

# An Investigation of Evidentiality in the Arabic Language

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## Abstract

This study investigates one of the semantic phenomena; namely, evidentiality in Arabic from a semantic and syntactic point of view. Specifically, it investigates the effect of the semantic content of evidential verbs in SA on the syntactic structure. The data of this study were generally collected from a supreme Standard Arabic (SA). The analysis of the data reveals that there are many linguistic mechanisms of indicating evidentiality in Arabic. These mechanisms are perfect verb forms and verbs of hearts (?afʕa:l ?alqulu:b) which are, in turn, subdivided into verbs indicating knowledge and complete truthfulness. Furthermore,

changing the semantic content of evidentiality verbs in Arabic gave rise to changing the syntactic behavior of those verbs.

**Keywords:** Evidentiality, Semantic content, Syntactic structures, Evidential devices

## 1. Introduction

All languages have certain linguistic tools in order to specify the sources of information obtained, which is mentioned in utterances, sentences, interactions or even texts, whether these texts are spoken or written. In fact, these linguistic tools may partially or completely differ from one language to another. Some languages have certain affixes which determine the sources of information mentioned in the text, whereas others have unique lexical elements that identify such sources of information. More concretely, Kashaya (of the Pomo family of northern California) has a very rich system of verbal suffixes indicating evidentiality (Anna Wierzbicka, 1996). However, evidentiality relations in English are sometimes conveyed with mental state and perception verbs (e.g. know, guess, see, look, hear, etc.) (Papafragou and Li, 2001).

Aikhenvald (2004) reports that about a quarter of the world's languages have some type of grammatical evidentiality. To be clear, she states also that no research has been conducted on grammatical evidentiality in sign languages. A first preliminary study on evidentiality in sign language has been conducted by Laura Mazzoni on LIS (Italian Sign Language).

The researchers find that there is no single study that has thoroughly investigated evidentiality in SA from a semantic and syntactic perspective. This observation of the paucity of research has inspired the researchers to work on this issue.

This study aims at identifying and describing the linguistic mechanisms utilized in indicating evidentiality in SA, on one hand and the influence of the semantic content of evidentiality markers on the syntactic structure of SA on the other.

## 2. Definition of Evidentiality: A Review of Related Literature

Aikhenvald (2003) states that evidentiality is properly understood as expressing the existence of a source of evidence for some information found in the text. This claim includes both stating that there is some evidence and specifying what type of evidence is there. In addition, Gronemeyer (1997) argues that there is a general agreement in the literature that evidentiality is a subsystem of epistemic modality due to the close relationship between evidentiality and epistemic possibility. He adds that evidentiality differs in that it characterizes the source and reliability of the proposition, rather than the speaker's judgment of the necessity/possibility of the proposition truth. He continues that despite the semantic similarity between epistemic modality and evidentiality, it is not straightforward to assimilate an analysis of the former to the latter.

Dendale and Tasmowski (2001) argue that the term evidentiality was introduced into linguistics about fifty years ago in a posthumously published grammar of Kwakiutl compiled by Franz Boas (1947). On the other hand, Lazard (2001) claims that the evidentiality may be said to be grammaticalized in a language when, in the grammatical system of this language, there are specific forms of which the semantic-pragmatic content is basically a reference to the source of the information conveyed by the discourse.

However, many researchers who have dealt with this newfound linguistic phenomenon, either

in their languages or in other languages, address its different issues and aspects so as to set a comprehensive understanding of it. Papafragou *et al* (2007) indicate that source distinctions are encoded in language through a variety of evidentiality markers. In English, such evidential devices are mostly lexical. For instance, in (1a) and (1b) below, the speaker conveys that she had direct perceptual access to the event of John's singing, while in (1c) and (1d) the evidence is indirect (hearsay in (1c) or some unspecified source in (1d)).

(1)

a. I saw John sing.

b. I heard John sing.

c. John was allegedly singing.

d. John was apparently singing.

On the other hand, evidential markers are defined as grammatical categories which indicate how and to what extent speakers stand for the truth of the statements they make. Evidentials illustrate the type of justification for a claim that is available to the person making such a claim. In Chafe and Nichols' (1986) terms, they represent a 'natural epistemology'. To be clear, Evidentials indicate both source and reliability of information. Admittedly, they put in perspective or evaluate the truth value of a sentence with respect to the sources of the information contained in the sentence on one hand, and the degree to which this truth can be verified or justified, on the other. This justification can by and large be expressed by certain (or specific) markers, which refer to immediate evidence on the basis of visual observation, to inference on the basis of (non)observable facts, to deduction or inference, etc. (Rooryck, 2001)

### *2.1 Evidentiality in English*

English has been investigated in terms of evidentiality. Chafe (1986) determined five markers of evidentiality in English. These markers are present as follows:

- Degree of reliability
- Belief
- Inference
- Hearsay
- General expectation

He states that each of these is typically associated with specific lexical and/or grammatical devices. Indeed, he notes that just about any part of the grammatical system may be used to signal evidentiality.

To begin with, Chafe states that there are three kinds of the first marker, i.e. degree of reliability. Firstly, modal auxiliaries which go before the main verb in a sentence such as 'She could / might / may come tomorrow' can be taken as evidence for evidentiality. Secondly,

adverbs which are words that 'modify' a verb or a whole sentence are unanimously considered linguistic tools identifying the sources of information contained in, say, a text. The underlined lexical items in the following sentence are examples of:

'She will possibly / probably / certainly / undoubtedly come tomorrow.'

Thirdly, hedges which are considered as expressions marking a proposition as "only approximately true" can also be taken as evidence for evidentiality. These hedges are divided into two categories as follows:

1-Non-prototypicality such as: "It's sort of / kind of raining" (it's not "really" raining).

2-Approximation such as: "It rained about / approximately three inches" can also be taken as evidence for evidentiality.

As regards the second marker of evidentiality, belief, Chafe states that this kind of evidentiality is encoded in the verb of cognition such as "I think / guess / suppose it's raining" (or "It's raining, I think/guess/suppose") and can be considered as evidence for evidentiality. Regarding the third evidential marker, inference, which is employed by using the modal auxiliaries such as "You're all wet, it must / has to / 's gotta be raining", by using adverbs such as those underlined in the sentences "It's obviously / evidently / apparently raining"; "Maybe / perhaps it's raining" and by using adjectives such as those underlined in the sentence: "It's obvious / evident / apparent that it's raining" can be taken as evidence for evidentiality.

As of sensory evidence, it can be direct by using perception verb (strong assertion): "I can hear / see / feel / smell it raining" or indirect perception verb (weak assertion): "It feels / looks / smells / sounds / like that it's raining". Concerning the fourth marker of evidentiality, hearsay evidence, it can be a direct quotation: "Joe said, 'it's raining'" or an indirect quotation: "Joe says it's raining", "They say it's raining" in which the speaker gives Joe responsibility for the truth of the statement, without repeating his words and verb of reporting: "I hear it's raining", "It's reported to be raining" in which the speaker ascribes responsibility to "unnamed sources".

Expectations, the last marker, are regarded as the most important one of these discourse markers. Some of these markers are underlined in the following sentence: "of course / in fact / actually / oddly enough, it's raining". They suggest that the proposition is either in line with or opposed to what the speaker thinks the hearer expects to be the case.

## 2.2 Evidentiality in Arabic

Unfortunately, evidentiality in Arabic has not received enough investigation nor enough linguistic scrutiny. It has not been investigated and analyzed in depth as compared with evidentiality in other languages especially the western ones although the Arabic system abounds with many evidential markers from different categories. However, for researchers' knowledge, there have been few studies which address this rather recent linguistic category in Arabic. Of these studies is Comrie (1976) that outlines a reasonable account of evidentiality in Arabic system. Actually, he explains both perfect and imperfect forms of the verbs in

Arabic, which indicate that evidentiality can mainly be introduced by the perfect form. This finding is also determined and forced by Boa Isaksson (2000) who points out that if a finite verbal form is used to express inferential or reportive nuances, it is exclusively a perfect, never an imperfect. Yet, in this research paper, the researchers explain certain issues related to this semantic phenomenon in Arabic and show how syntactic structures are also susceptible to be varied according to the semantic behavior of some verbs indicating evidentiality.

First of all, Ibn Aqeel (1995) classifies Arabic verbs in general into different categories according to their semantic content. They state that there are some verbs of which the semantic content refers to the degree of evidentiality. These verbs are linguistically called "to suppose and its sisters" – *Ḍan-na wa ʔaḡ-ḡawa:tiha:*). Besides, some prudent Arabic linguists divided these verbs into two subcategories according to their semantic content:

- 1- ‘the verbs of hearts’(ʔafʕa:l ʔalqulu:b).
- 2- ‘the verbs of conversion’(ʔafʕa:l ʔaltahwi:l).

The verbs of hearts (ʔafʕa:l ʔalqulu:b), in turn, are divided into two subcategories, based also on their semantic content. The first subcategory is those verbs which indicate knowledge and complete truthfulness (ʔafʕa:l ʔalyaqi:n). On the other hand, the second subcategory is those verbs which indicate potential truthfulness (ʔafʕa:l ʔalruʕha:n). Evidentiality is clearly apparent and evident in these verbs. Table 1 shows the most common seven verbs in Arabic which, of course, indicate evidentiality. These verbs indicate Evidentiality by the virtue of the fact that the speaker uses such verbs only when he/she is utterly sure of what he/she speaks. In general, these verbs share mutual semantic content depicted in the sense of "know"(Hasan, 1980).

Table 1. The most common seven verbs indicating knowledge and complete truthfulness in Arabic.

No.	Semantic content	Verb in Arabic	Example	Evidentiality Degree
1-	Know	(yaʕlam) know	I knew that respect is the way to love people.	100%
2-	Know	(yaraʔ) consider	I considered that hope is a motive for work.	100%
3-	Know	(yaʕid) find	I found that knowledge is power.	100%
4-	Know	(yadri:) recognize	I knew that respect is the way to love people.	100%

5-	Know	(yalfi:) Experience	I experienced that obstacles are a test of souls.	100%
6-	Know	(yađıal) make	I made that my home is my eternal love.	100%
7-	Know	(yaflam) Learn	He learned that success is the only way of life.	100%

As shown above, all of these verbs which have semantic content, rate 100% in evidentiality. Besides, all of these verbs share the same syntactic behavior which is clearly depicted in the following formula:

Subject ---- verb (of evidentiality) --- a complementizer clause

I - knew - that respect is the way to love people.

If the semantic content of these verbs differs from being 100% in evidentiality, their syntactic behavior will also change because these verbs may have more than one sense. For example, if the semantic content of such verbs especially those referring to the five senses such as (yara?) (English: see) indicates direct evidentiality, these verbs assign only one object, not two such as:

The man saw his wife near the park.

In this sentence, the main verb indicates direct not indirect evidentiality; and hence it assigns only one object not a complementizer phrase like those of indirect evidentiality mentioned in the table above. Syntactically speaking, the following two phrase tree structures indicate the syntactic difference in between; the first tree represents 100% evidentiality, knowledge and complete truthfulness<sup>i</sup> as shown in Figure 1:

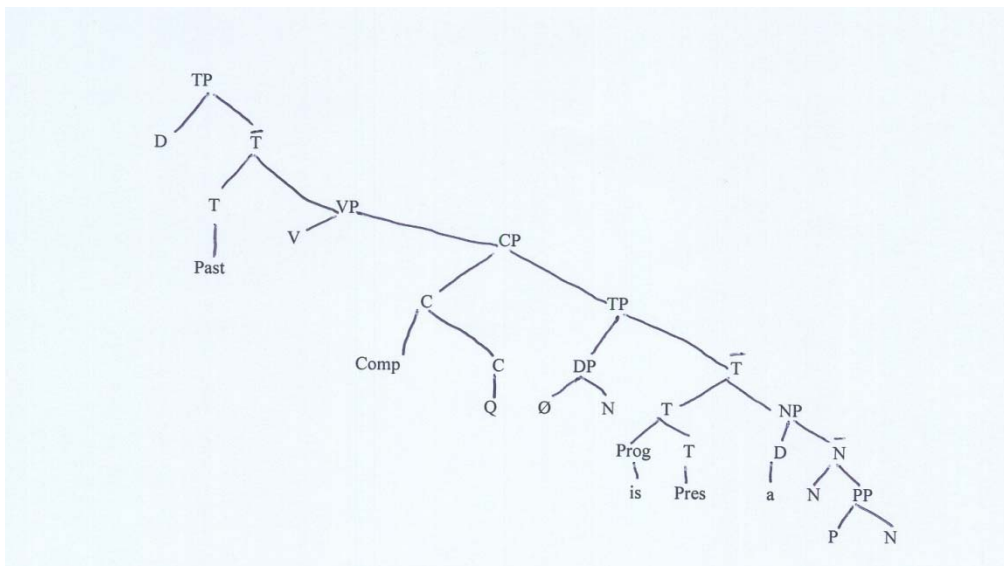


Figure 1. A phrase tree structure for the sentence: “I considered that hope is a motive for work.”

The second tree indicates when the verb see (yara?) indicates direct evidentiality (Figure 2).

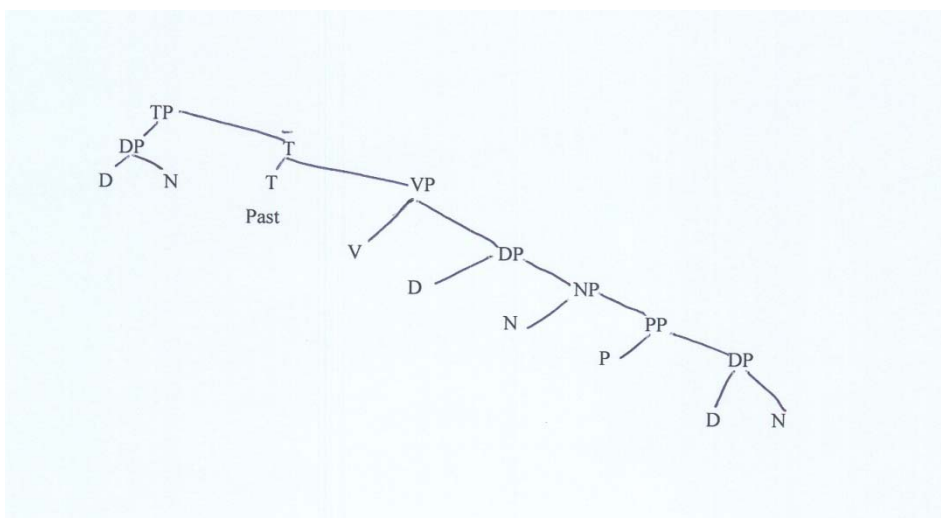


Figure 2. A phrase tree structure for the sentence: “The man saw his wife near the park.”

As regards to the other subtype of the verbs of hearts (?afʕa:l ?alqulu:b) which is verbs indicating potential truthfulness (?afʕa:l ?alruḏḥa:n), Table 2 shows the most common six verbs indicating potential truthfulness in Arabic. These verbs, in fact, indicate evidentiality but with less degree than done by verbs indicating knowledge and complete truthfulness. This result is attributed to the fact that the speaker here is somehow certain of what he/she speaks. In general, they share a mutual semantic content depicted in the sense of "suppose"( Hasan, 1980).



Table 2. the most common six verbs indicating potential truthfulness in Arabic.

No.	Semantic content	Verb in Arabic	Example	Evidentiality degree
1	Suppose	yaḌun-nu suppose	The pilot supposed that the river is a channel.	Less than 100%
2	Suppose	Yaḫa:l suppose	The traveler supposed that the city is more profitable for him.	Less than 100%
3	Suppose	yaḥsab Expect	I expected that staying off is tiring.	Less than 100%
4	suppose	yazḩam claim	He claimed that people are the strongest power.	Less than 100%
5	Suppose	yaḩad Suppose	He supposed the believer is a brother.	Less than 100%
6	Suppose	ḩaḩa: supposed	The tourist supposed that the minaret is a tower.	Less than 100%

As shown in Table 2, all of these verbs have semantic content, rating less than 100% evidentiality. Besides, all of these verbs share the same syntactic behavior which is clearly illustrated in the following formula:

Subject ---- verb (of partial evidentiality) --- a complementizer clause

The pilot      supposed    that the river is channel.

Surprisingly, if the semantic content of these verbs differs from being 80% in evidentiality, their syntactic behavior will also change because these verbs may have more than one sense.

Apparently, the verbs of conversion(?afḩa:l ?altaḩwi:l), the second category, do not have the semantic content of evidentiality but rather their semantic content indicates a sense of conversion from one state to another. Thus, these verbs do not fit this study.

Regarding the sensory evidence, Arabic has a similar system of such evidence to English. To be clear, Arabic native speakers use perception verbs for strong assertion, which is considered

direct evidence such as "hear yasmaʕ/ see yanḌur / feel yaʕʕur /, etc. In addition, indirect perception verbs to indicate weak assertion are also used to indicate evidentiality such as: "it is said that ..." Ju:qa:l. However, there are many Arabic structures indicating evidentiality, but since there is not enough space to mention them all here, we shall state two of these structures with different degrees of evidentiality:

- 1) (min ʔalmuḥtamal an-n tumḌir aljawm) من المحتمل ان تمطر اليوم

It is probable that it will rain.

- 2) 2- (min almuʔakad an-n tumḌir aljawm) من المؤكد ان تمطر اليوم

It is emphatically that it will rain.

In the first sentence, the evidential marker is "It is probable", which refers to the potential incidence of the event (50% evidentiality). On the other hand, in the second sentence the evidential marker is "It is emphatically", which refers to the potential incidence of the event (100% evidentiality).

Nevertheless, the past tense (perfect form) represents a wide-range and effective linguistic tool to indicate evidentiality in Arabic. Also, some scholars have claimed that the past tense in Arabic is mainly used as a marker for evidentiality (Comrie, 1976). In fact, the perfect form is meant that the action happened and the degree of speaker's evidentiality can reach 100%. Such usage is highly utilized in the Holy Koran, especially when talking about some events that really happened or even some events that do not still happen.

To be clear, the Holy Koran uses the perfect form to refer to the deeds carried out by Allah Almighty to indicate the 100% of evidentiality. In addition, many verbs that are attributed to Allah Almighty are perfect in order to bring the clear cut evidence to the fore even if these verbs deal with future aspects or deeds such as what will happen on the resurrection or judgment day:

1-

“وجاء ربك والملك صفا صفا وحيء يومئذ بجهنم يومئذ يتذكر الإنسان وأنى له الذكرى ” (الفجر 22-23)

(waʕa:ʔa rabbuka walmalaku ʕaf-fan ʕaf-fa: waʕiʔa yawmaʔiḏin biʕahan-nama yawmaʔiḏin yataḏak-kru ʔalʔinsa:nu waʔn-na: lahu ʔaḏikra:)

And your Lord comes with the angels in rows; And Hell will be brought near that Day. On that Day will man remember, but how will that remembrance (then) avail him?<sup>ii</sup>

2-

“إذا الشمس كورت وإذا النجوم انكدرت ” (التكوير 1-2)

(ʔiḏa: ʔaʕ-famsu kuw-wirat waʔiḏa: ʔalnuʕu:mu inkadarat)

When the sun Kuwwirat (wound round and lost its light and is overthrown) And when the stars shall fall.

Although the first holy verse talks about a future event, the perfect tense is used to indicate 100% evidentiality since as mentioned above that this tense is used in Arabic to show that events did happen; what is future for us is a past for Allah Almighty; therefore, this finding conforms totally with the claim stated above by many researchers that the perfect form is used in Arabic as a marker for evidentiality. On the other hand, although the second holy verse talks also about a future issue related to resurrection day, the perfect tense is also employed to show the same aspect, 100% evidentiality.

### 3. Conclusion

The aim of this study is meant to show certain aspects related to evidentiality in Arabic and how this linguistic phenomenon is depicted and framed in Arabic. The data analysis shows that SA provides many linguistic mechanisms to present evidentiality. These mechanisms are varied according to the degree of evidentiality involved. Besides, the results of this study reveal that perfect tense is mainly used in Arabic to show evidentiality. In addition, changing the semantic content of the evidentiality markers lead to changing the syntactic structure in SA.

This study has a number of limitations that should be noted. In fact, the researchers have limited themselves to probing the semantic and syntactic perspective of evidentiality leaving behind other related fields like the pragmatic one. Furthermore, the data is from supreme Standard Arabic, thus reducing the generalizability of the results to other varieties of Arabic.

Having studied the provisional agreement in SA, the researchers recommend the following for further research:

- 1) It is recommended that other variations of Arabic be investigated to see whether they coincide with the same results as in SA or not.
- 2) A contrastive study between Arabic and other languages should be done to see whether the result of change in the semantic content that leads to change in the syntactic structure in SA is universally found in all languages.
- 3) A psycholinguistic study in Arabic to see which kinds of evidentiality verbs, direct or indirect ones are firstly acquired.

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## Appendix

### Appendix 1. Arabic Reading Conventions

#### Consonants

Arabic Usual Equivalent	Symbol	Description
أ	ʔ	Glottal stop
ب	b	Voiced bilabial stop
ت	t	Voiceless dento-alveolar stop
ث	θ	Voiceless interdental fricative
ج	ʤ	Voiced alveo-palatal affricate

ح	ħ	Voiceless pharyngeal fricative
خ	χ	Voiceless uvular fricative
د	d	Voiced dento-alveolar stop
ذ	ð	Voiced interdental fricative
ر	r	Voiced alveolar flap
ز	z	Voiced dento-alveolar sulcal fricative
س	s	Voiceless dento-alveolar sulcal fricative
ش	ʃ	Voiceless alveo-palatal fricative
ص	ʂ	Voiceless dento-alveolar sulcal emphatic fricative
ض	ɗ	Voiced dento-alveolar emphatic fricative
ط	ɬ	Voiceless dento-alveolar emphatic stop
ظ	ɗ̤	Voiced interdental emphatic stop
ع	ʕ	Voiced pharyngeal fricative
غ	ɣ	Voiced uvular fricative
ف	f	Voiceless labio-dental fricative
ق	q	Voiced velar emphatic stop
ك	k	Voiceless velar stop
ل	l	Voiced alveolar lateral

م	m	Voiced bilabial nasal
ن	n	Voiced alveolar nasal
هـ	h	Voiced glottal fricative
و	w	Labio-velar semi vowel
ي	y	Palatal semi vowel

## Appendix 2. Vowels

ا	a:
ي	i:
و	u:
فتحة	a
كسرة	i
ضمة	U

<sup>i</sup> The trees are drawn according to the minimalist approach provided by Chomsky, 1995

<sup>ii</sup> Translations in English are adapted from the following two web pages:

<http://www.usc.edu/schools/college/crcc/engagement/resources/texts/muslim/Qur'an/>

<http://Qur'an.muslim-web.com/> (last visit was at 6 P.M on 26-2-2012)