

Ethno-syntactic investigation of evidentiality in two Siberian Uralic Languages

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In our presentation we compare related languages by focusing on evidentiality as a grammatical category. The application of the category presumes having cultural and social knowledge peculiar to the given community speaking the language in question (Aikhenvald 2004: 361, Bernárdez 2017). In the case of evidentiality cultural effects can be detected not in the lexicon as usual, but in the grammar. The understanding of these effects helps establish equivalencies between the evidential categories in different languages and moreover, it may contribute to getting acquainted with different cultures solely through the language system.

In our presentation we intend to show the cultural and cognitive motivation behind the different ways of manifestation of the category of evidentiality. The theoretical frame for it is the ethno-syntactic approach of the category. The objects of analysis are languages of the Uralic language family: Mansi (Ob-Ugric branch) and Nganasan (Samoyedic branch). These languages differ in their evidential systems.

In the majority of the Uralic languages evidentiality is present as a grammatical category. Typologically different types of evidential systems are represented which are believed to be an independent development in certain branches/languages of the family. The category is considered to be an areal feature which diffuses easily between languages and in the Uralic languages the development of evidentiality is viewed as a contact-induced change. (Skribnik & Kehayov 2018)

The Samoyed languages, especially the Northern ones have elaborated evidential system. The speakers distinguish morphologically the following types of source: inferential, reportative, and non-visual sensory. According to the cultural explanation, such complex system seems to be existed in languages that are spoken in small groups living in isolated environments, where there are difficulties in accessing the world (e.g. the impenetrability of the forest, impossibility of easy travel etc.). Absence of literacy can be a fundamental factor as well. Finally, there are very tight relations within the group and with neighbouring groups. It can be said that evidentiality goes on a par with the cultural conceptualisation of trust in communicative situations and with the external, environmental conditions of the community.

In the Mansi language evidential strategy is used, where the neutral/indirect opposition has developed. The more simple evidential system of Mansi and the dialectal distribution of the category may support the cultural explanation.

Considering language contact, it is an important fact that the discussed Uralic languages are minority languages spoken in the area of the Russian Federation. Therefore Russian has a huge influence on these languages, and speakers of them are nearly exclusively bilinguals. Evidentiality is not present in the Russian language as a grammatical category. According to Aikhenvald evidentials become lost (or the system may become simplified) in a language if the dominant language does not have this category (Aikhenvald, 2018). In the case of our target languages evidentiality appears to be a solid category, although simplification of it can also be observed in some cases. These processes show different patterns in the languages studied.

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