

Review of Aikhenvald, Alexandra (2004) *Evidentiality*. Oxford University Press. Oxford.<sup>1</sup>

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Although this book begins with a plea that it is “far from being the last word on evidentiality systems,” it is certainly the most important current resource for anyone interested in the nature and typology of evidentials, that is, morphemes indicating the information source or type of evidence that the speaker has for the truth of a sentence. Aikhenvald (hereafter ‘AA’), who has herself done extensive field work on evidentials in languages of Amazonia, has brought together data on over 500 different languages, summarizing virtually all the existing information on evidential systems. The book addresses a wide range of questions about the interaction of evidentials with other areas of grammar, and is written so as to be maximally useful to readers of any theoretical persuasion. The thirty pages of references provide a comprehensive collection of all existing data on evidential systems, and so in this review I will mostly limit my citations to works that AA does not include, either because they are too recent or because they don’t introduce new data.

While all languages have the means to specify information source with optional adverbs, adverbial phrases, higher predicates, etc., AA argues cogently in Chapter 1 for the importance of a typology of those languages that have obligatory morphological marking of information source.<sup>2</sup> In the languages that she discusses, every declarative sentence must include a morpheme specifying the type of information the Speaker has for the truth of the sentence<sup>3</sup>. The articles in Chafe and Nichols (1986) brought these obligatory evidentials to the attention of linguists working on languages that don’t have such systems, and recent efforts to analyze their properties reveal that they pose challenges for theories of epistemic modality (de Haan 1999, 2001, Izvorski 1998, Chung 2005, Matthewson et al 2006), the semantics/pragmatics interface

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<sup>2</sup> An excellent overview of the properties of evidentials can be found in Rooryck 2001a, 2001b.

<sup>3</sup> AA discusses the fact that it is sometimes difficult to tell whether evidential marking is obligatory if a language has evidentials but allows an unmarked form, which is interpreted as being known through personal experience or otherwise unassailable evidence.

(Faller 2002, Garrett 2001) and the syntax of the “left periphery.” (Cinque 1999, Camacho 2003, Speas 2004a,b, Blaine and DeChaine in press). AA argues strongly that evidential morphemes are distinct from the related categories of epistemic modality, illocutionary force, Speaker attitude, point of view and personal reliability. Thus, her book lays the groundwork for investigations of how evidentials are related to these other categories.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the different kinds of evidential systems, organized into sections according to how many categories of information source the language distinguishes. In each section, AA compares and contrasts the categories distinguished by various languages. Since the work of Willett (1988) it has been observed that the meanings of evidential morphemes are far more restricted than the meanings of epistemic predicates or adverbs. Willett found that languages generally mark oppositions among no more than four types of information source. AA finds a few languages that have been described as having more complex systems, but for the most part her survey confirms Willett’s observation. She finds that evidential systems make use of the following “recurring parameters”(p. 63): VISUAL (information obtained through seeing), NON-VISUAL SENSORY (information acquired through hearing, smell, taste and sometimes touch), INFERENCE (information based on tangible evidence or result), ASSUMPTION (information based on logical reasoning, assumption or general knowledge) HEARSAY (reported information with no reference to specific reporter) and QUOTE (information from a quoted source). No language marks all six categories, and languages seem to differ in exactly how they differentiate these categories. For example, some languages use the sensory evidential for any information learned by touching, whereas others restrict the sensory evidential to touch not controlled by the Speaker, using an assumption evidential for cases where the Speaker

touches something on purpose. Chapter 2 ends with a very useful chart summarizing the various types of evidential systems.

In compiling all this information, AA confronts the problem of inconsistent and misleading terminology, and she gives clear definitions of the terms she is using. The problems do persist, though, particularly in the use of the terms “visual” and “non-visual sensory.” Some language descriptions use the term “visual” to mean that the speaker actually witnessed the event (‘He left - I saw it’) while others use the term “visual” to mean that the speaker saw some results of the event, such as smoke, footprints, crumbs, etc. Similarly, the “nonvisual sensory” label is used by some researchers to mean that the Speaker internally sensed or experienced the event and by others to mean that the Speaker perceived an odor, sound, taste or sensation resulting from the event. AA works to make such distinctions clear, but the terminology from her sources still makes it difficult to compare languages.

Chapter 3 surveys the grammatical means used to mark evidentiality. Here AA raises questions about the widespread assumption that evidentials constitute a paradigmatic set of forms, of a single syntactic category. (See for example Cinque 1999, Johanson 2003 and Speas 2004a). This question is especially pertinent since the various evidence types look quite dissimilar in the two most detailed formal semantic accounts of evidentials (Garrett 2001 and Faller 2002). AA reports that many languages do mark evidentiality with verbal affixes that are mutually exclusive, apparently forming a paradigmatic system. However, crosslinguistically she finds “hardly any morphological limitations on how evidentials can be expressed.” (p. 69) In other words, languages in which evidential markers are fused with tense, or are clitics, particles, copulas or auxiliaries undermine the view that evidential systems are paradigmatic. Furthermore, in some languages, different evidence types are marked by different morphological means. In

AA's view, evidentials form a coherent semantic category, but are not necessarily grammaticized as a single morphosyntactic category.

This chapter also includes discussion of how evidential morphemes may co-occur in a given language, and of the relative scope of evidential markers. AA cites two examples where negation seems to take scope over an evidential and a few cases where evidentials take scope within questions (thus questioning the information source). However, these cases are so rare that they may well turn out to be exceptions that prove the rule that evidentials always have scope over the entire sentence.

In Chapter 4, AA surveys the various ways in which languages extend non-evidential categories to express evidential meanings. The constructions used in these "evidential strategies" include non-indicative moods, modals and perfect or resultative aspects, nominalizations, complementation, person marking, demonstratives and reported speech. She makes the point that these strategies are not universal, and that the evidential meanings that the constructions take on are not inherent to the construction's meaning. However, the core meaning of a construction does contribute to its tendency to be used as an evidential strategy. AA points out that irrealis moods can acquire evidential overtones because Speakers are unlikely to be able to vouch for unrealized events, and so one can infer that the Speaker's source of information is probably not firsthand. Perfect and resultative constructions (including resultative nominalizations) focus on results, and "an inference is made based on some traces or results of a previous action or state." (p. 112) Thus, perfect and resultative constructions can be used to imply that the Speaker's knowledge comes from inference. In many cases, the strategies discussed by AA are stylistically marked, such as the use of the conditional in newspaper reports or scientific texts. In other cases, such as the use of nominalizations to distance the Speaker from the action, it is likely that

researchers will find the strategies to be more pervasive than previously thought. (For example, in English “The fighting started” implies more speaker distance than “We/They started fighting”)

Chapter 5 delves more deeply into how languages differ in the semantic territory covered by each evidential category. The discussion here reinforces AA’s warning that the names of the evidential categories can be misleading and one must look beyond the labels to find what languages have in common and where they actually differ. As mentioned above, the “visual” and “nonvisual sensory” labels are the most problematic. “Visual” evidence for an event might mean either witnessing the event or seeing results of the event, and this distinction affects whether “visual” evidence is in the same category as personal experience and one’s own internal state. Similarly, the “nonvisual evidence” label is misleading: From AA’s description, this term seems to refer to internal experiences of sounds, tastes, smells and feelings, (eg., The baby is crying - I hear it) and as such it is generally in the same category as one’s own internal states. However, AA seems to consider “nonvisual sensory” evidence to be less direct and reliable than visual or “direct” evidence, which we would expect if “nonvisual sensory evidence” meant results of the event perceived through hearing, taste, etc. (eg. Mary was here - I know because I smell her perfume.) AA tries to clarify the terminology by distinguishing “strictly visual” evidence from information obtained through seeing and information acquired through any emotional sense, but it was still not clear to me what “strictly visual” information is. This problem arises in large part because the languages with evidentials tend to be underdocumented, so it is difficult to find parallel examples from different languages. Because of this, it wasn’t clear in the end whether the semantic complexity summarized in the charts on pp. 188-191 (which contrast with the relatively simple picture of the “semantic parameters” on p. 65 in Chapter 2) reflects interesting

differences in how languages categorize evidence or just differences in the existing descriptions of the languages.

In Chapter 6, AA defends the claim of DeLancey (1997) that evidentials are distinct from markers of “mirativity”, that is, unexpected new information, Speaker’s “unprepared mind” or surprise. She shows how evidentials may acquire mirative overtones, but argues that this is never part of the core meaning of evidential morphemes. These mirative extensions of non-firsthand markers suggest that the evidentials express a more abstract relationship between the event being communicated and the event of acquiring the knowledge, perhaps along the lines of the analyses of Isvorski (1998) and Chung (2005).

Chapter 7 discusses how grammatical Person affects the meaning or restricts the use of evidentials. Evidentials involve an implicit witness or possessor of evidence (the “Validator,” in the terminology of Stirling 1993). Since this evidence-possessor is usually the Speaker, sentences with first person arguments often acquire special connotations. Some languages seem to restrict certain evidentials to first person or non-first person contexts, while others are more flexible in allowing evidentials to take on connotations of volitionality or perspective. AA finds that at least in some languages, the implicit observer does not always have to be first person. When languages allow evidentials on questions, the evidential usually pertains to evidence that the addressee may have. Also, some languages allow constructions in which the Speaker is taking the addressee’s point of view, using, for example, a non-firsthand evidential when the Speaker in fact has firsthand knowledge but the addressee does not. The examples discussed all seem to arise in contexts where the Speaker believes that the Addressee is not expecting the information, i.e., that the information will be new to the Addressee. It would be interesting to explore the relationship between these extensions of non-firsthand with the mirative extensions, which also

use non-firsthand to indicate new information. AA cites some cases as possible examples of third person implicit observers, but these all involve reportative evidentials, where the Speaker is in fact the “observer” of the report-type evidence, even though someone other than the speaker may have witnessed the event itself.

Chapter 8 explores the behavior of evidentials in different clause types and the interaction of evidentials with negation, non-indicative modalities, tense and aspect. These topics are complex, and also underdocumented. AA does an excellent job of compiling what is known so far, in a way that lays the groundwork for a great deal of future research.

Some languages restrict evidentials to declarative sentences, while others allow evidentials (generally a reduced set) in questions. Some languages have a distinct evidential morpheme or set of morphemes for questions. Many languages restrict evidentials to matrix clauses. In fact, all of the examples AA gives of evidentials in dependent clauses involve adjunct clauses, although she mentions some cases where evidentials are found in the complements of verbs of speech. For many of the languages in which evidentials have been studied, there is still relatively little known about the possibilities in dependent clauses. AA does report that in no language is the evidential system more elaborate in dependent clauses than in matrix clauses.

Some languages restrict the co-occurrence of evidentials with non-indicative modalities, but many allow sentences with evidentials along with irrealis mood, epistemic modals, dubitative markers, etc. These co-occurrence data support AA’s claim that evidentials should not be reduced to any of these other categories.

Tense is closely tied to evidentiality, because the different evidential categories imply different temporal relations between the time of the event, the discourse time and the time at which the knowledge was acquired. For example, reportative evidence is necessarily acquired

after the event, but prior to discourse time, whereas visual witness-type evidence is generally acquired at the same time as the event. Some languages have evidentials that also express tense distinctions, and this tense usually indicates the time at which the evidence was acquired. Adding to data from Chapter 3 on the relative scope of tense and evidentials, here AA discusses how tense and aspect affect the choice of evidential, and how time can be encoded in evidentials crosslinguistically. This chapter doesn't include a discussion of languages in which evidentials are homophonous with aspect (such as Bulgarian), presumably because AA considers such cases to involve evidential strategies rather than pure evidentials.

Chapter 9 discusses the historical origins, diffusion and loss of evidentials. The morphemes in evidential systems often have heterogeneous sources, and the various evidentials can develop from verbs, adverbs, tense/aspect, spatiotemporal deictics or non-indicative modalities. AA confirms the observation of de Haan (1999) that evidentials rarely if ever develop from epistemic modals and she concurs that this means evidentials should not be considered a species of epistemic modal. Evidentials have a strong tendency to spread to languages with which they come into contact, although they can also be lost as a language becomes simplified in the process of obsolescence.

Chapter 10 provides a brief overview of discourse principles governing the choice of evidential in a given context. These principles seem to be largely universal: speakers choose the evidential representing the most reliable information that they have, and sensory evidence is given priority over inference and reports. Evidentials can be manipulated for stylistic effect, or to distinguish volitional from nonvolitional actions. Languages vary in the extent to which certain experiences count as firsthand, although it is sometimes hard to tell from the examples whether or not a given phenomenon is unique to the language exemplified. For example, In Jarawara,

falling asleep is treated as nonfirsthand while waking up is treated as firsthand, but there are no examples of whether other languages treat these two in some other way. Languages also differ in how particular narrative conventions are realized and language communities differ in cultural attitudes toward communicating information that is not known firsthand. AA mentions the relatively well-known hierarchies of evidential type (Oswalt 1986, Barnes 1984, Willett 1988), but on the whole her overview supports the position articulated by Faller (2001) that there are several different metrics of information strength and reliability involved in evidential choice.

Chapter 11 ventures into the topic of what evidentials might show us about cultural attitudes toward knowledge and communication. Speakers of languages with evidentials report that languages without them seem imprecise, and often try to find ways to express the concepts when they learn a second language lacking evidentials. AA warns against drawing quick conclusions about a given culture based on its evidential system, but she does note interesting areas of variation in how evidential categories are applied to evidence from dreams, shamanic visions and culturally recent sources like newspapers, radio and TV.

The book ends with a summary chapter, which is an excellent “quick index” to the various topics as well as to the languages that illustrate these properties. AA reiterates the importance of avoiding certain pitfalls in research on evidentials, such as extending the term “evidential” to phenomena in other languages based on a definition of the category that is so loose as to mask the unique properties of true evidential systems, or collapsing evidentials under some other umbrella category in a way that obscures the relationships among information source, speaker certainty, event time, narrative genre and speech act type.

Finally, AA makes explicit what is quite clear throughout the book: the pressing need for more detailed descriptions of languages with evidential systems. AA includes as an appendix a very useful field guide for those who wish to gather new information about evidentials.

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