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Commentary on "Strategies of Objectification in Opinion Articles: the Case of Evidentials": A Call to Study Evidentials in Argumentation

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1. Introduction

Evidentiality refers to the epistemological basis behind speech acts, with lexical evidentials the constructions that indicate the types of information that support propositions (Cornillie 2009). While research on evidentials has increased in the last few decades, the argumentative role of evidentials has not been extensively examined. Understanding the way evidentials signal arguers' standpoints and information sources could help elucidate how arguers reach mutually acceptable conclusions in their discussions.

Recently, Elena Musi (Miecznikowski & Musi 2015; Musi 2015) and other scholars (Rocci 2012, 2013; van Eemeren, Houtlosser, & Snoeck Henkemans 2007) have begun to analyze how evidentials and argument indicators invite inferences about standpoints, argument schemes, and critical discussion. For this volume, Musi has analyzed evidentials in a corpus of articles about oil drilling in the United States. Her analysis shows the argumentative role that evidentials can play in the oil drilling debate, and provides us with a valuable framework for studying evidentials.

The purpose of this essay is to identify topics in the study of evidentials, review Musi's research strategies and findings, and invite argument researchers to continue the study of evidentials.

2. The general study of evidentiality and evidentials

Researchers who study evidentials conceive them to encode epistemic claims either broadly or narrowly. Chafe, Palmer, and Lyons (Chafe & Nichols 1986; Lyons 1977; Palmer 1990), for instance, conceive of evidentials in a broad sense as "coding the speaker's *attitude* toward his/her knowledge of a situation" as well as narrowly "marking the *source* of such knowledge" (Willett 1988, pp. 54-55). By contrast, Aikhenvald (2004) considers evidentials as primarily the grammatical categorization of information sources. Aikhenvald has identified several systems of evidentials around the world that mark information sources, with six semantic parameters that mark evidentiality grammatically: visual, non-visual sensory, inference, assumption (based on general knowledge), hearsay, and quotative. Similarly, Willett has found that languages mark at least three types of evidence sources: attested or direct knowledge, evidence reported by others, and evidence that is inferred. Direct evidence is typically marked in languages with perception verbs (i.e., "I see," "hear," "feel"). Subjective attitudes are expressed differently depending upon the modal (e.g., might, must), and forms such as possibility, necessity, tense, and voice.

With the increase in the study of evidentiality and evidentials has come comprehensive cross-linguistic studies (Aikhenvald 2004; Willett 1988), along with focused analyses of European and South American languages (Diewald & Smirnova 2010; Hengeveld & Hattnher 2015), and analyses of languages like Spanish in which evidentiality is not explicitly part of the grammar (Marco 2015). Some scholars call evidentiality a universal semantic category (e.g., Marco 2015), which has resulted in studies focusing on identifying the grammatical features associated with expressing evidentiality and the contextual conditions forms must meet to express evidential meaning.

Evidentiality is also recognized to play an important role in social interaction and narrative as well as in media discourse. Broad interactional and rhetorical practices can function as evidentials, such as reported speech, which Clift (2006) has shown can function as an evidential that indexes a speaker's stance. The effects of evidentials have also begun to be documented. Aydin and Ceci (2013), for instance, find that people who use languages that mark evidentiality explicitly may be more vulnerable to suggestibility when misleading questions are employed. They argue that such findings are relevant in legal practice when multiple languages are employed.

Besides semantic-grammatical analyses of evidentials, speech act analyses have also been forwarded to identify the pragmatic and functional roles of evidentials. As Musi notes, evidentials can facilitate an argument's invitation to inference (Pinto 1996, 2001), for evidentials guide interlocutors to link relevant premises and help them discern the speaker's commitment. Evidentials also function rhetorically to help convince audiences of the acceptability of interlocutors' standpoints (White 2003).

Three recent examples show that evidentials in argument are best understood by integrating their semantic-grammatical features with pragmatic and performative features. In particular, Rocci (2012, 2013) has found that Italian modals like can, may, and must function as evidential strategies in advancing predictions in financial news stories. Hengeveld and Hattnher's (2015) new taxonomy of evidentials also resulted from integrating syntactic-semantic features of evidentials with their performative features. Their cross-linguistic analysis begins by differentiating the representative and interpersonal levels of utterances. At the representative level evidentials are organized in semantic layers that include situation, state of affairs, episode, and proposition. At the interpersonal level evidentials are organized in pragmatic layers that include expressed content, illocutionary intention, and the discourse act. Evidentials are further differentiated grammatically by mood, aspect, and tense. Finally, evidentials are distinguished by semantic scope relations that form four categories: reportativity, inference, deduction, and event perception.

A third example of a performative analysis of evidentials is the catalogue of argument indicators that mark critical discussion, assembled by van Eemeren et al. (2007). Argument indicators can standpoint expressions ("I really believe that") and doubt ("I'm not sure") in confrontation. Argument indicators mark requests for justification ("How do you know?"), the need to justify ("I have proof.") and starting points for discussion ("We agree that"). Argument indicators can also mark types of argument schemes, like "similar to" (analogy argument), "results in" (causal argument), or "has disadvantages" (pragmatic argument). Finally, argument indicators mark the conclusion to argumentation (e.g., "I still disagree.").

It is against the backdrop of this literature that Elena Musi frames her study. She sees evidentials as constructions that signal the information sources that can support a standpoint.

Her initial data analytic strategy included gathering a list of evidentials from those studied in the linguistics literature, which included verbs (e.g., can, reveal, prove), nouns (evidence), predicative constructions (e.g., possible, likely), and adverbs (e.g., obviously, surely). This strategy seems smart, as so many constructions have the potential to be argument indicators; the list is a good place to start and learn from.

Next, Musi discusses two theoretical issues that provide further understanding for the annotation framework she creates. She points out several features of evidentials that make them suited to analyze premise-conclusion relations: (a) evidentials can present a statement to which the speaker is committed, as evidentials express one's subjectivity and stance; (b) evidentials invite inferences about what premises are relevant and true, and (c) evidentials suggest how the speaker wants interactants to participate. In this way evidentials have an interpersonal and rhetorical function, in that evidentials invite an interlocutor to engage with the speaker. Musi notes that high modal force is associated with degree of commitment on the speaker's part, a point that could be further developed by argument researchers.

Musi also reviews the linguistics literature on the categories of subjectivity and objectivity. She notes Lyons' (1977) distinctions between the two types of epistemic modalities expressed in evidentials. Subjective epistemic modality is the speaker's belief regarding the truth of a proposition, while objective epistemic modality is the possibility that the proposition is true. Since the interactional context is needed to determine if an expressed modality is subjective or objective, Musi follows Nuyts' (2001, 2012) proposal that "objective" sources of information be seen as "intersubjective" ones, with quality information sources accessible to and shared by the speech community. For Nuyts, a modal is subjective when it is the speaker's sole responsibility, but a modal is intersubjective if it is presented as being shared or shareable. This is an interesting discussion, with implications that arguments be presented in ways that facilitate the recognition of taken-as-shared premises with the audience and the building of common ground (Clark 1996).

3. Research strategies for studying evidentials

As indicated, Musi examined lexical evidentials in opinion articles on oil drilling in the US. Two research strategies utilized by Musi seem particularly useful to consider for anyone who wants to study lexical evidentials in argumentation.

One research strategy involves the choice of the data corpus. Aspects of the data corpus such as topic, audience, and genre, may affect the use of evidentials and argumentation practice. For instance, the topic of oil drilling and its polarizing sub-topics likely shape journalists' lines of argument in their opinion articles. In this context, how might oil drilling shape the way evidentials are used and interpreted? What is it about oil drilling that makes this topic a good one to study evidentials in argument practice?

Besides the topic, the audience is also an important part of oil drilling discourse. As Musi notes, various stake holders are involved in the drilling debate, such as oil companies, environmentalists, local communities and federal regulators. Do stakeholders play a role in the use of evidentials? Knowledge of each group's standpoint in this context might point to the jobs that journalists' standpoints and information sources have to address to be effective.

Finally, the particular corpus of oil drilling articles was obtained from an online Twitter sample of the most tweeted articles on the topic. Argumentation in this media genre is important to analyze. However, what assumptions are made about argument when considering online audiences? Since the opinion articles were tweeted, might the argumentative contribution of the

person tweeting the article be important for lexical evidentials? Does the person use evidentials to magnify the premise-conclusions of the tweeted article? In sum, the data topic, audience, and media genre are all fascinating aspects of the interactional context for argumentation study, and potentially important factors to consider when studying evidentials.

A second research strategy and contribution by Musi is her proposal of a multi-layer approach to annotate evidentials. Musi focused her analysis on a certain set of modals, verbs, and constructions that have been already studied by linguists. The set of evidentials (around 26) were then analyzed for their syntactic, semantic and pragmatic features. The first layer of her system identified each lexical evidential for its part of speech; verbs (e.g., prove), noun (evidence), adverbs (e.g., clearly), and predicative constructions (e.g., likely). The first layer also identified the type of evidence indicated by evidentials: direct, inference, report, and hearsay.

The remaining three layers of Musi's system use current theorizing about statements and intersubjectivity to examine the environment within which lexical evidentials operate. Specifically, the second layer identified types of statements or propositions that can be influenced by evidentials. Freeman's (2000, 2005) typology was used, which distinguishes propositions as descriptions, interpretations, evaluations and logically determinant statements. Musi's third layer identified types of modal evaluation (Nuyts 2012), expressed as whether a statement was expressed as a personal commitment to a truth proposition (subjective) or if the statement was expressed as a shared commitment (intersubjective). Musi's fourth layer identified sources of information and their accessibility as argument premises. Singular sources of information were considered to be implicit premises known only by the author; shared premises were known by particular audiences; and shareable premises were seen as potentially controversial by a wider audience.

4. Evidentials in the oil drilling debate

Musi's annotation scheme enabled her to identify interesting features of evidential use in oil drilling argumentation. Three findings are pursued here.

A first significant finding was the distribution of lexical evidential in the corpus, and the types of evidentials that signaled particular information sources. Of the types of information sources encoded with evidentials, 80% were inferred sources of information (e.g. "Knudsen thinks those spills could be reduced"; Musi 2016, this volume). Moreover, over 63% of evidentials encoded inferences with verbs (e.g., "thinks"). These high frequency findings suggest that analysts could further an understanding of evidentials by identifying the specific evidential forms that co-occur with particular inferred information sources.

A second significant finding is that the use of evidentials to present evidence **directly** was most frequently signaled by perception and cognition verbs (*see, know*) and the noun *evidence*. Musi's contention is that direct evidentials in opinion articles function as strategies of objectification to frame the journalists' key propositions as true and supporting premises as unassailable (Freeman 2005).

This contention is affirmed in the Musi's example from a *NJ.com* article, in which a journalist reports US Rep. Pallone's arguments against off-shore drilling. Pallone begins by using the cognition verb, prove, to certify his causal claim and generalization that an entire coastline "could" be affected by a massive oil spill. This claim is followed by Pallone's use of a factive verb (know) and a perception verb (saw) to present how "we" know that BP's spill affected the whole coastline. This example is terrific for seeing how evidentials work together as

strategies of objectivity that give force to Pallone's cause-effect argument and generalization. But it also gives force to other aspects of the example passage that may invite readers to overlook reasoning flaws and instead accept Pallone's claim. Pallone makes several moves in the example that could raise critical questions for careful readers. For instance, Pallone's original claim was that an entire coast line "***could*** be affected by a massive oil spill" from his description of the BP oil spill. Yet he does not produce another actual example. Instead, Pallone constructs a fictive citizen with a hypothetical example that enables him to state that his citizen would predict that if an oil spill occurs off Virginia that it would not affect New Jersey. Pallone uses the fictive prediction to emphatically reject it ("that is totally false."). Rejection of the hypothetical example enables Pallone to conclude, then, that an oil spill "**will** impact the entire East coast." Hence, Pallone uses the hypothetical example to engage in analogy argumentation to predict that an oil spill will result along the East coast like Florida's coast. Yet Pallone employs no specific comparisons between the two coasts, a feature of the analogy argument scheme.

In addition to the lack of comparison between the two cases, we don't know how the journalist reasoned with Pallone's arguments, nor do we know how the person who tweeted the opinion article reasoned with Pallone's arguments. Still, Pallone's use of evidentials to establish objective premises in the beginning part of his argument enables him to stage a counterargument that invites the inference that Pallone's overall claim is likely to be acceptable. Unfortunately, this inference is based upon an undeveloped analogy and undeveloped generalization. Hence, evidentials can reassure readers about presumptions that may lead them to overlook suspicious premises and accept presented conclusions. Instead if inviting acceptable inferences, evidentials may help interlocutors commit fallacies.

A third significant finding is the pattern surrounding the expression of standpoints with high commitment. Musi found that when journalists presented their standpoints with high commitment, they immediately followed with multiple supporting premises that were easily recovered and recognized as shared with the audience. Musi's example for this pattern was from *American Progress*, in which the journalist argues that "oil and gas are the wrong energy sources to pursue along the Atlantic coast." This standpoint is prefaced by "It is clearer than ever," a construction that appears justified by the premises that followed the standpoint. Presenting the two premises as shared occurs with the journalist citing six negative consequences of drilling that have been previously documented (premise 1), and citing observations reached by "an independent analysis" recognized by relevant communities (premise 2).

While the discovery of this pattern is useful, the pattern may have additional components. For instance, the remaining portion of the example presents more elaborate grounds for supporting the two premises and standpoint. Premise two employs an authoritative warrant (i.e., independent analysis) to support the journalist's standpoint, but the example continues to present evidentiary grounds from the independent analysis as to why there would be no "economic cure-all" from oil drilling. So the observed pattern is expanded by providing additional grounds for the premises.

However, the observed pattern can be expanded still further, since part of premise two acknowledges the antagonist's claimed benefits of oil drilling, but then rejects it with the "independent analysis." The description of the independent analysis report provides a full two-sided refutation of the antagonist's claim of an economic cure-all. Moreover, in the refutation the journalist states that the report draws some of its evidence from oil industry data. Providing a refutation that draws from the antagonist's own evidence displays a logical contradiction in the

antagonist's argumentation that provides even more support for accepting the journalist's standpoint.

Thus, the pattern of presenting a high commitment standpoint followed by multiple premises that are expressed and taken-as-shared is further buttressed by elaborating the grounds for the premises that also provides a refutation of the oil industry's key claim. Together, these moves invite the inference that not only is the journalist's premises and grounds true, and the journalist's standpoint acceptable, but that the journalist's strongly expressed stance is acceptable, too.

5. A way forward in studying evidentials

Musi found that direct evidentials in oil drilling arguments marked premises as objective, which enabled journalists to present their premises as relatively unassailable. She also found that when journalists used evidentials to express their standpoints decisively, with premises presented immediately after and presented as shared, that these features helped journalists' arguments be more easily accessible and appear more convincing.

Many directions could be taken to study evidentials in argumentation. Researchers could establish the usefulness of evidentials for facilitating critical discussion. For instance, how do patterns of evidentials operate in argumentative discussions across different genres? How do evidentials affect the understanding and evaluation of a speaker's arguments? How do evidentials affect the stages of a critical discussion? In sum, how do evidentials function within a normative framework? Do particular evidentials play roles in staging opportunities for critical discussion?

Studies also could examine the role of evidentials in persuading one's interlocutor to accept one's standpoint. Can evidentials affect the use of injunctive or descriptive norms in argumentation? How do evidentials affect the mechanisms that generate basic beliefs (Freeman 2000), mechanisms like reason, perception, introspection, intellectual intuition, and conscience? Do evidentials function as heuristics by low involvement audience members? How are evidentials related to expressions of emotion, or to judgments of credibility?

Finally, a problem for argument theorists has been to discern how and why fallacies are committed by interlocutors. Using heuristics in a discussion may be one reason why discussants end up committing fallacies. The inability to distinguish between fallacies and heuristics may be due to the speaker's use of evidentials, which may solidify presumptions of argument acceptability embedded in the interaction context. Evidentials may mask differences between fallacies and heuristics, for as interlocutors use evidentials to render an argument initially acceptable, they may become suggestable to subsequent arguments containing logical flaws.

In sum, there are many routes to explore in the study of evidentials in argumentation. Evidentials help arguers express their commitment or doubt. Evidentials help arguers indicate the evidence they use to justify standpoints. Exactly how evidentials can be used to facilitate critical discussion could be on our docket for future argument research.

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