International Journal of Language and Literary Studies
Volume 7, Issue 3, 2025
Homepage : http://ijlls.org/index.php/ijlls

Typological variation in the expression of Evidentiality

Aysel Aghamalıyeva
Azerbaijan University of Languages, Azerbaijan, Baku
ayselagamalizade2015@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0003-0778-5576

DOI: https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i3.2223

APA Citation: Aghamalıyeva, A. . (2025). Typological variation in the expression of Evidentiality. International Journal of Language and Literary Studies, 7(3), 487–496. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v7i3.2223

Received: *25/03/2025*

Accepted: *10/06/2025*

Keywords: *Evidentiality, lexical marking, epistemic modality, linguistic typology, grammatical evidentiality*

Abstract
This article examines evidentiality as a complex and debated concept in linguistics. While scholars disagree on whether evidentiality is a grammatical or lexical category, there is consensus that its core function is to indicate the source of information. It answers epistemological questions such as: Was the event directly witnessed? Was it inferred from evidence? Was it learned through hearsay or reports? The article analyzes how evidentiality is expressed in Azerbaijani, English, and Spanish, focusing on both grammatical and lexical strategies. By comparing these languages, the study reveals typological differences and highlights the role of evidentiality in communication. It also discusses the relationship between evidentiality and epistemic modality, showing how both influence the speaker's stance and interpretation of truth.

1. INTRODUCTION

Evidentiality refers to how language conveys the origin or source of information has emerged as a critical topic in the field of linguistic typology and pragmatics. It reflects how speakers convey the origin of their statement – whether derived from direct experience, inference, hearsay, or assumption. Evidential markers serve not only as grammatical or lexical elements but also as epistemological utilities that shape the speaker's stance and the way it is understood by the listeners of truth.

Languages around the world employ different strategies to express evidentiality. In some languages, such as Turkish, Quechua, or Tuyuca, evidentiality is grammatically obligatory, whereas in others, like English or Azerbaijani, it is mostly lexicalized and optional. This typological variation highlights the complex interplay between grammar, cognition, and culture.

The present study aims to investigate evidentiality across several languages, including Azerbaijani, English, and Spanish, focusing on both grammaticalized and lexical means of evidential marking. Through contrastive analysis, the study seeks to identify universal patterns and language-specific realizations of evidential strategies. Additionally, the paper discusses the implications of evidentiality in discourse, speaker responsibility, and intercultural communication.

Recent scholars (Aikhenvald, 2004; De Haan, 2013) have emphasized the cognitive and sociolinguistic functions of evidentiality, suggesting that it plays a role not only in sentence-level semantics but also in broader discursive and pragmatic structures. This paper builds upon these insights by examining data from multiple languages and proposing a functional classification of evidential markers based on their source types and discourse effects.

1.1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The concept of evidentiality first gained scholarly attention through the work of Franz Boas (1911), who noted that certain Native American languages require speakers to specify the source of their information as a grammatical obligation. Boas's pioneering insights laid the foundation for future linguistic investigations into how different languages encode evidential meaning.

Roman Jakobson (1957) further refined the concept, introducing the term "evidential" in the context of Balkan Slavic languages and making a clear distinction between evidentiality and modality. Jakobson's work was instrumental in establishing evidentiality as a grammatical category separate from mood or tense.

The most comprehensive typological study of evidentiality was conducted by Alexandra Aikhenvald (2004; 2015), who categorized evidential markers into several major types: visual, non-visual, sensory, inferential, reportative, and quotative. According to Aikhenwild's comparative linguistic studies, roughly 25 percent of the world's languages incorporate evidentiality into their grammar and whereas numerous others rely on vocabulary choices or contextual cues to convey similar information.

Other significant contributions to the study of evidentiality include the works of W. Chafe and J.Nichols (1986), who compiled numerous examples of evidential marking across

languages, and F. De Haan (1997; 2013), who emphasized the interaction between modality and evidentiality. Additionally, R. Palmer (1986) and J. Nuyts (2001) contributed theoretical frameworks distinguishing epistemic modality from evidentiality, although their boundaries often overlap.

While much of the early research focused on non-Indo-European languages, recent studies have begun to explore evidentiality in European languages, including English, Spanish, German, and French. These studies show that although these languages lack grammaticalized evidential systems, they make use of modal verbs, adverbs, and discourse markers to convey evidential meaning. According to Boas (1938) while for us definiteness, number, and time are obligatory aspects, we find in another language location area the speaker or someone else, source of information – whether seen, heard or infered as obligatory aspect. As a result, it can be said that in some languages evidentiality is an obligatory category.

This study is grounded in the typological framework developed by Alexandra Aikhenvald (2004), which provides a comprehensive classification of evidential systems across languages. According to Aikhenvald, evidentiality can be divided into two major types: direct – information obtained through visual or sensory perception and indirect – information acquired through inference, assumption, or hearsay. These evidential types are encoded in languages either grammatically (e.g., affixes or clitics) or lexically (e.g., modal verbs, adverbials, discourse markers).

Evidentiality is often discussed in relation to epistemic modality, which concerns the speaker's evalation of the likelihood that the information conveyed is accurate. Although the two categories are closely related, many linguists argue that they are functionally and structurally distinct. R.Palmer (1986) proposes that evidentiality should be viewed as a subcategory of epistemic modality, while others, like J. Nuyts (2001) and F. De Haan (1997), maintain that evidentiality deserves independent status due to its specific role in indicating information source rather than belief strength.

Evidentiality in Tariana and Wintu

This framework also incorporates cross-linguistic comparisons that show variation in evidential systems depending on the language family, geography, and sociocultural factors. For

instance, while some languages require obligatory evidential marking on verbs, others allow evidentiality to be optional or context-dependent (Binhomran, Altalhab, 2023).

Some languages incorporate evidentiality as a compulsory grammatical feature, rather than an optional stylistic device (Asadov, 2017). Cross-linguistic variation in evidential systems is well documented, whereas languages like English encode source of information lexically, others require morphological marking on the verb. A case in point is Tariana (Arawak, Amazonia), which possesses a richly differentiated evidential paradigm fused with tense. In the Triana dialect, stating "José played football" by itself is not sufficient. The speaker must specify how the information was acquired through direct perception, auditory report, inference, or assumption (Aikhenvald, 2015).

Juse ifida di -manuka -ka ' José has played football ' (We saw it).

Juse ifida di- manika -mahka ' José has played football ' (We heard it).

Juse ifida di -manika -nihka ' José has played football ' (We infer it from visual evidence).

Juse ifida di- manika -sika ' José has played football ' (We assume this on the bases what we already know).

These paradigms demonstrate that Tariana treats evidentiality as a core grammatical category. Such "evidential markers", often affixes or clitics, obligatorily specify the information source, in contrast to languages where evidential meaning remains a peripheral, lexically expressed nuance (Chafe, 1986; Aikhenvald, 2004).

Evidentiality, also known as indirectivity marking, is a prominent feature in Uralic and Turkic languages. Some Turkic languages make finer distinctions within indirect evidence, particularly between reported and non-reported indirect information. A notable example comes from Mahmud al-Kashgari's 11th-century portrayal of the Turkish language (al-Kashgari, 1982) Mahmud observed the suffix *-di* in the word *gəldi* 'came' serves as a direct indicator of evidence, indicating that the action occurred in the speaker's presence. In contrast, the suffix -miş in gəlmiş also marks past tense but carries indirect evidential meaning, suggesting the event happened outside the speaker's immediate observation. Such indirect forms are often translated into English using adverbial phrases like "apparently", "obviously", or "as far as I understood".

D.D. Lee's (1997) analysis of the Californian Wintu language provides a remarkable example of how languages can encode different types of evidence through grammatical markers. In Wintu, speakers must specify their source of knowledge when describing an action like "Harry is chopping wood" by choosing one of five distinct verbal suffixes attached to the verb kupa 'to chop':

Harry kupabe ' I see or have seen Harry chopping' (Visual evidence).

Harry kupante 'I hear him, or a chip flies and hits me' (Auditory/non-visual sensory evidence).

Harry kupare 'I have gone to his cabin and find him absent and his axe gone' (Inferential evidence from physical traces).

Harry kupael "I know that Harry has a job chopping wood every day at this hour and that he is a dependable employee and perhaps and that he is not in his cabin' (Assumptive evidence from general knowledge).

Harry kupake 'I know this by hearsay' (Reportative evidence) (San Roque, 2019).

Comparative Analysis: Azerbaijani, English, Spanish

In applying this theoretical foundation, the present study seeks to analyse evidential expressions in Azerbaijani, English, and Spanish. Each of these languages represents a different point on the evidentiality spectrum-ranging from morphologically marked systems (as in Azerbaijani) to entirely lexical strategies (as seen in English and Spanish). This comparative analysis contributes to a broader understanding of how evidentiality functions in language and communication (Najafov, 2025).

Each language employs unique mechanisms to express the source of information, revealing the diversity in evidential strategies across linguistic systems. For instance, Azerbaijani, a Turkic language, exhibits a relatively clear system of grammaticalized evidentiality, particularly in the past tense. The suffix -miş is commonly used to indicate indirect evidentiality, implying that the speaker did not witness the event firsthand but learned about it through inference or hearsay:

O getmişdi 'He had apparently gone'.

Yağış yağmışdı 'Apparently, it had rained'.

The use of -miş suggests that the speaker is not taking full responsibility for the factuality of the statement but rather relaying information that has been deduced or reported.

Another language, English lacks a grammatical category of evidentiality but expresses it lexically and pragmatically through modal verbs, adverbs, and perception verbs:

I am hungry (Direct experience).

Bob is hungry (Potentially reportative if based on Bob's statement).

Without explicit evidence, the second sentence is pragmatically odd unless:

Reported evidence – Bob or someone else has communicated this.

Inferential evidence – We deduce it from observable cues (e.g., growling stomach).

Bob looks hungry (sensory evidence).

Bob must be hungry (Logical inference).

Bob seems hungry (Indirect perception).

English also marks predictions supported by evidence:

"Look at those clouds! It is going to rain" (Visual evidence).

While English lacks grammatical evidentiality, speakers still systematically distinguish between direct and indirect knowledge , just through different linguistic strategies.

These constructions allow speakers to signal their source or degree of certainty about the information. Although optional, such devices are crucial in conveying nuanced meanings related to knowledge, belief, and evidence.

Like English, Spanish does not grammaticalize evidentiality, but it provides lexical and syntactic means to convey the source of information:

Parece que va a llover 'It seems that it is going to rain'.

Dicen que él llegó tarde 'They say he arrived late'.

Debe de estar cansado 'He must be tired'.

These constructions, involving verbs like parecer 'to seem' and modal expressions like deber de, encode inferential or hearsay knowledge without requiring morphological changes.

The comparative analysis of evidentiality reveals significant typological and functional differences in how languages encode the source of information. These differences not only

reflect linguistic variation but also point to deeper cognitive and cultural patterns in how speakers perceive and report knowledge.

In Azerbaijani, the use of the suffix -miş as a marker of indirect evidence illustrates a grammaticalized evidential system, where the speaker is linguistically required to distinguish between witnessed and non-witnessed events. This obligatory encoding of information source creates a strong connection between grammar and the speaker's epistemic stance, limiting ambiguity about how knowledge was acquired.

By contrast, English and Spanish rely on lexical and syntactic strategies. Although these markers are optional, they allow for flexible and nuanced expression of speaker stance. For example, adverbials like apparently or dicen que 'they say that' serve to distance the speaker from the proposition and indicate indirectness or uncertainty. This optionality, however, places more interpretive burden on the listener and leaves room for pragmatic inference.

A noteworthy point is the overlap between evidentiality and epistemic modality in all three languages. While evidentiality concerns the source of information, epistemic modality deals with the degree of certainty. Modal verbs like must in English or deber de in Spanish can blur the line between inference (evidentiality) and judgement (modality), making it challenging to draw a strict boundary between the two categories.

2. DISCUSSION

Evidentiality and epistemic modality are conceptually interconnected, as both reflect the speaker's stance towards the truth value of their statements. In English, this relation is typically realized through modal verbs, such as must and may, or adverbs like probably and possibly. Some researchers, including (Palmer, 1986), consider evidentiality a subset of modality. However, others argue for its independent classification, emphasizing its distint functional scope:

I see that he is coming (evidential).

I know that he is coming (epistemic).

Although both evidentiality and epistemic modality pertain to how evidence is handled in speech, their purposes diverge. Epistemic modality assesses the reliability or probability of information, while evidentiality focuses solely on indicating that some form of evidence exists

– without offering interpretation. As De Haan (1997) explains, evidentials signal the presence of knowledge but avoid any evaluation of its strength or validity.

Moreover, the presence or absence of grammaticalized evidentiality often correlates with cultural expectations of responsibility and accountability in communication. In languages with obligatory evidential marking, speakers may be more frequently required to justify their knowledge claims. In contrast, languages with optional evidential devices may allow for greater rhetorical flexibility but also ambiguity.

3. CONCLUSION

These findings suggest that evidentiality, while often underrecognized in European language systems, plays a crucial role in shaping discourse, influencing both speaker behavior and listener interpretation. This has important implications for field such as intercultural communication, translation studies, and language teaching, where understanding how information source is conveyed is essential.

Evidentiality, as a linguistic phenomenon, provides valuable insights into how speakers encode the source of information and how different languages shape the expression of knowledge. Through the comparative analysis of Azerbaijani, English, and Spanish, it becomes evident that evidentiality can be realized either as a grammatical category or through lexical and pragmatic strategies.

The study also highlights the blurred boundaries between evidentiality and epistemic modality. Although the two concepts are analytically distinct, they often overlap in actual language use. This overlap underscores the importance of considering both in typological and functional studies of languages.

Ultimately, evidentiality is not just a structural feature of language – it is a window into cultural norms, cognitive framing, and communicative expectations. Greater awareness of evidential strategies across languages, can improve translation accuracy, intercultural understanding, and language pedagogy.

REFERENCES

Abbasova E. (2014). The Issues of Modality in the Azerbaijani Linguistics and Study of Turkic Language *Turkology, Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume

152, Pages 1252-1255, ISSN 1877-0428, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.09.360.

https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042814054275

Asadov A.A. (2025). Totalitarian obstacles and modern challenges in the study of world literature. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(5), 442-448; doi:10.56352/sei/8.5.44. https://imcraaz.org/archive/363-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-ofmodern-problems-issue-5-volviii-2025.html

Asadov A.A. (2017). *US-Azerbaijani literary relations: a new prose*. Baku, "Khan" Publishing House

Aikenvald A.Y. (2004). *Evidentiality*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Aikenvald A.Y. (2015). Evidentials: Their links with other grammatical categories. *Linguistic Typology*, 19(2), 239-277. https://doi.org/10.15.15/lingty-2015-0008

Al-Kashgari M. (1982). Compendium of the Turkic dialects. (Diwan Lughāt al-Turk) (R. Dankoff, Trans.). Harward University Press. (Original work written ca. 1072)

Boas F. (1911). *Handbook of American Indian languages* (Vol.1). Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.

Boas F. (1938). Language. In F.Boas (Ed.), General anthropology. (pp.124-145). Boston, MA: D.C. Health and company.

Chafe W.L., Nichols J. (Eds.). (1986). Evidentiality: the linguistic coding of epistemology. Norwood. NJ:Ablex.

De Haan F. (1997). Evidentiality and Epistemic Modality: Setting Boundaries. *Southwest Journal of Linguistics*, 16(1), 83-101.Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico.

De Haan F. (2013). Semantic distinctions of Evidentiality. In M.S. Dryer & M. Haspelmath (Eds.), *The World Atlas of Language Structures Online*. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. https://wals.info/chapter/77

Jakobson R. (1957). Shifters, verbal categories, and the Russian verb. In selected writings II: Word and language (pp.130-147). The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton.

Lee D.D. (1997). Evidentials in English: A functional perspective. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 27(6), 747-763. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Elsevier Science

Binhomran, K. , & Altalhab, S. (2023). A systematic review of EFL research on the impact of reading comprehension on students' vocabulary retention, and the relation between reading and vocabulary size. *International Journal of Language and Literary Studies*, 5(3), 146–168. https://doi.org/10.36892/ijlls.v5i3.1395

Najafov R. (2025). On the sociology of education, management and analysis of the principles of orientation of education in the aspect of socialization of the individual. *Science, Education and Innovations in the Context of Modern Problems*, 8(7), 15-34; doi:10.56352/sei/8.8.2. https://imcra-az.org/archive/375-science-education-andinnovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-8-vol-8-2025.html

Nuyts J. (2001). Epistemic modality, language and conceptualization: A cognitive-pragmatic perspective. Amsterdam, Netherlands. John Benjamins.

Palmer F. R. (1986). Mood and Modality. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

San Roque L. (2019). Evidentiality. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 48, 353-370. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102218-011243

Hasanov J., Alishzade N., Nazimzade A., Dadashzade S., Tahirov T. (2023). Development of a hybrid word recognition system and dataset for the Azerbaijani Sign Language dactyl alphabet, *Speech Communication,* Volume 153, 102960, ISSN 0167-6393, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.specom.2023.102960. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167639323000948