Evidentiality in Grammar

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Evidentiality is a grammatical category that has source of information as its primary meaning – whether the narrator actually saw what is being described, or made inferences about it based on some evidence, or was told about it, etc. Languages vary in how many information sources have to be marked. Many just mark information reported by someone else; others distinguish firsthand and nonfirsthand information sources. In rarer instances, visually obtained data are contrasted with data obtained through hearing and smelling, and through various kinds of inference.

As Boas (1938: 133) put it, “while for us definiteness, number, and time are obligatory aspects, we find in another language location near the speaker or somewhere else, source of information – whether seen, heard, or inferred – as obligatory aspects.” The terms ‘verificational’ and ‘validational’ are sometimes used in place of ‘evidential.’ French linguists employ the term ‘mediative’ (Guentchéva, 1996). The term ‘evidential’ was first introduced by Jakobson (1957). A summary of work on recognizing this category, and naming it, is in Jacobsen (1986) and Aikhenvald (2004).

Evidentiality is a verbal grammatical category in its own right, and it does not bear any straightforward relationship to truth, the validity of a statement, or the speaker’s responsibility. Neither is evidentiality a subcategory of epistemic or any other modality (pace Palmer 1986: 51); in numerous languages irreals and other modalities can occur together with evidentials (also see discussion in De Haan, 1999; Lazard, 1999, 2001; and DeLancey, 2001).

In Tariana, an Arawak language spoken in the multilingual area of the Vaupés in northwest Amazonia, speakers have to specify whether they saw the event happen, or heard it, or know about it because somebody else told them, etc. Omitting an evidential typically results in an ungrammatical and highly unnatural sentence (see details in Aikhenvald, 2004).

If one saw José play football, (1) would be appropriate:

(1) Juse irida di-manika-ka
   José football 3person.masculine.
   singular-play-RECENT.PAST.
   VISUAL
   ‘José played football (we saw it)’

If one just heard the noise of a football game but could not see what was happening, (2) is the thing to say:

(2) Juse irida di-manika-mahka
   José football 3person.masculine.
   singular-play-RECENT.PAST.NONVISUAL
   ‘José played football (we heard it)’

If one sees that the football is not in its normal place in the house, José and his football boots are gone, with crowds of people coming from the football ground, these details are enough for us to infer that José is playing football:

(3) Juse irida di-manika-nihka
   José football 3person.masculine.
   singular-play-RECENT.PAST.INFERRED
   ‘José played football (we infer it from visual evidence)’

If José is not at home on a Sunday afternoon, we can safely say (4). Our inference is based on general knowledge about José’s habits: he usually plays football on Sunday afternoon.

(4) Juse irida di-manika-sika
   José football 3person.masculine.
   singular-play-RECENT.PAST.ASSUMED
   ‘José played football (we infer it from general knowledge)’

If one learnt the information from someone else, then (5) – with a reported evidential – is the only correct option:

(5) Juse irida di-manika-pidaka
   José football 3person.masculine.singular-
   play-REC.P.REP
   ‘José played football (we were told)’

Languages that have ‘evidentiality’ as a grammatical category vary in how many types of evidence they
mark. Some distinguish just two terms (eyewitness and noneyewitness, or reported and everything else), while others six or more terms.

Every language has some lexical way of referring to information source, e.g., English reportedly or allegedly. Such lexical expressions may become grammaticalized as evidential markers. Nonevidential categories may acquire a secondary meaning relating to information source. Conditionals and other nondeclarative moods may acquire overtones of uncertain information obtained from some other source, for which the speaker does not take any responsibility; the best known example is the French conditional (Dendale, 1993). Past tense and perfects acquire overtones of nonfirsthand information in many Iranian and Turkic languages, and resumptive nominalizations and passives (also with a resumptive meaning) can express similar meanings. In other languages, the choice of a complementizer or a type of complement clause may serve to express meanings related to how one knows a particular fact. In English, different complement clauses distinguish an auditory and a hearsay meaning of the verb hear: saying I heard Brazil beating France implies actual hearing, while I heard that Brazil beat France implies a verbal report of the result. These evidential-like extensions are known as ‘evidentiality strategies’ (Aikhenvald, 2003a). Historically, they may give rise to grammatical evidentials.

Languages with evidentials fall into a number of subtypes, depending on how many information sources acquire distinct grammatical marking. Small systems with just two choices cover:

A1. Firsthand vs. nonfirsthand. The firsthand term typically refers to information acquired through vision (or hearing, or other senses), and the nonfirsthand covers all other sources, including information acquired by senses other than seeing, by inference and by verbal report. A useful overview of such systems, especially in Turkic and Iranian languages, is in Johanson and Utas (2000). In (6), from Jarawara, an Arawá language from Brazil (Dixon, 2003), a firsthand evidential marks what the speaker could see, and the nonfirsthand refers to what he could not see.

(6) Wero kisa-me-no,
name get.down-BACK-IMMEDIATE.PAST.
NONFIRSTHAND.masculine
ka-me-hiri-ka
be.in.motion-BACK.
RECENT.PAST.FIRSTHAND.masculine-DECLARATIVE.masculine
‘Wero got down from his hammock (which I didn’t see), and went out (which I did see)’

A2. Nonfirsthand and everything else. The nonfirsthand evidential covers a large domain of information acquired through senses other than seeing, and through hearsay and inference of all sorts, as in many Caucasian languages, and also in Turkic and Finno-Ugric languages (Johanson, 2003; Aikhenvald, 2003a). Forms unmarked for evidentiality are evidentially neutral (they do not have any reference to information source). The nonfirsthand evidential in Abkhaz, a Northwest Caucasian language (Chirikba, 2003), can describe inference, as in (7): that the woman was crying is inferred from the fact that her eyes are red. The same form is used for reported information.

(7) ja-q’a-n ďwa-zaaron
it-be-PAST (she-i-cry-NONFIRSTHAND
‘(when she came up to the light, to the fire, her eyes were very red) Apparently, she had been crying’ (speaker’s inference)

A3. Reported (or ‘hearsay’) and everything else. Systems of this sort with one, reported, evidential, which covers information acquired through someone else’s narration, are widespread all over the world (see, for instance, Silver and Miller (1997: 38) on North American Indian languages). (8) comes from Estonian:

(8) Ta olevat
he be.REPORTED
arsti-teaduskonna
doctor-faculty.GENITIVE.SINGULAR
lõpeta-nud
finish-PAST.PARTICIPLE
‘He is said to have completed his studies of medicine (but I wouldn’t vouch for it)’

A4. Sensory evidence and reported. The sensory evidential refers to something one has seen, heard, smelt, or felt (by touch); the other evidential refers to verbal report, as in the Australian languages Ngiyamba (Wangaaybuwan-Ngiyambaa) and Dyirri (Dieri).

Of these, A1 and A4 are clear-cut two-term systems, while A2 and A3 include an ‘everything else,’ or evidentially neutral, term.

Systems with three choices are:

B1. Direct (or visual), Inferred, and Reported. Depending on the system, the first term can refer to visually acquired information, as in Qiang, a Tibeto-Burman language from China; or to information based on sensory evidence, which covers seeing, hearing, smelling and touching something, as in Mosétén, an isolate from Bolivia, the Jaqi, or Aymara languages.
from Bolivia (Hardman, 1986), and Shilluk (a Western Nilotic language from Sudan). Quechua languages have three evidentiality specifications: direct evidence (-mi), conjectural (-chi, -chr(a)) and reported (-shi) (see Floyd, 1999, on Wanka Quechua):

(9) trabaja-aña-m li-ku-n
direct evidence work-PURPOSE. go-REFLEXIVE-3person MOTION-now-
EVIDENTIAL DIRECT. ‘He's gone to work’ (I saw him go)

(10) chay lika-a-nii
that see-NOMINALISER-1person
juk-ta-chra-a lika-la
other-ACCUSATIVE- CONJECTURAL. EVIDENTIAL-TOPIC
see-PAST ‘The witness (‘my seer’) must have seen
someone else’ (her house was robbed; she
saw someone next to her house, it was not
me, I infer it was (-chr) someone else)

B2. Visual, Nonvisual sensory, Inferred are found in Washo, from the California-Nevada border and in Siona, a West Tucanoan language from Ecuador.

B3. Visual, Nonvisual sensory, Reported are found in Oksapmin (isolate from Papua New Guinea), Maricopa, a Yuman language from Arizona, and Dulong, a Tibeto-Burman language from Burma.

B4. Nonvisual sensory, Inferred, Reported are found in the Samoyedic languages Nganasan and Enets.

B5. Reported, Quotative and everything else. only reported and quoted information requires a special marker in a few North American Indian languages, e.g., Comanche, a Uto-Aztecan language from Oklahoma.

These systems include at least one sensory specification. The nonvisual sensory evidential in B2, B3, and B4 systems typically covers information acquired by hearing, smelling, and touching, and feeling. The inferred evidential refers to inference based on visible traces and assumption, while the reported evidential describes any kind of verbal report. If a language has an evidentially unmarked form, its evidentiality value is typically recoverable from the context.

Four-term systems cover:

C1. Visual, Nonvisual sensory, Inferred, Reported, as in numerous East Tucanoan languages spoken in northwest Amazonia, and in Eastern Pomo, a Pomoan language from California.

C2. Visual or direct evidence, Inferred, Assumed, REPORTED, as in Shipibo-Konibo, a Panoan language from Peru. The sensory evidential in a C2 system can refer to firsthand knowledge acquired through any physical sense, be it vision, hearing, smell, taste, or touch, as in Shipibo-Konibo; or it may refer just to information acquired by seeing, as in Tsafiki, a Barbacoan language from Ecuador (Dickinson, 2000). The visual evidential is formally unmarked; there is one suffix marking information inferred from direct physical evidence, another for inference from general knowledge, and an additional one for reported, or hearsay.

(12) Manuel ano fi-e
Manuel food eat-DECLARATIVE
‘Manuel ate’ (the speaker saw him)

(13) Manuel ano fi-nu-e
Manuel food eat-INFERRED-
DECLARATIVE
‘Manuel ate’ (the speaker sees the dirty dishes)

(14) Manuel ano fi-n-ki-e
Manuel food eat-NOMINALISER-
VERB.CLASS:do-
DECLARATIVE
‘Manuel ate’ (He always eats at 8:00 and it’s
now 9:00)

C3. Direct (or visual) Inferred, Reported, Quotative are found in Cora, a Uto-Aztecan language from Mexico.

Four-term systems involve at least one sensory specification. If there is just one sensory evidential, additional complexity arises within inferred evidentials (as in C2: one evidential then refers to inference based on visible results, and the other one to inference based on reasoning and assumption). Additional choices between reported evidentials involve distinguishing reported and quoted information (C3).

The only type of multiterm system found in more than one language involves:

D1. Visual, Nonvisual sensory, Inferred, Assumed, and Reported. This system was exemplified in (1)–(5) above and is also found in Tucanoan languages in Brazil and Colombia, such as Tuyuca and Desano (Barnes, 1984).
Systems with more than five terms have just two sensory evidentials, and a number of evidentials based on inference and assumption of different kinds, as in the Nambiquara languages from Brazil, and Foe and Fasu, of the Kutubuan family spoken in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea. In some languages, a wide variety of evidential meanings may be expressed in different slots of the verbal word or within a clause. Different evidentiality specifications are ‘scattered’ throughout the grammar, and by no means form a unitary category, as in Makah, a Wakashan language from Washington State (Jacobsen, 1986), in Eskimo languages and in Western Apache, an Athabaskan language from Arizona (de Reuse, 2003: 97).

Evidentials can be expressed with a wide array of morphological mechanisms and processes. There is no correlation between the existence of evidentials and language type. Even pidgins and creoles are known to have had evidentials (as did Chinese Pidgin Russian). Examples of a truly functionally unmarked form in an evidentiality system are rare. The first-hand, visual, or a combined visual and sensory, evidential tends to be less formally marked than any other term. This term is formally unmarked in some languages, as we saw in (12), from Tsafiki. Evidentiality neutral terms are a property of a few systems where an evidential is opposed to ‘everything else’ (these are A2, A3, A5, and B5). This is quite different from omitting an evidential, which can happen either if the information source is clear from the context, or if evidentials are mutually exclusive with some other morpheme, e.g., mood, as in Samoyedic languages.

Cooccurrence of different evidentials in one clause – and the different morphological statues of evidentials – provides a tool for distinguishing evidentiality subsystems within one language. If a language has several distinct evidentiality subsystems, the reported specification is most likely to be set apart from others.

Evidentials differ from other grammatical categories in a number of ways. The information source can be marked more than once in a clause. Two sources can be different, but somehow linked together, as in Tsafiki (Dickinson, 2000: 408):

(15) Manuel anō fi-nu-ti-e
    Manuel food eat-INFERENCE.
    PHYSICAL.EVIDENCE-
    REPORTED-
    DECLARATIVE

‘He said/they say Manuel has eaten’ (they didn’t see him, but they have direct physical evidence)

In Eastern Pomo, the two sources can be fully distinct: describing information source of a blind man, one uses a nonvisual evidential, while the story is told in reported evidential because the narrator heard it from someone else. These features make evidentiality similar to a predication in its own right. Further arguments to the same effect include:

- An evidential may be within the scope of negation, as in Akha, a Tibeto-Burman language (Hansson, 2003). In (16), the visual experience and not the verb itself is being negated:

(16) a`j o NOUN.PARTICLE be
    di he
    a`shu´ và nā VERBAL.PARTICLE who not VISUAL

‘I do not know/can’t see who is beating him’

- An evidential can be questioned, as in Wanka Quechua (Floyd, 1999: 132).
- The ‘truth value’ of an evidential may be different from that of the verb in its clause. Evidentials can be manipulated to tell a lie. One can give a correct information source and wrong information, as in saying ‘He is dead-REPORTED,’ when you were told that he is alive, or correct information and wrong information source, as in saying ‘He is alive-VISUAL,’ when in fact you were told that he is alive, and did not see him die.
- And finally, an evidential can have its own time reference, distinct from the time reference of the event talked about (see Aikhenvald, 2003b, for Tariana).

Evidentials vary in their semantic extensions, depending on the system and its structure. The first-hand term in two term-systems typically refers to visual and often other sensory information, and can be extended to denote the direct participation, control, and volitionality of the speaker. The sensory evidential in A4 systems refers to sensory perception of any kind, without any epistemic or other overtones. The nonfirsthand term in A1 and A2 systems means the opposite of firsthand. The nonfirsthand often implies lack of participation, lack of control, nonspecific evidence (or no evidence at all), inference, and hearsay. An extension to hearsay is sometimes found but is not universal.

There are hardly any epistemic extensions in A1 evidentiality systems with two choices. Languages tend to have other ways of expressing probability and possibility.

In systems with three or more terms, the visual or the direct evidential usually covers information acquired through seeing, and also generally known and observable facts. It may be extended to indicate certainty. The nonvisual sensory evidential in B2, B3, and B4 systems refers to information acquired by
hearing, smell, touch, or feeling (such as an injection), and has no epistemic extensions. No language has a special evidential to cover smell but not auditory information. The inferred evidential typically covers inference based on visual evidence, on nonvisual sensory evidence, on reasoning or on assumption. It is also used to refer to someone else’s ‘internal states’ – feelings, knowledge, and the like. It may acquire an epistemic extension of ‘conjecture,’ uncertainty, and lack of control.

The reported evidential is semantically uniform in systems of all types. Its core meaning is to mark that information comes from someone else’s report. A reported evidential can be used as a quotative, to indicate the exact authorship of the information, or to introduce a direct quote. It can be used for a second-hand or third-hand report. A reported evidential may develop an epistemic extension of unreliable information, as a means of ‘shifting’ responsibility for the information to some other source one does not vouch for, as in Estonian: example (8) has overtones of ‘I don’t vouch for this information.’ Such extensions are not universal. As Valenzuela (2003: 57) remarks for Shipibo-Konibo, the selection of reported evidential over the direct evidential “does not indicate uncertainty or a lesser degree of reliability but simply reported information.”

Languages with multiterm evidentials generally tend to have a multiplicity of other verbal categories, especially ones that relate to modalities. The larger the evidential system, the less likely it is that the evidential terms will develop epistemic extensions.

A nonfirsthand term in a two-term system, or an inferred term in a three-term system, tend to subsume all sorts of information acquired indirectly. These evidentials may then evolve mirative extensions (to do with unexpected information, the ‘unprepared mind’ of the speaker, and speaker’s surprise: DeLancey, 1997, 2001).

When used with a first person subject, the nonfirst-hand evidentials in A1 and A2 systems, nonvisual evidentials in larger systems, and reported in systems of varied types may acquire additional meanings of lack of intention, control, awareness, and volition on the part of the speaker. Verbs covering internal states may require obligatory evidential choice depending on person. As a result of these correlations evidentials acquire the implicit value of person markers.

Evidentials interrelate with clause types and other grammatical categories in the following ways:

1. The maximum number of evidential specifications tends to be distinguished in declarative main clauses.

2. The most frequent evidential in commands is reported (‘do what someone else told you to’). The choice of an evidential in questions may contain reference to the source of information available to the speaker, to the addressee or to both.

3. Fewer evidentials may be used in negative clauses than in positive.

4. Nonindicative modalities (conditional, dubitative and so on) may allow fewer evidential specifications than the indicative. In many languages, evidentials may not be used in future which is, by its nature, a kind of modality.

5. The maximum number of evidential specifications is expected in past tenses. In some languages, as in Jarawara (Dixon, 2003), firsthand and nonfirst-hand evidentials are distinguished only in the past. The source of information for an event is often based on its result, hence the link between firsthand/nonfirsthand, on the one hand, and past, perfect, perfective, and resultative on the other.

Evidentials often come from grammaticalized verbs. The verb of ‘saying’ is a frequent source for reported and quotative evidentials, and the verb ‘feel, think, hear’ can give rise to a nonvisual evidential in large systems. Closed word classes – deictics and locatives – may give rise to evidentials, both in small and in large systems.

Evidentiality strategies involving past tenses and perfects, and nominalizations, can develop into small evidentiality systems (A1 and A2). The creation of a reported evidential may involve reanalysis of subordinate clauses (typically, complement clauses of verbs of speech) as main clauses (as in Estonian). Nonindicative moods and modalities may give rise to a term in a large evidentiality system; however, there are no examples of a modal system developing into a system of evidentials. This lack of evidence confirms the separate status of evidentiality and modality. Large evidential systems tend to be heterogenous in origin.

Evidentiality is a property of a significant number of linguistic areas, including the Balkans, the Baltic area, India, and a variety of locations in Amazonia (Aikhenvald and Dixon, 1998). Evidentials may make their way into contact languages, such as Andean Spanish (see papers in Hardman, 1981).

If several information sources are available – for instance, I both saw and heard a dog barking and later someone told me about it – any one of three evidentials can potentially be used: visual, nonvisual, and reported. In this situation, the visual evidential tends to be preferred. The genre of a text may determine the choice of an evidential. Traditional stories are typically cast in reported evidential. Evidentials
can be manipulated in discourse as a stylistic device. Switching from a reported to a direct (or visual) evidential creates the effect of the speaker’s participation and confidence. Switching to a nonfirsthand evidential often implies a backgrounded aside. Evidentiality is interlinked with conventionalized attitudes to information and precision in stating the source of information (Hardman, 1981, 1986).

See also: Arawak Languages; Epistemology and Language; Inference: Abduction, Induction, Deduction; Mood and Modality in Grammar; Reported Speech: Pragmatic Aspects; Tense, Mood, Aspect: Overview.

Bibliography