The moral implications of evidentiality in Nanti society: epistemic distance as a pragmatic metaphor for moral responsibility

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1. Introduction

Evidentiality has captured the attention of many socially oriented students of language because of its obvious importance in the interactional construction of authority, responsibility, and entitlement (Fox, 2001; Hill & Irvine, 1993). In this talk I clarify one of evidentiality's less-studied social-interactional functions by examining its use to construct responsibility for events in Nanti society.

Most work on the relationship between evidentiality, a linguistic category, and responsibility, a social one, has focused on the use of evidentiality to construct responsibility for *attributes* of discourse, such as its truthfulness or its appropriateness relative to local norms of politeness. There has been much less work carried out on the use of evidentiality to construct responsibility for situations and eventualities, such as mishaps or successes.

The basic argument I advance here is that evidential strategies index relationships between knowing subjects and situations, and that in Nanti society at least, these relationships can be deployed as metaphors for the subject's involvement in that situation. Involvement, in turn, serves as a basis for Nanti judgments of moral responsibility. The result is a pragmatic metaphor (Silverstein, 1976), by which the epistemic distance encoded by evidentials comes to stand for the subjects' moral responsibility for the events referred to by those evidentially-marked propositions.

2. Ethnographic Background

Nantis are one of the seven Arawak peoples grouped together as speakers of Kampa languages. There are approximately 500 Nantis, living in some 8-10 settlements in the Timpia and Camisea River basins. I carried out the majority of fieldwork on which this talk is based in the community of Montetoni, which, with 190 inhabitants, is the largest of the Nanti settlements. With the exception of some young men who speak Matsigenka, all residents of Montetoni are monolingual in Nanti. Nantis are presently semi-nomadic interfluvial hunter-horticulturalists.

3. Evidentiality and Responsibility: Theoretical Background

The fact that evidential resources may be implicated in the interactional negotiation of responsibility is well established (Fox, 2001; Hill and Irvine, 1993). What is not always clearly distinguished in these discussions is that evidentiality is interactionally salient to two quite different *kinds* of responsibility: responsibility for the *attributes of discourse*, and responsibility for *events*.

Discourse-attribute responsibility is the interactionally-constructed assignment of praise or blame for those attributes of discourse singled out as salient by interactants and by local language ideologies. Salient discourse attributes of this sort typically include truth or falsehood, and politeness or rudeness. Under this construal of responsibility, interactants are held responsible for how their discourse displays, or fails to display, particular discourse attributes. This form of responsibility has been the focus of the majority of research on the role of evidentiality in the construction of responsibility.

Hill and Irvine (1993), Fox (2001) and Haviland (1989, 2002), for example, remark that quotative and reportive evidentials serve to mitigate speakers' responsibility for the truthfulness of a reported utterance. These evidentials explicitly differentiate participant roles, typically assigning the speaker the role of animator[1], who, as Goffman (1981) observed, typically does not bear responsibility for the truth value of a reported utterance; responsibility instead falls to the principal[2,3].

The second form of responsibility I consider, and the focus of this paper, concerns praiseworthiness or blameworthiness for events, such as successes, mishaps, or tragedies. Under this construal of responsibility, interactants are held accountable for certain situations having arisen, rather than for the attributes of discourse. I refer to this kind of responsibility as *event responsibility*[4].

I have encountered fairly little work on how evidential strategies are implicated in the interactional construction of event responsibility. Hill and Zepeda (1993: p. 208) present some brief comments on bilingual English-Tohono O'odham discourse, along the lines of the argument I present in this paper. Bendix (1993: p.241-2) briefly

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[1] Speakers may also use quotative markers to *increase* their responsibility for an utterance, as discussed by Bendix (1993: p. 238) for Newari, Haviland (2002:) for Tzotzil, and Michael (2001) for Nanti.

[2] As Shuman (1993) and Irvine and Hill (1993) point out, quotative evidential strategies may ultimately fail to acheive the sought after fission of principal and animator, leading interactants to "shoot the messenger".

[3] Similarly, Irvine (1993) and Besnier (1993) have shown how reported speech can allow speakers to making insulting or critical comments while shielding them from recrimination.

[4] Since discourse may itself be seen as performative and consequential, event responsibility may include responsibility for the *consequences of discourse*. This is one of the lessons of Duranti (1993), which discusses how Samoan orators can be held blameworthy for the *consequences* of their talk. In cases such as this, the two forms of responsibility are significantly intertwined, as *attributes* of discourse are seen as the *causes* of undesirable social eventualities.

describes some strategic uses of Newari evidential morphology to mitigate event responsibility via implicatures regarding intentionality and volitionality[5].
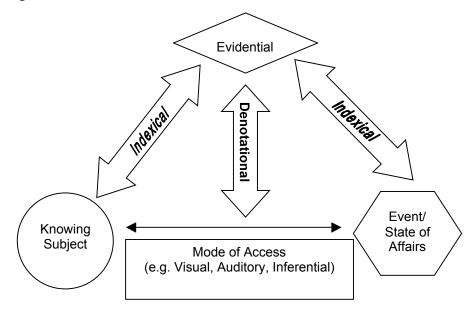
4. Evidentiality: Definitions and Nanti Examples

Evidentiality proper can be notionally defined as marking the 'source of information' for a proposition (Aikhenvald, 2004). The following Nanti example illustrates a reportive (hearsay) evidential.

    (1) Noke ikamake.
           no   -ke   i-   kam   -ak   -i
           1   -REP   3mS-   die   -PRF   -REA.IRR
           'He died (reportive).' ~ 'I hear he died.'

We can improve on the notional definition of evidentiality by taking a cue from Jakobson's (1990: p.391-2) formulation of evidentiality as a category that interrelates distinct speech events (see also Kockelman, 2004; DeHaan, 2004), and from conceptual accounts of evidentiality inspired by cognitive linguistics (Floyd 1999, Mushin 2001). On this view, evidentials *index* a knowing subject and an event described by the evidentially-marked proposition, and they denote the *mode of access* that the knowing subject has to the event in question. In other words, an evidential encodes the epistemological access to a particular event or state affairs, relative to a particular subject. Figure 1 illustrates this set of relationships:

Figure 1

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[5] In addition, Dwyer (2000:51-2), speculates briefly on how speakers of Salar (Turkic, China) may use non-firsthand evidentials to distance themselves from situations they deem shameful. Chirikba (2003:261,264) makes similarly brief remarks about the use of reportives in Abkhaz (Abkhazo-Adyghean, Georgia, Turkey, Ukraine).

Evidentials thus relate a knowing subject to an event via a *mode of access*. Different evidentials, such as the visual or the inferential, denote different modes of access to the event in question. In Nanti discourse, I will show, these different modes of access imply different degrees of involvement by the subject in the event, and ultimately, different degrees of moral responsibility for the event.

Implicatures from evidentials to involvement arise from cultural knowledge regarding the prototypical circumstances for the use of particular evidentials. The fact that human knowledge is acquired by embodied, socially- and physically-situated agents places significant constraints on the circumstances in which particular modes of access are available to such agents. The visual mode of access, for example, prototypically requires both significant physical proximity and the absence of intervening obstructions. Similarly, the use of an auditory evidential implies that the subject could not see the event, due either distance or some intervening object. The use of an inferential implies that even auditory access to the event was not possible, and that the speaker's knowledge is based on some secondary source of information. In short, different evidentials imply different degrees of sensory or physical separation of the subject from the event.

From these implicatures regarding sensory and physical separation follow others regarding involvement and participation, which in turn lead to implicatures regarding event responsibility. The data I am about to discuss show that for Nanti speakers, the separation implied by certain evidentials serves as a strategy for mitigating event responsibility. This suggests that for these speakers, the implied separation serves to indicate lack of involvement, and consequently, lack of event responsibility.

Evidentiality is an important aspect of Nanti communicative practice, and the Nanti language appears to be in the process innovating grammatical evidentiality[6]. Nanti exhibits three morphologized evidentials, a quotative proclitic *-ka*, a reportive proclitic *-ke*, and an inferential second-position clitic *-ka*. Both the quotative and reportive are inflected for person. Unmarked newsworthy statements are normally interpreted as indicating direct – typically, visual – evidentiality, unless this implicature is defeased by contextual knowledge. Otherwise, visual and auditory evidentiality are realized periphrastically via the verbs *neh*, `see', and *kem*, 'hear', respectively.

5. Event Responsibility in Nanti Society

The discursive construction of event responsibility is a major theme in Nanti interactions. This feature of Nanti communicative practice stems from a view that what happens in the social world as crucially a product of individuals' actions and choices. Or to put it somewhat sardonically, 'everything is someone's fault'. Although I have witnessed interactions in which the assignment of culpability may be ultimately dropped, as when culpability appears to be gravitating towards socially prominent men, I have rarely heard Nantis articulating the view that something 'just happened', or that something was a consequence of luck or chance.

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[6]   None of the available descriptions of the Kampan languages mention grammaticalized evidentiality. Matsigenka is reported to have a pair of what appear to be epistemic modal suffixes, *-raka* and *-rorokari/-roka,* that indicate possibility and probability, respectively (Snell, 1998).

Socialization into this view of responsibility is a striking aspect of Nanti childhood. Very young Nanti children are very rarely criticized for actions or their consequences. This state of affairs changes radically, however, between the ages of four and six years old, when children go from being virtually blameless to being magnets for culpability. Suddenly their actions become the objects of intense discursive scrutiny and assessments of culpability. When an infrequent theft occurs, or there is damage to property, children are always the first suspects, and are overwhelmingly designated as the guilty parties. Children quickly learn that not only is everything someone's fault, but that they themselves are particularly vulnerable to accusations. Not surprisingly, after a few years of such experiences, children begin to acquire discursive competence in deflecting the culpability that gravitates towards them.

6. Evidential Strategies and Responsibility in Nanti Discourse

We now turn to an example of how evidential strategies are deployed in Nanti interaction to deflect culpability. The interaction involves six adults and several children. The principal participants are two women, Mecha and Chabera; also contributing to the conversation are Pasotoro, Mecha's husband, and Ajerika, Pasotoro's sister-in-law. The interaction takes place in Mecha's cooking hut on September 27th, 2004. The topic of conversation is a burn that Mecha's daughter Rosa received the previous day. To summarize, a few days beforehand, several men had cleared the tall grass in an open area near Mecha's family's huts. The grass was left to dry, to be burned a few days hence. But before the adults could do so, a group of children gathered the grass into piles and set it alight. In the ensuing fun, Rosa stepped into a pile of smouldering grass, burning her foot. Rosa did not tell her parents about the burn, however, and even slept in the chicken coop to evade detection. Only the next day did Mecha finally learn of the mishap from one of Rosa's siblings. She then tracked Rosa down and severely chastised her. I was present for this interaction, with my research partner Christine Beier, because Pasotoro asked me treat Rosa's burn. The interaction begins when Chabera, who recently arrived, points to Rosa's burn, and asks how it occurred.

1 C: **Tya okantaka oka?**
How did this happen? (indicating Rosa's burn)

2 M: **Kara chapi shimpenashi.**
Over there, yesterday, (in the) grass.

3 **Otya maika oburoki no<u>neh</u>ana^ke.** <VISUAL>
I saw it for the first time just now, (when I was making) oburoki (i.e. yuca beer).

4 **Otya maika no<u>neh</u>ake.** <VISUAL>
I saw it just now.

5. P: **[Oburoki ochapinitanahi**
(when she was making) oburoki, in the late afternoon

6 M: **[No<u>ka</u> tata gimpi?** <QUOTATIVE>

I said, what got you?

7   C: [Tya iro?
                                                     Where did it happen?

8   M: **Oga ogima^tira, iro<u>ka</u> agapokihiro.** <small>INFERENTIAL</small>
     That burning (grass), she presumably stepped in it.

9   **o- o- otsararaha.**
     She- she- she was horsing around.

10   **otya inka^hara no<u>neha</u>ke.** <small>VISUAL</small>
     I saw (the burn) just recently.

11   **No<u>ka</u> tata gimpi?** <small>QUOTATIVE</small>
     I said, what got you?

12   **O<u>ka</u> onti tsitsi oga.** <small>QUOTATIVE</small>
     She said, this is (due to) the fire.
...

13   C: **Magatiro ogamaika tagake?**
     All this is burned?

14   M: **Magatiro aka, aka nero oka.**
     All over, see here.

15   C: [**Oga tera ityara pin<u>keme</u>?** <small>AUDITORY</small>
                                           You didn't hear it at the time?

16   M: **=Tera. yoga iryo yo-, otya maika i<u>ka</u> maika-** <small>QUOTATIVE</small>
     =No. This one, he-, just recently he said now

17   B: **atsi (unintelligible) atsi (unintelligible)**
     Hey, (unintelligible), hey (unintelligible)

18   A: [**O- otya maika o<u>ka</u> notsi-, notsibuhoka^ke tsi^tsi**
     <small>QUOTATIVE</small>
                                   She- she just now she said, I stirred up the fire.

19   **oka tsitsi osakak^e.** <small>QUOTATIVE</small>
     She said, the fire burned (me).
...

20   C: **Ari (unintelligible) te pin<u>keme</u> irage?** <small>AUDITORY</small>
     Really, you didn't hear her cry?

21   M: **Tenkanki irag^e.**
     She didn't cry at all.

22	P:	**[Te irage.**
		She didn't cry.

The first observation to be made is that in Nanti society, mothers are generally considered responsible for the safety of their children. But the older children become, the more they are held responsible for their own safety. In the context of Rosa's burn, therefore, both Mecha and Rosa, who is about 7 years old, are candidates for culpability. Second, as soon as Chabera starts inquiring into the events surrounding Rosa's burn, Mecha adopts intonational and prosodic contours characteristic of Nanti speakers defending themselves from criticism or accusations. This indicates that Mecha uptakes Chabera's questions as relevant to the assignation of culpability for the events under discussion. This assessment is supported by Mecha's careful use of evidentials to place her from the events of the mishap. We can note, for example, that in responding to Chabera's initial question regarding how the burn occurred, in line 1 [show lines 1-5], Mecha moves immediately from a brief response to Chabera's explicit question to an extended discussion that distances her from the event in question. In line 3, Mecha indicates that the accident occurred *kara*, 'over there', far from her cooking hut. In lines 3 and 4, Mecha indicates that she just recently saw the burn for the first time, indicating her protracted ignorance regarding the events surrounding the burn, and her recent visual acquaintance with the facts, thereby emphasizing her lack of involvement in the original events. In line 5, her husband Pasotoro supports her claim.

In line 6, Mecha employs a quotative evidential, indexing for Chabera her ignorance about the events surrounding the burn at the time that she first saw it, further underlining her lack of involvement in those events.

In line 7 Chabera asks for more information about how the accident occurred. Very interestingly, Mecha responds in line 8 using an inferential, *iroka agapokihiro*, 'she presumably stepped in it,' thereby characterizing her epistemological access to the accident as highly indirect. Mecha even follows this up in line 9 by explicitly pinning the responsibility for the burn on Rosa by remarking *otsararaha*, 'she was horsing around.'

Lines 10-12 reinforce Mecha's case for her ignorance surrounding the events of the burn by repeating how recently she learned of the burn, using the periphrastic visual evidential *-neh*, 'see', and by indicating how she learned of the burn through verbal interaction, using the quotative evidential *-ka*.

In line 15, we see an interesting move, when Chabera asks if Mecha *heard* the event, even if she didn't *see* it. It appears that although Chabera has, for interactional purposes, accepted the fact Mecha didn't see the event, she appears intent on clarifying Mecha's access to the event, and specifically, *when* she learned of the event. In line 16, Mecha denies that she heard anything, and begins to indicate that her son told her about the burn, upon which almost everyone in the hut makes a bid for the conversational floor.

In line 20, Chabera presses the issue further, inquiring if Mecha didn't perhaps hear Rosa crying subsequently. Mecha responds that she didn't, and her husband Pasotoro once again supports her. There may be another issue here: even if Mecha is

blameless for the burn itself, it could be certainly be seen by Nantis that a lapse of almost 24 hours before Rosa is treated for the burn to be a sign of negligence on her parents' part.

We see in this interaction a great deal of work by all the participants in the interaction to clarify Mecha's mode of access to the events of the burn. Mecha takes great care to characterize her access using inferentials and quotatives, thereby situating herself at a great remove from the events in question. She uses the verb *neh*, 'see' periphrastically to express a visual evidential meaning only in reference to the recent event of belatedly seeing Rosa's burn, some 24 hours after it occurred. Her husband Pasotoro twice supports her representation of her access to events of the burn.
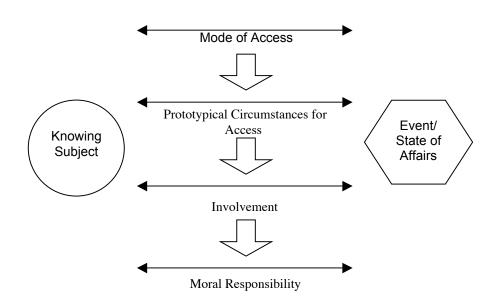
Chabera, on the other hand, appears to be working to eliminate the possibility that Mecha is understating her epistemological access to the events of Rosa's burn, by inquiring if Mecha might have heard the event, or at least Rosa's subsequent crying.

Significantly, the concern with evidentiality in this interaction does not appear to be in any way tied to the epistemic status – that is, the truthfulness or reliability – of Mecha's representation of how Rosa's burn occurred. In this interaction, then, evidentiality does not serve to qualify discourse-attribute responsibility. Instead, it serves to index Mecha's involvement in the events surrounding the burn and its aftermath. Given that Mecha's possible culpability is in play, a possibility underlined by Mecha's assignation of responsibility to Rosa in line 9, and Ajerika's similar assignation in line 18, it is reasonable to interpret Mecha's efforts to place herself and an epistemological remove from the events in question as a strategy to deflect culpability.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The interaction just analyzed presents compelling evidence that evidentiality is an important strategy in Nanti discourse for negotiating event responsibility. Evidentiality denotes an epistemological relationship between the knowing subject and the event that the evidentially-marked proposition describes. Furthermore, by implicatures regarding the prototypical circumstances under which the use of particular evidentials would be appropriate, evidentials indicate spatial and sensory relationships between the speaker and the event in question. The fact that evidential strategies are efficacious in Nanti discourse in deflecting event responsibility suggests two further points: first, that physical and sensory distantiation are indices of involvement, or rather, the lack thereof; and second, that lack of involvement in an event generally diminishes moral responsibility for the event. This set of relationships is summarized in Figure 2.

In Nanti evidential practice, therefore, the epistemic distance between the knowing subject and the event denoted by evidential strategies serves as a pragmatic metaphor (Silverstein, 1976) for the moral responsibility that the subject has for that event. As such, in Nanti society, evidentiality is not only a means for marking epistemological attributes of utterances, but also one for indicating the moral responsibility of social agents.

Figure 2

Mode of Access

Knowing Subject

Prototypical Circumstances for Access

Event/ State of Affairs

Involvement

Moral Responsibility

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