into an activity, which allows it to be affirmed or denied and therefore praised or mocked.

Echoic irony built into grammar

The study also contributes to the theory of irony. On the echoic account, irony involves echoing an attributed thought or norm while expressing a dissociative attitude towards it (Wilson & Sperber, 1992). In most ironic utterances, the reader must infer both the echo and the attitude. In sarcastic verbing, the echo is supplied by the grammar: the repeated noun names the norm, and the converted verb tests it. This may explain why the construction spreads so easily across nouns, and why it is so readily interpretable in a medium without prosody. Writers can produce an ironic evaluation of almost anything by filling a single slot, and readers can recover the norm being echoed from the noun itself.

A construction at several stages at once

The entrenchment data show the construction caught at several stages of conventionalisation simultaneously. Most items are frame-bound, a handful have begun to be used outside the frame, and a few, such as ghosting and DJing,

are fully lexicalised. This snapshot is consistent with the gradualist account of constructionalisation proposed by Traugott and Trousdale (2013), and with Würschinger's (2021) finding that most lexical innovations do not spread far. Because the corpus is synchronic, however, it cannot show that any individual item has moved along the cline. Tracking particular items, such as girling or princessing, over time would test whether frame-bound uses are in fact the starting point for later independent uses.

The Nigerian setting

Instances such as "The agenda is not agending o", with its Nigerian Pidgin discourse particle, suggest that the construction is well established in Nigerian online discourse. Nigerian social media is a site of inventive, humorous slang (Yusuff *et al.*, 2024). Items such as agending, agend and propagand, which dismiss claims about covert plans and campaigns, also appear to comment on public and political discourse, which may link the construction to the political humour that Yusuff *et al.* identify in Nigerian slang of the 2023 election period. A comparison of Nigerian and other users' instances would show whether the construction has distinctive Nigerian uses, for example in political commentary.

Limitations and future research

The study has several limitations. First, the corpus is small and purposively sampled. It supports claims about the construction's internal range but not about its frequency, and the polarity pattern, though exceptionless here, rests on twenty items. Second, the sampling targeted the echo frame, which inflates the proportion of frame-bound items. Third, only the 32 of 61 candidate instances on which both coders agreed were analysed; because the excluded instances were by definition the hardest to classify, the patterns reported here, including the polarity–function alignment, may be cleaner than those in an unfiltered corpus. In addition, because the original coding sheets were not retained, tier-level reliability statistics could not be calculated. Fourth, some codes, particularly entrenchment levels, depend on evidence that changes over time. Fifth, the corpus is synchronic and cannot trace the history of individual items. Sixth, two items, girling and mezzoing, lie on the boundary between frame-bound and template-productive use, and their classification as E2 is open to debate. Future research could build a larger corpus through systematic platform searches, stratified by platform and by the poster's country; analyse disagreement cases as evidence of the construction's fuzzy boundaries; track selected items over time; and test readers' interpretations of affirmed and negated frames experimentally, with and without emoji and co-text.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to determine how sarcastic verb formations are built, how they move towards conventional vocabulary, and how polarity relates to the pragmatic effects they produce. Zero-derivation dominates the corpus, while back-formation and negative prefixation survive as minor but distinct routes; the two back-formed items are also the only preterite instances, suggesting a link between derivational route and frame type. Entrenchment spans the full cline from frame-bound coinage to full lexicalisation, consistent with a gradual account of constructionalisation. Within the frame-bearing subset, negated instances function as mock-complaint and affirmed instances as praise or social commentary. The clearest finding is that the construction's evaluative force belongs to the frame rather than to the individual word, since ordinary verbs such as studying carry the same mock-complaint force as novel coinages. Read through the echoic account of irony, the construction builds the ironic echo into its grammar: the noun supplies the norm and the verb tests it. Sarcastic verbing is therefore a productive and theoretically tractable construction, not scattered internet wordplay, and the documented corpus offered here provides a starting point for larger and longitudinal studies.

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Appendix a. item-level coding

Codes: Route (Z = zero-derivation; B = back-formation; N = negative prefixation); L = lexical status; E = entrenchment; Frame (Prog = progressive; Pret = preterite; Bnd = bound; Std = standalone); Pol = polarity (Aff = affirmed; Neg = negated; – = not applicable). Pragmatic function codes for the frame-bearing items can be read from Table 5.

S/N	Item	Route	L	E	Frame	Pol
1	fooding	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Neg
2	fooding	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Aff
3	queening	Z	L2	E2	Bnd	–
4	agending	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Neg
5	studying	Z	L3	E1	Prog	Neg
6	husbanding	Z	L2	E1	Prog	Aff
7	girling	Z	L1	E2	Bnd	–
8	clowning	Z	L4	E4	Bnd	–
9	white-peopling	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Aff
10	wifing	Z	L3	E3	Bnd	–
11	princessing	Z	L1	E2	Bnd	–
12	braining	Z	L2	E1	Prog	Neg
13	moneying (1)	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Neg
14	moneying (2)	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Neg
15	beautying	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Neg
16	videoing	Z	L3	E1	Prog	Neg
17	baby-boying	Z	L1	E2	Bnd	–
18	penising	Z	L1	E2	Bnd	–
19	budgeting	Z	L3	E1	Prog	Neg
20	bodying	Z	L2	E1	Prog	Aff
21	skinning	Z	L2	E1	Prog	Aff
22	mezzoing	Z	L1	E2	Bnd	–

23	hairing	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Aff
24	sleeping	Z	L3	E1	Prog	Neg
25	Jesusing	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Aff
26	altoing	Z	L1	E1	Prog	Aff
27	agend	B	L1	E1	Pret	Neg
28	propagand	B	L1	E1	Pret	Neg
29	gaslighting	Z	L4	E4	Std	–
30	ghosting	Z	L4	E4	Std	–
31	DJing	Z	L4	E4	Std	–
32	unalive	N	n/a	E-alt	Std	–