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Introduction: The functions of evidentiality (FoL special issue)

Eric Mélac and Pascale Leclercq (Université Paul Valéry Montpellier 3)

## 1. Setting the scene

Evidentiality is a fairly recent concept that emerged in the 1940s and was popularized in the 1980s (for a description of the emergence of the concept, see Aikhenvald 2004: 11–17; Boye 2018). It has seen an exponential rise in interest after Aikhenvald's (2004) seminal monograph, which led linguists to describe evidential morphemes in a variety of languages worldwide, shedding light on a universal semantic domain whose cross-linguistic expression differs greatly.

Broadly speaking, the term 'evidentiality' has often been taken as referring to the mode of access to information, or to the evidence that speakers use to substantiate their claims. Aikhenvald's (2004) definition of evidentiality as "the grammatical expression of information source" is probably the most often cited. It is indeed a good starting point for the investigation of this conceptual domain, as it raises the question of what form evidential expressions can take in different languages. In particular, there is some debate as to whether evidentiality can only be expressed through grammatical markers (inflections, clitics, or particles), or whether it is a semantic domain that can be expressed through lexical means (Cornillie 2007; Boye & Harder 2009; Mélac 2022). Indeed, typologists tend to distinguish so-called 'evidential' languages, that is, languages that feature grammaticalized means of evidential reference, such as Tariana, Common Tibetan, or Turkish, and 'non-evidential' languages, which mainly use a variety of lexical expressions to express information sources, such as French or English. Describing the linguistic markers that encode evidentiality is a complex task, especially for languages that still lack formal description, but the recent development of spoken corpora has enabled new insights into the linguistic systems of under-researched languages, such as South-Tibetic Dzongkha, the official language of Bhutan (see Watters, this issue). While there is still room for the formal description of the evidential markers in the languages of the world, the availability of corpora, or the relative ease with which they can be built thanks to new technologies, makes it possible to take a more usage-based approach to evidentiality. Renewed approaches to evidentiality also include cognitive and psycholinguistic research into the way L1 and L2 speakers conceptualize the domain (Arslan *et al.* 2015; Marín-Arrese *et al.* 2017; Papafragou *et al.* 2007; Leclercq & Mélac 2021).

This special issue on evidentiality stems from a need to take a fresh perspective on the very notion of evidentiality from a functionalist point of view, with a particular focus on the emergence of evidential markers, and their communicative functions. It was prepared with contributions of participants to the 'Evidentiality and modality' conference organized by Eric Mélac and Pascale

Leclercq. Although the event was originally to take place in Montpellier in 2020, the COVID pandemic struck, and it was postponed to June 2021, in an online format. While we had been disappointed to renounce a fully on-site event, we were impressed by the affordances the online modality offered, with about 150 enthusiastic attendees from all around the world, most of whom would definitely not have made it had the event taken place in the south of France. The online conference provided a platform for a fruitful dialogue between typological research and functional approaches, while bringing together languages featuring a fully grammaticalized evidential system, or not. Taking a functional approach to evidentiality, we believe that formal linguistic description has to be supplemented by careful, evidence-based analysis of the pragmatic use of the linguistic markers under scrutiny. Investigating the emergence of such markers is also key to the understanding of their functions. As such, the processes that lead to the evolution of forms and the underlying motivations for such changes constitute an area of choice for functionalists (for a recent synthesis on the cross-linguistic development of evidentials, one may see Mélac & Bialek 2024). This special issue therefore features two papers that shed light on some of the mechanisms associated with the rise of new evidential markers, in a language where the grammaticalization of evidentiality is highly advanced (rGyalthang Tibetan, see Suzuki, this issue), and in another language where it is minimal (English, see Ziegeler, this issue). Another central issue addressed in this volume concerns the discursive functions of morphemes that appear in an evidential paradigm (see Watters, and Arslan). Watters presents how Dzongkha copulas are used as communicative strategies in a context of knowledge negotiation, while Arslan investigates how Turkish evidentials may be associated with statements perceived as truthful or deceptive.

We will first provide a brief overview of the evidential domain and related notions, before outlining how this volume's four contributions highlight new facets of evidentiality research.

## **2. Concepts, terminologies, and definitions**

### 2.1 Evidentiality

As mentioned earlier, evidentiality is usually defined as “the grammatical expression of information source” (Aikhenvald 2004, 2018a). However, this definition is not completely consensual. Even for authors who define evidentiality in these terms, what is meant by ‘grammatical’ may differ. For some scholars, notably from the functionalist tradition and specialized in well-investigated languages, evidentiality may be instantiated by all types of linguistic forms along the lexicon-grammar continuum (Boye & Harder 2009; Diewald & Smirnova, eds., 2010; Wiemer & Marín-Arrese, eds., 2022). However, in the edited volume *The Oxford Handbook of Evidentiality* (Aikhenvald, ed., 2018b), which mainly deals with languages possessing evidential inflections or clitics, ‘grammatical’ is interpreted as limited to forms which are at the right end of the lexicon-grammar continuum. Nevertheless, other forms can be considered grammatical, even if they are not inflections or clitics, as

is the case of complex prepositions, such as *according to* in English, which is the focus of Ziegeler’s paper (this issue). The other languages that are investigated in this special issue, namely rGyalthang Tibetan, Dzongkha, and Turkish, may all be considered ‘fully evidential’, since they present a paradigm of evidential inflections. The term ‘information source’ also has different interpretations, as evidential categories do not seem to correspond to information sources as they are commonly understood, but rather to types of access to information: direct perception, inference, or hearsay. This has led Tournadre & LaPolla (2014) to distinguish between ‘access to information’ and ‘information source’. For them, ‘access to information’ mainly corresponds to the way the speaker has acquired the knowledge included in the proposition, that is, through his/her senses or inferential processes, while information source corresponds to the speaker’s report of the information that was first communicated by another person. This framework is adopted by Suzuki (this issue), who considers it relevant for Tibetic languages, which tend to possess two distinct morphological paradigms for ‘access’ and ‘source’.

There are several taxonomies of evidential markers, with some languages presenting a paradigm of only two distinctions, while others include many more. The most basic taxonomy is illustrated by languages with a binary distinction, such as Turkish. In this language, evidentiality is encoded through inflections on the predicate, with the direct evidential as the default form while the use of the indirect evidential is marked, as illustrated in (1) and (2) (taken from Arslan et al., this issue):

(1) *Didem bir şarkı söyle-di*  
 Didem one song say-DIR  
 ‘Didem sang a song.’ [witnessed] (Turkish)

(2) *Didem bir şarkı söyle-miş*  
 Didem one song say-INDIR  
 ‘Didem sang a song.’ [reported or inferred] (Turkish)

When information is accessed through direct perception, Turkish speakers use the direct evidential suffix *-di*, while *-miş* encodes reported or inferred information.

Other evidential paradigms display additional categories, such as rGyalthang Tibetan, which notably distinguishes between visual and nonvisual evidentiality, as shown by (3) and (4) (taken from Suzuki, this issue).

(3) *chu myi-snang*  
 water NEG-EXV.VSENS  
 ‘There is no water.’ [the speaker has seen there was no water by looking through the transparent bottle] (rGyalthang Tibetan)

(4) *'di nang chu yod brag*

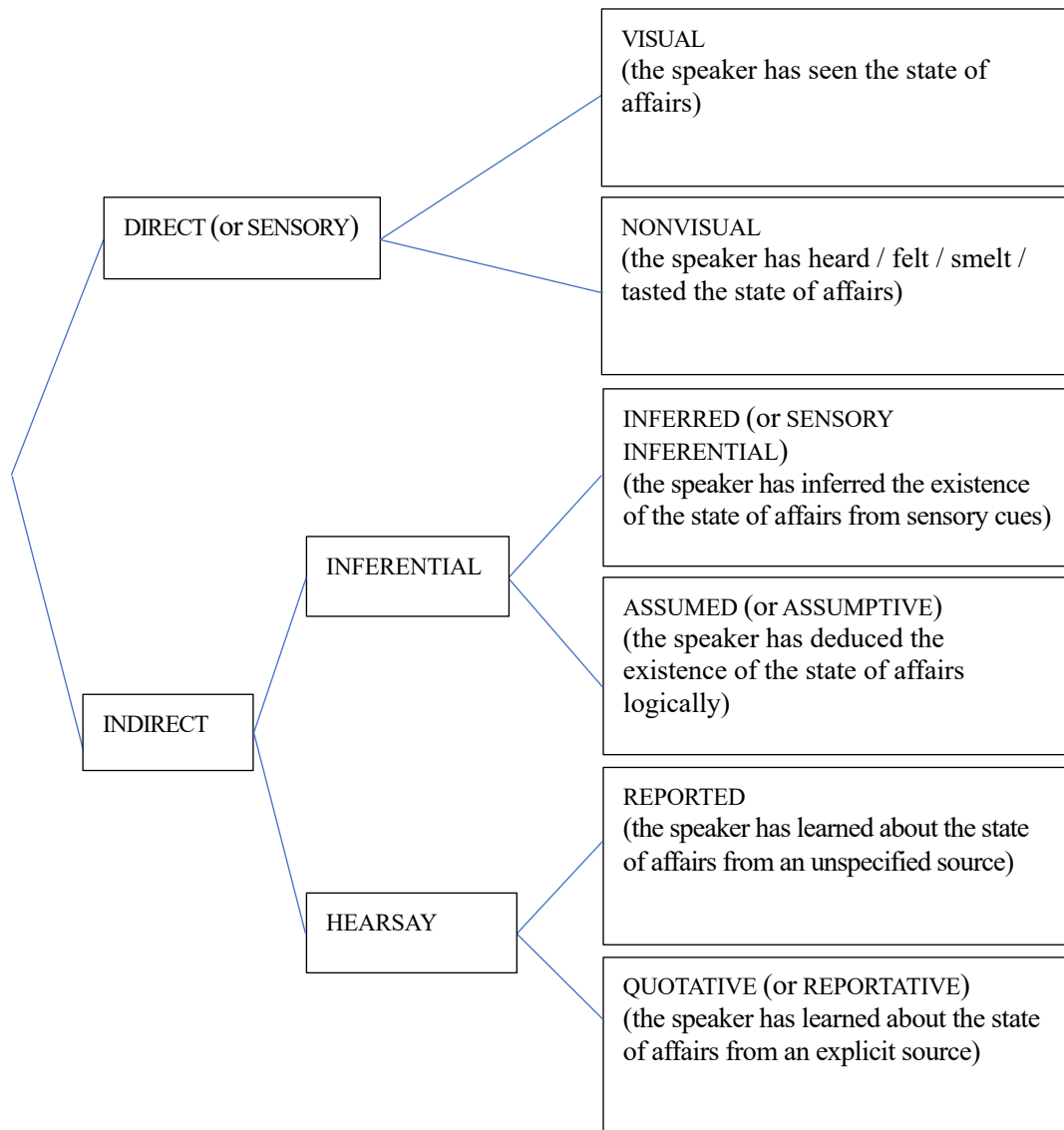
this inside water EXV.NVSENS

'There is water in this.' [the speaker has heard liquid by shaking the jar] (rGyalthang Tibetan)

Not only does rGyalthang Tibetan distinguish visual (*snang*) and nonvisual (*yod brag*) access to information, but it also possesses fully grammaticalized markers encoding inferential and hearsay evidentiality.

There are some inevitable inconsistencies in the terminology adopted to refer to evidential categories in the literature describing the various languages that possess evidential inflections, for two main reasons. First, the semantic space covered by an evidential in one language may only partially overlap with what another evidential encodes in another language. The functions of the markers that Suzuki calls 'sensory' in rGyalthang Tibetan are close to what Arslan calls 'direct' in Turkish. However, the Turkish direct marker *-di* has a broader function than Tibetic sensory markers, since the former may be used as a default marker for well-established historical facts that the speaker cannot have witnessed, so their direct evidential interpretation is less strict than what can be found in many Tibetic languages. Secondly, despite efforts to standardize the terminology, broad-scale crosslinguistic work faces the challenge of a great diversity of grammatical traditions, which favour different grammatical labels. As a consequence, the terms 'inferential', 'inferred', 'assumptive', and 'assumed' are sometimes used interchangeably, while 'hearsay', 'reported', 'reportative', 'quotative', and 'secondhand' may also be used inconsistently depending on authors. To help the reader navigate with the main terms used in the special issue, Figure 1 presents a taxonomy of evidential categories and the labels that have been adopted in the four papers.

Figure 1. A taxonomy of evidential markers



## 2.2 Related notions: epistemicity, mirativity, and egophoricity

Since the definition of evidentiality varies, its boundaries may overlap with neighbouring notions, with variation depending on theoretical traditions and individual scholars. Among the most prominent notions that are related with evidentiality are epistemicity, mirativity, and egophoricity. We cannot present all the discussions and controversies associated with the latter notions and their connections with evidentiality, but we will introduce relevant elements that may help appreciate how these concepts are apprehended in the papers included in this special issue.

First, the term ‘epistemicity’ is slightly ambiguous as it is used by certain authors to refer to the narrow domain of epistemic modality, and by others to refer to the general domain of knowledge. Epistemic modality corresponds to the assessment of probability of the state of affairs, or more precisely,

to the ‘estimation, [...] typically but not necessarily by the speaker, of the chances or the likelihood that the state of affairs expressed in the clause applies in the world’ (Nuyts 2016: 38). Such a restricted definition helps to clarify the distinction between epistemic modality and evidentiality, which are still conflated in some works, resulting in an imprecise description of certain markers. Many authors have examined how to distinguish these two domains, as well as their interconnectedness (Cornillie 2009; Squartini 2016; Wiemer 2018 *inter alia*). A key reason for the two notions to be kept separate is that many markers only express one of the two domains. For example, Suzuki (this issue) shows that the sensory markers of rGyalthang Tibetan encode evidentiality, since they can only be used when the speaker has perceived the state of affairs directly, but not epistemic modality, as they express the same level of certainty as other markers, such as factuais (called ‘statementals’ by Suzuki) and egophorics. Evidentiality and epistemic modality are, however, connected, since it is common, though not necessary, for indirect evidentials to be associated with a lower level of certainty (see Squartini 2016; Mélac 2014: 56–59, 2024 *inter alia*). Many of the forms described in this special issue indeed display both an indirect evidential profile and a non-assertive property. As shown by Ziegeler (this issue), English *according to* may express the speaker’s lack of endorsement of the information, which entails that using this form signals a de-assertion of the proposition(s) under its scope. Suzuki argues that rGyalthang inferential markers inherently express a lower epistemic stance than sensory, statemental, or egophoric markers, and Arslan (2020, and this issue) also argues that the Turkish indirect evidential has epistemic connotations, since it blends well with uncertainty adverbs while a direct evidential does not. The broader definition of epistemicity is used by Watters (this issue), who argues that the notions of ‘epistemic status’ and ‘epistemic stance’ are both necessary to describe the behaviour of Dzongkha copulas. These notions were notably developed by Heritage (2012) to refer to the speaker’s state of knowledge (‘epistemic status’), and their explicit position related to this state (‘epistemic stance’). In such a model, it is not the level of certainty that determines an epistemic status or stance, but rather the different level of knowledge between the speaker and the hearer.

Mirativity is another highly debated notion often encountered in studies dealing with evidentiality. DeLancey (1997) proposed to use the term ‘mirativity’ to refer to the ‘grammatical marking of unexpected information’, and his seminal study led to a series of papers and monographs describing mirative markers in a great diversity of languages (Aikhenvald 2012; Mexas 2016; Peterson 2017 *inter alia*). As is the case for most notions in linguistics, mirativity is invoked by different scholars to cover a variable semantic space. Aikhenvald (2004: 209) provides a large definition of mirativity, that is, ‘the speaker’s unprepared mind, unexpected information and concomitant surprise’, and the domain is frequently extended to include not only the speaker’s, but also the hearer’s or the main character’s information processing (Hengeveld & Olbertz 2012: 488; Aikhenvald 2012; Adelaar 2013). The dimension of unexpectedness or surprise is not always part of the definition of mirativity, since some authors argue that a mirative marker may simply encode that the information under its scope has been acquired recently as opposed to integrated knowledge. This is how Watters (this issue) employs

the term for the description of some copulas in Dzongkha, in line with van Driem & Tshering (1998), and Hyslop & Tshering (2017). Mirativity is a controversial notion for several reasons. Although it is generally accepted that languages may express such a domain in one way or another, the existence of fully grammatical morphemes dedicated to mirativity has been questioned (see notably the criticisms expressed in Hill 2012, to which DeLancey 2012 responded). As pointed out by AnderBois (2018), not only the semantic space covered by mirativity is fuzzy, but so-called ‘mirative’ morphemes often possess other meanings, notably evidential ones, which are often more frequent than their postulated mirative functions. Watters’s paper (this issue) argues that it is the opposite in Dzongkha, since morphemes which may have been presented as evidential in this language turn out to encode mirativity, that is, ‘newly acquired knowledge’ when examining their functions in discourse.

Finally, egophoricity is another key notion for understanding evidentiality thoroughly, or at least for apprehending the evidential systems of Tibetic languages, which are investigated in both Suzuki’s and Watters’s papers. San Roque *et al.* (2018: 2) consider egophorics to be grammatical markers encoding that the proposition is based on the speaker’s “personal or privileged knowledge or involvement”. Several features that are associated with egophoricity thus relate to different domains, since such a definition implies that egophoricity combines person, deixis, subjective stance, and volitional modality. Tournadre (1992) first proposed to use *égophorique* to describe a set of grammatical markers in Common Tibetan, namely existential verbs, copulas, auxiliaries, and verbal suffixes containing the (sub-)morphemes *yod*, *yin*, *byung*, and *myong*. The definition of egophoricity is highly disputed for several reasons. The semantic profiles of these markers vary greatly according to the context, the stage of the language, and the Tibetic language under consideration (Zeisler 2011; Hyslop 2018; Simon 2021 *inter alia*). The picture becomes even more blurry when expanding the notion to non-Tibetic languages (Floyd *et al.*, eds., 2018). Because egophoricity refers to both a set of markers and a multidimensional semantic domain, it is necessary to specify its application for each study under consideration. In this special issue, Suzuki considers egophoric morphemes to belong to an evidential category as they appear in the same syntactic slot as other evidential morphemes, such as sensory and inferential markers. From this perspective, ‘personal knowledge’ is argued to be a type of evidence, and thus an additional evidential dimension that constitutes the central property of egophorics (see also Tournadre & Suzuki 2023: 415–422). According to Watters, however, cognates of the egophorics found in Common Tibetan or rGyalthang Tibetan do not reflect an evidential category in Dzongkha, but are rather in opposition to mirative forms. Dzongkha egophorics are thus argued to be markers of assimilated knowledge. Although the relation between egophoricity and evidentiality is beyond the scope of this special issue, Suzuki’s and Watters’s papers provide additional data confirming how difficult it is for linguists to delineate the borders of large, overlapping semantic domains.



## 4.2 Overview of the issue

The four contributions to this special issue combine a focus on evidential expressions in typologically distinct languages. English is a West-Germanic language (Indo-European family), and Ziegeler's paper focuses on *according to*, which is a form that illustrates the dual origin of English, since *accord* comes from Old French while *-ing* and *to* come from Old English. rGyalthang Tibetan and Dzongkha are both Tibetic languages (Sino-Tibetan-Burman family), but the former belongs to the South-Eastern Tibetic branch, while the latter is a South-Tibetic language. Because they belong to separate language clusters, mutual understanding between rGyalthang Tibetan and Dzongkha is very limited. The authors show how the two languages have developed distinct evidential systems partly from the same cognates. This confirms that the development of evidentiality follows both areal patterns and cross-linguistic idiosyncrasies, even for closely related languages. Finally, Turkish is a member of the Oghuz group of the Turkic family. Contrary to English, Turkish possesses evidential verbal inflections, but its system is binary (direct vs indirect), while Tibetic languages make further distinctions with a more comprehensive set of fully grammaticalized evidential morphemes.

In order to provide a fine-grained description of the focal languages, and shed light on subtle discursive phenomena, the contributors adopt different methodological approaches (for an overview of the methods used in evidentiality studies, one may see Kittilä *et al.* 2018). Ziegeler investigates corpora representing different historical stages of English (from Middle English onwards) so as to document the step-by-step development of *according to*. Suzuki's study is mainly based on naturally occurring speech collected during fieldwork with some staged situations to control contexts motivating the elicitation of specific evidential functions. In addition, the developments of the evidential morphemes under study are reconstructed with language-internal and cross-dialectal comparisons, as well as with data from Old and Middle Tibetan. Watters explores a corpus of conversation in Dzongkha which he collected during fieldwork. The interactional characteristic of the corpus allows him to examine how knowledge stance influences the use of Dzongkha copulas. Finally, Arslan conducts a psycholinguistic experiment in a lab setting that involves sentence judgement tasks and eye-movement monitoring. The collected dataset allows for an innovative investigation into the impact of evidentials on the reliability judgements of Turkish readers. Now that we have presented the languages that are examined in this special issue and the various methods that are used, we will present the four papers in more detail.

**Debra Ziegeler** investigates the link between evidentiality and grammaticalization/co-optation processes by focusing on the English complex preposition *according to*. This case study highlights the pragmatic specificities of hearsay markers, which may explain their distinct diachronic developments. Ziegeler's paper focuses on one specific subdomain of hearsay, namely reportative evidentiality, in English. By doing so, she takes a stance on the evidential vs non-evidential language debate, by stating that evidentiality is a semantic domain that does not necessarily require fully grammaticalized linguistic markers. In other words, her work contributes to a functional approach to evidentiality through an

analysis of the emergence of a semi-grammaticalized reportative evidential, which she describes as being widely used “in academic writing or in news media for supporting the reliability of claims based on the reports of a third party” in contemporary English. Ziegeler remarks that *according to* may imply that the speaker rejects the mentioned information source (a phenomenon that is often referred to as the ‘reportative exception’; see AnderBois 2014). Using a diachronic dataset, she describes the path taken by *according to* from a progressive aspect construction to an adverbial adjunct, while ascribing the development of the evidential functions of *according to + NP* in contemporary English to a co-optation process (Kaltenböck *et al.* 2011). The author thus highlights the link between the semantics of evidentiality and the process of co-optation, which extracts a form from sentence grammar for use in discourse grammar. The shift of *according to + NP* to an evidential function is associated with the speaker’s manipulation of the entire proposition, making co-optation a more appropriate mechanism than grammaticalization at that late developmental stage.

**Hiroyuki Suzuki** investigates the different functions of the evidential marker *grag* in rGyalthang Tibetan, which is used both for non-visual sensory and hearsay evidentiality. Through a variety of elicitation questions, the paper offers an account of the multifunctionality of this evidential form. Suzuki reconstructs the development of *grag*, and examines diachronic processes that may have led to this multifunctional evidential. In doing so, the author argues for pathways of change that have not been documented in the literature on evidentiality. It is shown that three functions of *grag* should be distinguished, and these correspond to different morphosyntactic configurations and developmental patterns. From a verb meaning ‘to resound, to hear’, *grag* seems to have first developed into a nonvisual sensory suffix by a process of grammaticalization involving a semantic extension from the sense of hearing to all the other senses excluding sight. In parallel, it developed into a hearsay enclitic through a separate process of grammaticalization that illustrates a decategorialization process but little functional shift if one considers the early occurrences of lexical *grag(s)*. Finally, reconstructed data point to a late emergence of the nonvisual sensory copula, which seems to have resulted from a rare process of degrammaticalization from the suffix *-grag* to the copula *grag* (most probably by the ellipsis of the first morpheme in a morphemic string involving a copula followed by *-grag*).

**Stephen Watters** analyses the specific functions of copular verbs in a corpus of conversation in Dzongkha. This paper investigates to what extent egophoricity is related to evidentiality by testing whether the morphemes under study actually encode access to knowledge, or serve more discursive functions. The Dzongkha system is atypical among the Tibetic family, as the egophoric markers do not seem to be associated with the first person, but are rather in opposition with mirative markers, and thus encode well-integrated knowledge. The author shows that the knowledge gradient between the speaker and the respondent are determining factors in the choice of copulas in Dzongkha. As egophorics are in essence non-mirative, they involve a type of knowledge that has been assimilated by the speaker, and that cannot be directly extracted from the immediate context, which generally implies a “steeper epistemic gradient” between the interlocutors. Genuine examples of conversation further illustrate the

exploitation of this system to serve communicative purposes. Watters shows that an assertive stance or a confirmation in a response impacts the behaviour of Dzongkha copulas. He also examines how other discourse strategies and social contexts, such as politeness, surprise, or playfulness, may also influence the choice between those markers.

**Seçkin Arslan** investigates how evidentials can be used to detect deception. This is the first time the link between lie detection and evidential marking is tested through a behavioural task in a lab setting, and the results confirm the sensitivity of Turkish readers to the use of evidentials in their assessment of the reliability of a statement. The author brings to the fore Aikhenvald's (2004) claim that speakers may deliberately (mis)use evidential markers while telling lies. To assess this claim, and examine "whether adult Turkish readers judge evidential forms mismatching with their respective information sources to be truthful or deceptive", Arslan uses an experimental protocol, combining speakers' judgements while presented with sentences in Turkish containing direct or indirect evidentials in a variety of more or less plausible contexts, and eye-tracking measures during a reading task. This experiment taps into the attentional patterns of 40 native speakers of Turkish through an "end of sentence deception detection task", in which participants are asked to assess the compatibility of the use of a direct or indirect evidential marker with a given information source. The author also controlled for event witnessability, that is, to what extent it is plausible for participants to witness such events in real life, through an offline questionnaire completed by 60 native Turkish speakers. The experiment presents two main findings. First, the indirect evidential *-miş* seems to be associated with a judgement of unreliability when compared to the use of the direct evidential *-di*. Secondly, when there is a mismatch between the use of an evidential and its context (e.g. when the indirect evidential is used while the writer specifies s/he has witnessed the event), the reader tends to interpret this mismatch as deception. These results highlight the fact that Turkish readers are sensitive to evidentials when assessing the reliability of a statement, both at a metalinguistic level (judging from the sentence judgement task) and at a behavioural level (as confirmed by the participants' eye movements).

## **5. Conclusion**

We believe that this special issue contributes to the field of evidentiality studies by the use of cutting-edge methods and the presentation of innovative data from various languages. Ziegeler's paper integrates the new advances in the field of language change with concepts such as co-optation, to show how grammaticalization is insufficient to examine the development of an evidential system. Her study could help other researchers reveal similar processes in languages possessing sufficient historical data. The Tibetic family is an example of such languages which have developed a highly grammatical evidential system distinguishing a great number of evidential categories. Suzuki's investigation provides evidence of the stages which a fully grammatical evidential marker may go through before reaching a clitic or inflection state. Grammaticalization studies have shown how the mechanisms of language

change rest on universal functions, so the pathways Suzuki has been able to reconstruct will be worth exploring in languages belonging to other families in order to verify how widespread they may be. Those languages with fully developed evidential paradigms are usually under-investigated. Consequently, much of the data on the semantics and pragmatics of evidentials rely on fieldwork, elicitation, and the researcher's intuitions. Linguists working on 'evidential languages' rarely resort to corpora of genuine conversations, which makes claims on discursive functions poorly supported, and ultimately risky. Watters's paper belongs to the new generation of studies that may provide evidence on the pragmatics of evidentials by relying on conversational corpus data, and we hope that more work will investigate these questions (one may also see Mélac 2023 for a corpus-based investigation on the pragmatics of evidentiality). Finally, there are still few psycholinguistic investigations of the functions of evidential markers. The reason is mainly practical, because it is usually difficult to recruit speakers of languages with fully grammatical evidential systems, and the linguists who speak those languages rarely have an experimental background. Arslan is one of the linguists with such a background, and further psycholinguistic experiments involving other evidential systems would be of great value. By collecting papers that investigate evidentiality from different angles, this special issue sheds light on some of the multifaceted functions of evidential markers, but has also confirmed how much work remains to be done to fully understand these phenomena at the intersection of language and cognition. As evidentiality is now a vibrant field of investigation, we can only wait with excitement what new studies will reveal. We thus hope that future studies will verify and refine the many claims this special issue supports.

## Abbreviations

DIR direct, EXV existential verb, INDIR indirect, NEG negative, NP noun phrase, NVSENS nonvisual sensory, VSENS visual sensory.

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