Evidentials under the paw of the Russian bear

There is an urban legend spreading among linguists. It connects the community size of speakers and the existence of evidentiality systems in that language. Evidentials, as the legend has it, are found in "small" languages, whereas "big" languages lack it.

At first sight, looking at the Uralic languages one cannot but agree with the "small-big" explanation. The explanation is attractive, because the giants among the Uralic languages, the "big" over-one-million nations Hungarian and Finnish indeed lack evidentials, whereas the smaller-than-one-million linguistic communities, such as Estonian, have a flourishing evidential system. In addition, the small Uralic languages scattered over a vast area in Russia also tend to have evidentials or evidential strategies rather than lacking them. Size, indeed, seems to matter for the existence of evidentiality in a language.

What would the researchers working with qualitative methods make of this idea? Predictably, they would be critical. When an areal or contact linguist superficially looks at the problem, she would hypothesize that Russian has influenced the languages around it, and the influence has not reached as far as Hungarian or Finnish. However, how to explain the lack of any evidentials in Russian?

A historical linguist would have an explanation ready for this "doughnut" pattern. She would hypothesize that evidentials were always present in the Uralic languages, but Russian speakers moved into the heart of the Uralic language territories and drove the Uralic speakers to the peripheries. However, this explanation neglects Hungarian and Finnish, which do not have any evidentials and also the fact that the origin of the evidentials and evidential strategies is not identical in the "doughnut area".

So we are left with the "big-small hypothesis". We present the sources that discuss the "big-small hypothesis" (e.g. Aikhenvald 2004, Trudgill 2011) and study their data and arguments in more detail. We put forward another hypothesis for the Uralic pattern that is more specific than "small versus big". We could dub it along the lines of other metaphors of small versus big, such as "David against Goliath hypothesis" or "Under the paw of the mighty Russian bear hypothesis".

We concentrate on three points that show that the Aikhenvald-Trudgill hypothesis could profit from a more nuanced and interdisciplinary approach:

1) We consider "big" languages with evidentials or evidential strategies in Europe, such as Turkish or Bulgarian, and several languages outside of Europe that cannot be considered exactly "small" either – many languages in India, such as Malayalam, or South America, such as Quechua. Uralic languages outside of Russia do not have regular evidentials, irrespective of their big or small size in terms of speaker community, such as the Sami languages (Fernandez-Vest 1996, s.a.).

2) We examine a possible hypothesis that "big" languages have a completely different type of evidentiality compared to "small" ones. The examples that we examine are the evidential systems from small languages that function on the Turkic basis, including some small Uralic languages.

3) We entertain a possibility of an additional account based on complex social cognitive, social psychological, socioeconomic and sociopolitical factors that can lead to a reduced size of the population speaking a specific language. As opposed to an Aikhenvald-Trudgill inspired account, size *per se* is not necessarily seen as a *precondition* for the maintenance of complexity in an evidential system of a linguistic community but rather as a *concominant* of it. Therefore, the proposed research agenda connects with that of language death and language maintenance in the Uralic environment.

4) We hypothesize that small languages are frequently also suppressed languages. In those communities, its members are more frequently in situations that give rise to social stress. The stress is caused by cognitive dissonance that stems from a clash between lying and self-interest on the one hand and self-esteem as a good person or reputation as a valuable member of the community on the other. Evidentials provide a way to tell the truth but also to hide the source of the information. Therefore, the hearer cannot make strong inferences about the information. We support our account with arguments based on the results of a recently conducted experiment administered to Finno-Ugric respondents (Estonian, *N*=141). The experiment was cast in the form of an online survey on the strategic use of evidentials. In this experiment, the subjects were presented with situations that either involved or lacked competition for scarce resources. They were then asked to choose between answers that they would give to their interlocutor in the situation. In case of abundance of sources, the respondents tended to tell the truth, using the indicative. In case of scarcity of resources, the respondents were more prone to hide the source of the information from the competitor, which was done by means of the Estonian indirect evidential.

This presentation presents the experiment design and results in detail. It considers the pros and cons of typological sociolinguistic accounts in explaining the spread of evidential systems. It compares the current state of the art in the evidentiality studies in typology, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and experimental linguistics and thereby provides a more nuanced picture of the phenomenon. This contribution adds a socioeconomic and sociopolitical dimension to the language change and language complexity studies that target evidentiality. That is, in addition to the internal social factors pointed out in earlier literature, community-external relations will be discussed as a relevant additional factor that may influence the use of evidentials in a linguistic community.

References

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