

The subjective heart of evidentiality

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Evidentials are expressions that signal the source of the semantically determined information conveyed by an utterance. In this talk, I focus on two patterns that characterize the behavior of evidentials cross-linguistically: resistance to direct denials in dialogues and the addressee-oriented interpretation in information-seeking questions. While those patterns have been viewed as unrelated in the previous literature, I argue that they are two sides of one coin. I propose a formal account that correctly predicts this fundamental sameness by deriving the linguistic behavior of evidentials from the interaction of their conventional meaning and the properties of cognitive processes they describe.

I attribute to evidentials a unified semantics of first-person mental states and argue that they belong to the class of subjective expressions, along with first-person attitude reports as well as first-person statements about pain. Based on data from a range of languages, I show in the talk that the patterns in dialogues and questions falls out naturally from this subjective account. Because evidentials describe experiences that resist third-party assessment, an evidential statement cannot be denied in dialogues. And in information-seeking questions, subjectivity creates an effect of obligatory shift to the addressee because it is incompatible with speaker-oriented interpretations, wherein the speaker would not have access to their own epistemic state. I further demonstrate that not only does the subjective account provide a principled solution to the known puzzles, but that it also makes correct novel predictions not derived by previous analyses.

Current linguistic theories of evidentiality are disconnected from theories of knowledge and models of reasoning. By linking the phenomenon of evidentiality to non-linguistic cognition, I make a necessary first step towards filling this gap.