

# Studying evidentiality in language

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[github/sverhees/site/other](https://github.com/sverhees/site/other)

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- ▶ More commonly: encoding of information source
- ▶ In other words, how people know what they are talking about: personal experience, a wild guess, hearsay, etc.

# Evidentiality

- (1)      kieylali-k    kan-n-tika  
         peccary-OBJ to.die-VS-EVID:INFER.CERT/PST  
         hala-n-dana  
         to.stink-VS-EVID:SENS.CERT/PRS  
         ‘The peccary **died**; (because) it **stinks**.’

Via Eberhard (2018: 347)

Sabanê (Nambikwara)

# Outline

1. What is evidentiality?
2. Cognition and culture
3. Fieldwork on evidentiality

# What is evidentiality?



# Franz Boas (1858-1942)



Suffixes marking “source of information” in Kwakiutl  
(Kwakwaka’wakw) (**Boas 1911**)



*“The man is sick. We express by this sentence, in English, the idea a definite single man at present sick. In Kwakiutl this sentence would have to be rendered by an expression which would mean, in the vaguest possible form that could be given to it, definite man near him invisible sick near him invisible. [...] An idiomatic expression of the sentence in this language would, however, be much more definite, and would require an expression somewhat like the following, That invisible man lies sick on his back on the floor of the absent house.”*

(Boas 1911: 43)

“[...] thus the Kwakiutl, whose language I have used several times as an example, would require a form indicating whether this is a new subject introduced in conversation or not; and, in case the speaker had not seen the sick person himself, **he would have to express whether he knows by hearsay or by evidence that the person is sick, or whether he has dreamed it.**”

(**Ibid.**)

# The term “evidential”

- ▶ Boas first described a category of information source as a general concept  
(Aikhenvald 2004: 12–13)
- ▶ But exponents of this category had been described much earlier: observations by Pāṇini on Sanskrit – from the 4th century BCE – seem to be the oldest  
(Friedman 2018: 125)

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- ▶ But exponents of this category had been described much earlier: observations by Pāṇini on Sanskrit – from the 4th century BCE – seem to be the oldest  
([Friedman 2018](#): 125)
- ▶ According to [Friedman \(2018\)](#), A.M. Halpern was the first to use the term **evidential**: as a descriptive term for a verb suffix in the Quechuan language Yuma (indicating direct evidence)  
([Halpern 1946](#): 286)

# The term “evidential”

- ▶ Roman Jakobson coined the term **evidential** for a typological category of the verb in 1957

“**Evidential** is a tentative label for the verbal category which takes into account three events – a narrated event, a speech event, and a narrated speech event, namely the alleged source of information about the narrated event. The speaker reports an event on the basis of someone else’s report (quotative, i.e. hearsay evidence), or a dream (revelative evidence), or a guess (presumptive evidence) or of his own previous experience (memory evidence).”

(Jakobson 1957: 46)

“To our question, what happened to the steamer Evdokija, a Bulgarian first answered: *zaminala* “it is claimed to have sailed”, and then added: *zamina* “I bear witness; it sailed”.  
(*Ibid.*)

# The term “evidential”

- ▶ Importantly, Jakobson brought together information source suffixes from Native American languages and indirect verb tenses from Bulgarian as instances of the same category (Plungian 2010: 26)



# Evidentiality in typology

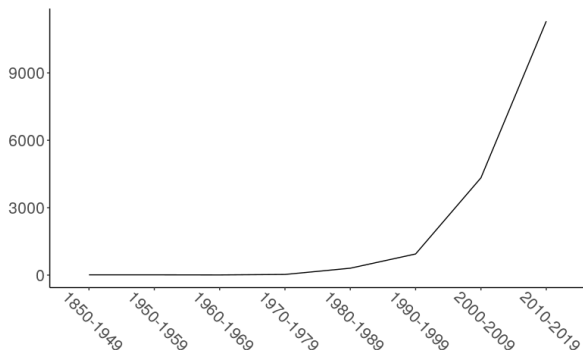
- ▶ Research started growing exponentially only from the mid-80's onwards
- ▶ After the publication of *Evidentiality: the linguistic coding of epistemology* (Chafe & Nichols 1986)

# Evidentiality in typology

- ▶ Chafe & Nichols (1986) defined evidentiality in terms of “attitude towards knowledge”, rather than simple information source marking
- ▶ They departed from a broad universal semantics, and included all kinds of linguistic devices (grammatical suffixes, lexical items)

# Research on evidentiality

**Figure 1:** Search results for keyword “evidentiality” in Google Scholar by decade



Retrieved April 2019.

The book offers insight into “the ways in which ordinary people, unhampered by philosophical traditions, naturally regard the **source and reliability of their knowledge**. Simultaneously we can learn a great deal about an important ingredient of language itself, the ways in which languages agree and differ in their emphases, and in the **kinds of devices** they make available to their speakers.”  
(Chafe & Nichols 1986: vii)

“One of the current misconceptions concerning evidentiality is to do with a gratuitous extension of this term to cover **every way of expressing uncertainty, probability and one’s attitude to the information**, no matter whether it is expressed with **grammatical** or with **lexical** means; or whether it is the primary meaning of a category or not [...]”  
(Aikhenvald 2003: 19)

# Epistemic modality

- ▶ Evidentiality is often associated with **epistemic modality**, i.e. the speaker's degree of certainty and commitment regarding the truth value of a piece of information (**Boye 2012**: 1–6)
- ▶ There have been some attempts to equate or identify the two in the past

# Epistemic modality

The notion that information source marking is inherently connected to reliability and certainty seems intuitively plausible.

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- (2) Smith also owns one of Elton John's old pianos.
- (3) Smith also **reportedly** owns one of Elton John's old pianos.

via: [The Washington Post](#)



# Epistemic modality

- ▶ Plungian (2001: 354) aptly called this a “cultural stereotype”
- ▶ There is no cross-linguistically valid one-to-one mapping between certain source types and reliability judgments
- ▶ By now: general consensus that the two categories are distinct, though the nature of their relationship remains a matter of debate (see discussion in Wiemer (2018))

“Well, I won’t believe it till I see it, ”  
said the man. “An’ then I dunno  
whether I’ll believe it or not.”

*The Circus of Dr. Lao* by Charles G. Finney (1935)

# Grammar vs. semantics

- ▶ Another central debate is whether the term evidentiality should be reserved for grammatical encoding
- ▶ A.Y. Aikhenvald is the main proponent of a grammar-central approach, explicitly defining evidentiality as “grammatical marking of information source” (Aikhenvald 2018: 1)
- ▶ Most others treat evidentiality as a universal semantics which can be expressed with various linguistic means

# Grammar vs. semantics

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- ▶ A more substantial problem is how to distinguish different types

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- ▶ A more substantial problem is how to distinguish different types
- ▶ Aikhenvald (2004) distinguishes three main types of expressions: grammatical marking, lexical items, and “evidential strategies” → forms that can express an evidential value on occasion in context, but have a different main function

# Grammar vs. lexicon

- ▶ **Grammatical** marking (as opposed to lexical) consists of “closed systems, which can be realized by bound morphemes, clitics and words which belong to full grammatical classes, such as prepositions, preverbs or particles” (Aikhenvald 2004: 11)

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# Evidential strategies

e.g. modal verbs in Germanic languages

- (4) Er **soll** sich das Bein gebrochen haben  
he must:3.PRS self DEF leg broken have  
'Apparently he has broken his leg.' / 'He  
*reportedly* broke his leg.'  
via (Aikhenvald 2004: 150)

German

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via (Aikhenvald 2004: 150) German

cf. *He must have broken his leg.*

# Evidential strategies vs. grammar

- ▶ Evidential strategies are forms that can express an evidential value on occasion in context, but this is not their “main meaning”
- ▶ Grammatical evidentials commonly originate from strategies
- ▶ Many forms are in the process of evolution from strategy to grammar; it is unclear where to draw boundaries between them

# Inference and semantic change

A key mechanism in semantic change and grammaticalization is **inference**

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Do not confuse various applications of the term:

- ▶ Inference in naive epistemology
- ▶ Inference as a value in systems of evidential marking
- ▶ Inference in cognitive psychology
- ▶ Inference as a mechanism for semantic change

# Inference and semantic change

“Another commonly cited mechanism that propels semantic change toward greater grammaticization is **inference** or the **conventionalization of implicature** [...] In this type of change, a [grammatical form] that often occurs in an environment in which a certain inference may be made can come to be associated with that inference to such an extent that the inference becomes part of the explicit meaning of the gram.”  
(Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 25)

# Inference and semantic change

*since* as a temporal → causal conjunction

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- (5) Since Susan left him, John has been very miserable.
- (6) Since I have a final exam tomorrow, I won't be able to go out tonight.

New meaning derives from a common inference that correlation implies causation.

(Hopper & Traugott 2003: 78–84)

# Evidentiality and implicatures

- ▶ Evidential meanings rarely emerge alone
- ▶ In many languages a single form conveys different meanings, including hearsay, logical inference, mirative (new, unexpected information) and epistemic modality (the speaker does not vouch for the truth of the information)

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- ▶ The status of these various meanings is unclear
- ▶ One may be a pragmatic extension of the other, or they may be two sides of the same coin → Interpretations of another, more abstract category such as “mediative”

- (7)      řali-r    miča    qini-b-o      ek'wa  
ali-ERG dagger break-N-CVB AUX.PRS
1. 'Ali (as I found out) broke [his] dagger.'
  2. '(I see that) Ali broke [his] dagger.'
  3. '(Apparently) Ali broke [his] dagger.'

From (Tatevosov 2007: 361)      Bagvalal (East Caucasian)

# Mediative

“When [speakers] use the ordinary, unmarked forms, they are stating the facts purely and simply as they know them, with no commentary. But, when they choose to use the special, marked forms, they are expressing them **MEDIATELY**, through their acknowledgment of the event, without specifying how it happened, and in so doing they are placing themselves, so to speak, at a distance from what they are saying. In the case of hearsay the utterance implies ‘as I hear’; in the case of inference it implies ‘as I infer’; in the case of unexpected perception it implies ‘as I see.’” (Lazard 1999: 95)

# Mediative

[...] Speakers are somehow split into two persons, the one who speaks and the one who has heard or infers or perceives. This operation distances them from their own discourse, whereas in neutral expression they adhere to their own discourse by virtue of the very laws of linguistic intercourse. The **real value** of the forms in question is this **abstract distance**, not any consideration of the nature of the source of the speaker's knowledge of the facts.”

(Ibid.)

# Grammar vs. non-grammar

- ▶ Lack of empirical criteria leads to contradictory classifications
- ▶ How to identify the (main) meaning of a grammatical form?
- ▶ Repercussions for methodology



# Semantic domain

Personal experience	Active participation		Direct
	Sensory access	Visual	
		Auditory	
Inference	From results		Indirect
	From reasoning		
Hearsay	Secondhand Thirdhand		

\*Shaded grey = rare distinctions.

# Floating notions

- ▶ Information from **dreams** can be framed as direct / visual access, or as unreal and thus inherently unwitnessed; Kwakiutl supposedly has a dedicated revelative marker
- ▶ **General knowledge** that cannot be ascribed to a specific source (type) is marked as direct / personal (minimal mediation), inference from reasoning (assumption), reportative (in Mi'kmaw) or has a dedicated marker

# Hearsay

Aikhenvald (2004) makes a distinction of **reportative** vs. **quotative**: reportative = reported information without reference to a specific source ('it is said that Y'); quotative = reported information with reference to a source ('X said Y').

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Quotatives often simply designate a proposition as being a quote, rather than specifying access per se, so it is debatable whether they are strictly speaking evidentials.

# Hearsay

- (8) he-w hek'a c'innoɫ-o bis:i-di ɤot:tɯ  
DEM-M man know.CAUS-IMP 2Pl-ERG QUOT  
ɫodi! hit'on χan.š-tɯ.  
REP say.AOR king-ERG  
“You find out what kind of man [did this]!”<sub>QUOT</sub>  
said<sub>REP</sub> the king.’

(Dirr 1906)

Andi (East Caucasian)

# Hearsay

- (9)      ilo-de            du- $\lambda$ a      yocha b-eq'-are= $\lambda$ 'ehe  
         mother-ERG 2SG.DAT book N-get-PFV=QUOT  
          $\tilde{a}\lambda$ ehe            b-ik'<sup>w</sup>-ari is:i- $\lambda$ a  
         hear-CVB.N N-be-PFV 1PL.EXCL-DAT  
         'Mother bought you a book, we heard.'

(Magomedbekova 1967: 107)      Akhvakh (East Caucasian)

# Hearsay

- (10)      ʔá lí      ná      kònò sù-wókkó      músá      kò  
            <name> QUOT REP    3SG:M-see:PFV <name> do  
            má ytà  
            vomit:VN

‘There is a rumour that Ali said he saw Musa vomiting.’

(Storch 2018: 625)

Maaka (Chadic)

# Hearsay

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<name> QUOT REP 3SG:M-see:PFV <name> do  
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‘There is a rumour that Ali said he saw Musa  
vomiting.’

(Storch 2018: 625)

Maaka (Chadic)

→ Seems to convey information attributed to a specific  
source, rather than simply delimit a quotation



# Active participation

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- ▶ Some languages distinguish active participation from direct observation (see Sarvasy (2018: 646–650) on Foe)
- ▶ Tibetic languages famously distinguish egophoric access, which is considered a distinct category (Floyd, Norcliffe & San Roque 2018)
- ▶ Egophoric covers personal knowledge: active participation, thoughts, inner sensations (Tournadre & LaPolla 2014); in some cases requires control (Widmer & Zúñiga 2017)

# Egophoricity

“The Tibetic Egophoric category is not part of the evidential system; it is an independent, and more fundamental, category which affects evidential meanings that come under its shadow. Rather than an evidential category, Egophoric is a category to which evidentiality is not applicable.”  
(DeLancey 2018: 584)

# Evidentiality as an indexical category

- ▶ Remember Jakobson's **narrated speech event** – an intermediary event designating a relationship between an event and an origo (usually the speaker)

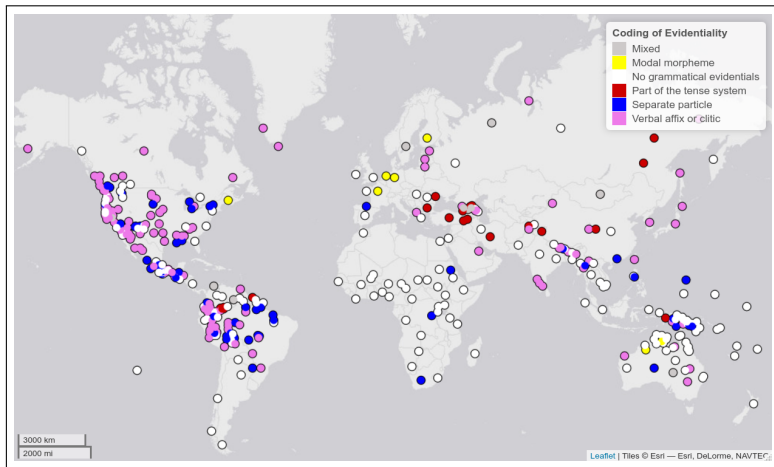
# Evidentiality as an indexical category

- ▶ Remember Jakobson's **narrated speech event** – an intermediary event designating a relationship between an event and an origo (usually the speaker)
- ▶ Some recent functional studies revisit the idea of evidentiality as an indexical category (similar to tense, spatial deixis, etc.) (**Hanks 2014**, **Bergqvist 2018**)
- ▶ And similar views are common in formal semantic approaches (see an overview in **Speas (2018)**)

# Evidentiality as an indexical category

- ▶ Evidentials by default refer to the information source (or access) of the speaker
- ▶ Indexical approaches can account for shifts, including:
  - ▶ Speaker to character in a story
  - ▶ Speaker to addressee in a question
  - ▶ Extension from speaker to include addressee in “shared knowledge” markers

# Areal types



\*Reproduction of (de Haan 2013) made with Lingtypology (Moroz 2017) for R (R Core Team 2018)

What is evidentiality?

# Interim summary — evidentiality is:

- ▶ A relatively new but very fashionable category in linguistics
- ▶ Relatively rare if you define it as *grammatical* encoding of information source
- ▶ Universal if you define it as *linguistic* encoding of information source
- ▶ Alternatively, you can define it as an indexical category specifying the relationship between an origo (usually the speaker) and an event in terms of access to information about the event



# Interim summary

- ▶ Major subdomains are direct experience, inference, and reported speech
- ▶ Some types of information sources (e.g. dreams, general knowledge) display a high degree of cross-linguistic variation in terms of how they are marked
- ▶ And some **values** remain controversial in typology

# Interim summary

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- ▶ Some types of information sources (e.g. dreams, general knowledge) display a high degree of cross-linguistic variation in terms of how they are marked
- ▶ And some **values** remain controversial in typology
- ▶ There is a general lack of empirical criteria to identify evidentials: either as markers of evidentiality, or as *grammatical* markers of evidentiality

# Abbreviations I

1	first person	54
2	second person	53, 54
3	third person	33, 34, 55, 56
AOR	aorist	53
AUX	auxiliary	45
CAUS	causative	53
CERT	certainty	4
CVB	converb	45, 54
DAT	dative	54
DEF	definite	33, 34
DEM	demonstrative	53
ERG	ergative	45, 53, 54
EVID	evidential	4
EXCL	exclusive	54
IMP	imperative	53
INFER	inferential	4
M	masculine	53, 55, 56
N	neuter	45, 54
OBJ	object	4
PFV	perfective	54–56

# Abbreviations II

PL	plural	54
PRS	present	4, 33, 34, 45
PST	past	4
QUOT	quotative	53–56
REP	reportative	53, 55, 56
SENS	sensory evidential	4
SG	singular	54–56
VN	verbal noun	55, 56
VS	verbal suffix	4

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