
The linguistics of what speaker and addressee know - and how to study it

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African languages have so far not contributed a lot to our understanding of epistemicity – the linguistic expression of the speaker’s and addressee’s knowledge. Epistemic modality (degree of speaker certainty) has not been a major topic of research for these languages and evidentiality (the grammatical expression of the source of knowledge) was even claimed to be largely absent on the African continent. However, we all keep track of each other’s knowledge and this influences how we communicate – also when using African languages. For example, the marker *cālā* in !Xun expresses indirect evidence, uncertainty, as well as contrast with the addressee’s expectation:

!Xun (König 2013: 80, glosses adapted)

(1) Hā á **cālā** kē ú l’àn hä.

PRO Q NONFIRSTH.EV PST go with PRO

‘He is said to have left together with her (but I doubt it).’

There is an increasing amount of research showing that African languages in fact have very interesting ways of expressing mirativity, evidentiality, authority over knowledge, and we already knew that information structure is influential in the grammar for many African languages. The question is therefore how epistemicity is expressed in African languages, and more narrowly for this workshop: how can we study this?

In my contribution to the workshop, I present the aims of the [MapLE project](#) and its methodology. I discuss 1) the necessity of gathering spontaneous interactional data, 2) how this is complemented by more targeted diagnostics, and 3) the opportunity of using virtual reality (VR) in fieldwork. VR offers the researcher the chance to create a fully controlled environment that nevertheless feels very natural to the speaker (Gonzalez et al. 2024). This can be especially relevant for deixis and (in)direct evidence.

References: • König, C. (2013). Source of information and unexpected information in !Xun—Evidential, mirative and counterexpectation markers. In A. Aikhenvald & A. Storch (eds.). *Perception and Cognition in Language and Culture*. Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004210127_004. • González, P., van der Wal, J., Berruti, C., van Doorn, V.T., Morozova, I., von Raesfeld Meyer, J., & T. Vorisek (2024). Using virtual reality for linguistic fieldwork. *Semantic Fieldwork Methods* 6(1).