

# The construction of stereotypes through language: the case of evidential markers

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to link the existence of some cultural stereotypes such as indirectness and tentativeness -attributed to high context cultures and negative politeness cultures- with listeners' interpretation of the use of evidential markers.

## 1 Introduction

Following Hall (1976), in high-context cultures the interpretation of meaning relies heavily on context as for example Asian and Arabic countries—like Japan, Korea, Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, etc. (Lewis 2006) and English (Grainger and Mills 2016) and Irish (Kallen 2005). In contrast, low-context cultures tend to be explicit, clear and direct with minimal inference (American, German and Dutch cultures, vid. Havertake 1994, Lewis 2006). Concerning negative politeness cultures (Asian, Arabic countries, Scandinavian, English, Irish, etc.; Brown & Levinson 1987; Havertake 1994, Kallen 2005), they avoid intruding on others personal territory - not to impose on the listener - and involve indirectness). On the other hand, evidentiality is the indication of the source of information on which speakers rely when stating something, which is divided into inferential and reportative evidentiality. The inferential expressions *it seems*, *it appears*, *it must* convey that speaker accesses the information through an inferential process based on perceptual evidences or based on reasoning from knowledge of the world. The reportative evidentials *it is said*, *reportedly*, *apparently*, *allegedly*, etc. show that the propositional content of the speech has been previously uttered by another person or people, in the absence of the

actual speaker (vid. Wiemer & Marín-Arrese, 2022).

## 2 Evidentiality and related notions

As it is known, one of the bases for the construction of cultural stereotypes lies in the different ways individuals interact linguistically. Focusing on verbal interaction, we consider that the indication of the source of information contributes to the creation of cultural stereotypes, since cultures show a different way of using evidential devices, and therefore, a different way of interpreting it. An obvious example of this is the following. In many aboriginal languages (Quichua, Nanti, Western Apache, etc., Nuckolls 2012) evidentiality constitutes an obligatory category that confers a social status on the speaker according to which he/she is recognized as socially well-integrated, and reliable person. If the evidential devices are omitted or misused, the speaker is considered a liar, opaque, and unreliable: he/she speaks for the sake of speaking without any informative basis (Mansfield 2019, Hintz & Hintz 2017). In languages with non-obligatory evidentiality, the omission of this category is the default situation. The appearance of evidentiality is generally interpreted as a manifestation of attenuation and lack of certainty (Mushin 2013) and stereotypes can also emerge. In this paper we will focus on non-evidential languages in general (e.g. European languages).

Based on the theory of information territory (Kamio 1997), it is argued that evidentiality in discourse shows instances of use that are not strictly evidential but rather determined by the epistemic vigilance of territories (Sperber & Wilson 1995, Heritage 2012).

The perception of different territories of information that belong to each participant - territory of the speaker, territory of the

listener, common territory shared by both participants or common ground, and territory beyond the reach of both- entails epistemic rights for the participants. For example, the information obtained through external and internal direct experience, knowledge related to the speaker's field of specialization, and information about people, objects and events close to the speakers belong to the speaker's territory (Kamio 1997). In this case, the speaker possesses epistemic right over the information and the information usually does not require evidential justification. On the contrary, if the speaker wants to make a statement about someone else's state of mind, he/she must use an evidential form that expresses how the speaker came to know something that is not in their territory of information.

As it is known, crossing the boundary of our own information territory and intruding into the listener's is to claim more epistemic rights for ourselves than we are entitled to, thus infringing the social norms of verbal conduct. Thus, the awareness-raising of other people's territories in conjunction with negative politeness leads to the use of evidential, since they facilitate the speaker to demarcate territories of information in three ways:

1.- The information is outside his/her territory, and consequently, he/she does not consider him/herself to have epistemic primacy:

(1) It seems that there will be good weather at the weekend (inferential evidentiality)

(2) Apparently his death was due to poison (reportative evidentiality)

2.- It delimitates information belonging to the territory of the speaker, but of which he/she is not certain:

(3) Apparently / it is said that/ It seems that my partner cheats on me (reportative/ inferential)

3.- Another case is related to situations in which the propositional content belongs to the listener's territory. In these situations the listener has epistemic primacy, and therefore, more epistemic rights to make assertive statements than the speaker. The intention of the speaker is to corroborate the

information, and to show negative politeness:

(4) Apparently you are going to move to another city (reportative, not lack of certainty)

(5) It seems that you are annoyed this morning (inferential, not lack of certainty)

(6) It is said that you were at the Oscars (reportative)

Nevertheless, there is a difference in speakers' perception of whether a certain piece of information belongs to their territory or not (Kamio 1997), since the way the territory of information is organized in languages is influenced by culture and, consequently, its interpretation changes culturally. The speakers transfer their system of territory of information into other cultures, arising stereotypes.

Thus, the situations in which the speaker perceives the need to resort to evidential cueing is cultural dependent, as the interactants negotiate differently the boundaries of territories of knowledge. A proof of this is the higher use of evidentials in British English and Japanese in comparison with American English (Kamio 1997, Trent 1998, Precht 2003).

### 3 Conclusion

The fact that evidentiality guide interlocutors to link relevant information and help them discern the different territories makes the message more implicit and open-ended. Implicitness is a characteristic of high-context cultures, which can integrate the use of evidentials as a matter of course. In low-context cultures, where communication is direct and explicit, they are more reluctant to make use of evidentials except in the necessary cases (as a strict source of information or as a strong nuance of doubt). We can conclude that low and high context cultures show a different perception of the territories of information. The latter are very sensible to the territories of information of each participant and handle implicitness as a useful part of the language. Consequently, evidentials are more frequently used. This difference of use in evidential expressions reinforces the cultural stereotype of indirectness and tentativeness attributed to high context cultures.

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## Appendix

We present examples of evidential units that demarcates territory rather than a lack of certainty in Galician (a Romance language spoken in the autonomous region of Galicia in the North West of Spain, which we consider to be one of the cultures of high context and negative politeness). In languages whose culture does not rank as high-context as Galician (e.g. Spanish) the evidential markers would be omitted since the speaker knows with certainty what he/she is claiming. In Galician the speaker is interested in marking that he/she has accessed this information not by him/herself but from external sources, even if he/she is sure of it. The information marked by the evidential belongs to different territories in Galician and Spanish. The use of evidentiality helps to create stereotypes (e.g. attenuation, implicitness, tentativeness and indirectness) about the language that uses them because of the different interpretation implied by high- and low-context cultures.

Examples for this study have been drawn from the written Corpus: Corpus of Reference of Current Galician (CORGA). <http://corpus.cirp.es/corga/buscas>

Galician evidential markers: *seica* ('apparently', 'it seems', 'it is said', 'so'), *disque* ('it is said'), *parece* ('it seems').

### Examples

(1) Logo fomos ver teatro, *seica* botaban "O velorio" do grupo Troula, mais cando chegamos, as localidades estaban esgotadas. Perante esta situación decidimos tomar algo no Universal.

Then we went to the theatre, *apparently* they were showing "El velatorio" by the group Fiesta, but when we arrived, the tickets were sold out. In this situation we decided to have a drink at the Universal.

(2) Arrepiouseme todo o corpo, saíronme as bagoas, *seica* chorei, aínda que disimulando como podía. Tan lonxe do meu país aquela música!

My whole body started to shake, my eyes welled up with tears, it seems that/I guess I cried, even though I was trying my best not to. That music so far away from my home country!

(3) *Seica* estiveches na casa de María.

*So / apparently* you've been to Maria's house.

(4) Xa deixaron de traballa-la terra, logo?

- Pois *disque* si. Xa hai moitísimo tempo.

- Have they already stopped working the fields, then?

- Well, *apparently yes/it seems* so. They already did a long time ago.

(5) -Que, Roxelio, *seica* non hai moito que facer. Imos tomar un vaso?

Then, Roxelio, *it seems/apparently* you have not much to do. Shall we go for a drink?

(6) Eiquí non hai nin restos de don Xaquín, as cousas están todas en orden e, ó menos así ó primeiro visual *non parece faltar nada*.

Here there is no trace of Mr. Xaquín, everything is in order and, at least the first impression is that nothing *seems to be missing*.