Tense and Evidentiality in Estonian

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In Estonian, the notion of evidentiality has developed into a grammatical category, called the “indirectal”. It morphologically surfaces in two moods. Next to the reported indicative, which includes the present and the past tense, the peculiarity of Estonian is the existence of a reported imperative. We suggest that its development may have been stimulated by the wide spread of evidentiality in the indicative, and that it has started off from the third person via a role shift by which the speaker ceases to be the source of the command to become its intermediary. The passage to the first person is considered straightforward, but that to the second person, by contrast, is predicted to (provisionally) remain outside the realm of the grammaticalization process.

1. Introduction

Evidentiality, the reference to the source of information, is grammaticalized in a number of circum-Baltic languages. Of the Finnic languages one can find this phenomenon in Estonian and Livonian and in the Baltic languages Latvian and Lithuanian. In Estonian, evidentiality is not limited to the indicative (declarative) clause (1), but it may occur in imperative clauses as well (2). In the examples below evidentiality is expressed by means of special verb forms — in the first case with the help of the marker -vat, in the second case with -gu (-ku), which express the reportive nature of a statement or command.

(1) Ma / sa / ta / me / te / nad kirjuta-vat kirja
    I / thou / s/he / we / you / they write-EV letter
    ‘I am / you are, s/he is, we, you, they are said to write a letter.’
In Estonian linguistics the *vat*-marked forms are usually treated as an independent mood, called *modus obliquus* or the *quotative mood*. Opinions vary with regard to the status of *gu*/*ku*-marked forms. However, a recent academic grammar (Erelt et al. 1995: 80–83) treated them also as belonging to an independent mood called the *jussive*. Huno Rätsep put forward a different theory, claiming that Estonian has the category of *mode of reporting*, which consists of the direct and indirect modes of reporting. According to this theory, the moods are divided on the basis of two modes of reporting. The traditional indicative and the imperative belong to the direct mode of reporting. The *vat*- and *gu*/*ku*-marked moods, however, constitute the indicative and imperative of the mediated mode of reporting (Rätsep 1971). In addition to the evidential moods, Estonian has some other means of expressing evidentiality, first and foremost it uses compound tense forms for this purpose — the perfect and the pluperfect — and the modal verb *pidama* ‘must, have to’.

The aim of this paper is to give a preliminary but comprehensive picture of the Estonian evidentiality system in the light of contemporary understanding of evidentiality. Our semantic classification of evidentiality follows the classification by Thomas Willett, according to which evidentiality is divided into *direct* and *indirect* evidentiality. In the first case, the marked information comes from a primary source, that is, the speaker himself witnessed what he is talking about. In the second case the information comes from a secondary source — it is inferred from some information or was heard from someone. Accordingly, indirect evidentiality is divided into *inferred* (inferential) evidentiality, which is often based on observed evidence, serving as the basis for inference, and *reported* evidentiality, which is based on second-hand or third-hand information (Willett 1988: 57). The grammatical means that are used to express these meanings are divided into special evidential categories (as the above-mentioned *vat*-marked quotative) and formal means, where evidentiality is expressed as a secondary function (e.g. the perfect or the pluperfect). Following Aikhenvald (2004), we regard the former as *evidentials* and the latter as *evidential strategies*. In Estonian, reported evidentiality is expressed by grammatical means. The evidentials (evidential moods) are described according to their usages and semantic properties; evidential strategies may express either reportive or inferred evidentiality (See also Sepper 2006).
The first two sections of the article discuss the Estonian evidential moods: the first section focuses on the reported indicative and the second on the reported imperative. The third section is devoted to evidential strategies.

2. Reported indicative

The semantic opposition between the direct and the reported indicative (cf. the direct and the reported imperative) is based on the different role structures of the participants in a speech act. The distinction between the modes of reporting based on the role relationship in the speech situation (speaker, listener) and the information-forwarding situation (source of the message, recipient of the message, mediator of the message) was introduced to Estonian linguistics by Rätsep (1971). The present treatment follows his views. There is a one-to-one neutral, unmarked correspondence between the speaker and the listener, and, on the other hand, between the source of the message and its recipient. The one who is speaking acts as the source of the message, and the listener is its recipient (see Figure 1).

\[
\text{SOURCE OF MESSAGE} \rightarrow \text{RECIPIENT OF MESSAGE} \\
\text{SPEAKER} \quad \text{LISTENER}
\]

**Figure 1.** The relationship between the speech situation and the information-forwarding situation in the case of the direct indicative

One usually assumes such a correspondence if the unmarked mood, the direct indicative, is used, for example, in *John is writing a letter* or in Estonian (3):

\[
(3) \quad \begin{array}{ll}
\text{Jaan} & \text{kirjuta-b} \\
\text{Jaan} & \text{write-IND:PRS:3SG} \\
\text{Kirja} & \text{letter:PRTV}
\end{array}
\]

‘Jaan is writing a letter.’

The reported indicative shows that the speaker is not the source of the message but acts as the mediator of the message received from somewhere. Thus, the situation of forwarding a message includes three inter-related entities: the source of the message, the mediator, and the recipient. The two latter coincide with the participants in the speech situation — the speaker acts as the mediator of the message, and the listener is its recipient (Figure 2). However, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the speech situation and the information-forwarding situation. Such a shifted situation is reflected, for example, in a sentence with the quotative predicate (1).
Figure 2. The relationship between the speech situation and the information-forwarding situation in the case of the reported indicative

The main formal means in Standard Estonian for the expression of the reported indicative or the quotative is the *vat*-form with its two tenses: the present (4) and the perfect with the auxiliary verb *olema* ‘be’, which has a general past meaning (5).

(4) Present tense:

ma *kirjuta-vat*

I write-EV

‘I am said to write.’

(5) Past tense:

*ma ole-vat kirjuta-nud*

I be-EV write-PAST:PART

‘I am said to have written.’

Evidential forms can be found in the impersonal (passive)\(^2\) as well:

(6) *Kirjuta-ta-vat kirja*

write-IMPS-EV letter:PRTV

‘A letter is said to be written.’

(7) *Ole-vat kirjuta-tud kirja*

be-EV write-IMPS:PART letter:PRTV

‘A letter is said to have been written.’

The *vat*-marked form of the reported indicative developed from the partitive form of the present participle by way of regrammaticalization. It has been suggested that the evidential use of the participle originated from its use as a complement of speech act verbs, as in example (8). Later it was subjected to reanalysis and started to be used as the independent (finite) predicate of any clause, as in (9).\(^3\)

(8) *Ta ütle-s poisi tule-va-t koju*

S/he say-PST boy:GEN come-PART:PRTV home
'He said that the boy is coming home.'

(9) Poiss  tule-vat  koju  
Boy: NOM  come-EV  home
'The boy is said to come home.'

In the 1920s, language planners were able to accelerate the grammaticalization of the vat-evidential in Standard Estonian.

The past forms of the reported indicative include also the use of the past participle without a copula — only in the affirmative (10) — and the innovative nuvat-form that emerged on the basis of the past participle (-nud) and the vat-form (11).

(10) Poiss  tul-nud  koju  
boy  come-PST:PART  home
'The boy is said to have come home.'

(11) Poiss  tul-nu-vat  koju  
boy  come-PST-EV  home
'The boy is said to have come home.'

There are two possible explanations as to how the past participle, e.g. tulnud (10), started to express evidentiality. On the one hand, it may be an elliptical form of the historically more recent perfect or past perfect with the copula olema 'be', e.g. oli tulnud 'had come'. On the other hand, the lone past participle may have gradually started to be used as a finite form, as is the case in other Uralic and Baltic languages. Such participial predicates were used in narrative texts; the development of the evidential meaning was supported by the retelling of narratives. In the contemporary language, too, the participial predicate is a past form that is characteristic of narrative texts. Of the circum-Baltic languages the development of reported evidentials from participles is common in Livonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian. The past participle without a copula can be used in the imperative as well. However, in that case it acquires not rather an evidential but a reproachful or conditional meaning (12).

(12) Tul-nud  poiss  koju!  
come-PST:IMP  boy  home
'Had the boy come home!'

In addition to the participles, varieties of Estonian reveal that both the Estonian infinitives were regrammaticalized into reported indicative forms. In North
Estonian dialects, and on a limited scale also in common spoken Estonian, the *da*-marked infinitive form is used as the reported indicative (13).

(13)  *Ta ela-da hästi*  
he/she live-d INF well  
'He/she is said to live well.'

In Central Estonian dialects the *ma*-marked infinitive is common in the same meaning (14).

(14)  *Ta ela-ma hästi*  
he/she live-m INF well  
'He/she is said to live well.'

The *vat*-vorm in the common language has also a dialectal background. At first it spread in the South Estonian dialects and was selected as the quotative form of the written language during the period of standardization at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century.

### 3. Reported imperative

The meaning of the reported imperative is also based on a shift of the role structure between the participants in the speaking and reporting situations in comparison with the direct imperative.

(15)  *Lahku!*  
leave:IMP:2SG  
'(thou, you) leave!'

(15)  *Lahku-ge!*  
leave-IMP:2PL

The meaning of the second person of the direct imperative (14) includes the one-to-one correspondence between the two component situations. The speaker issues the command, and the listener acts as the recipient of the command.

| SOURCE OF COMMAND | → | RECIPIENT OF COMMAND |
| SPEAKER | | LISTENER |

Figure 3. The relationship between the speech situation and the information-forwarding situation in the case of the 2nd person of the direct imperative
However, this correspondence is violated in the third person (16).

(16) *Ta/nad kirjuta-gu kiri*
    he/she/they write-EV:IMP letter
    ‘Let him/them write a letter.’

The speaker does act at the same time as the source of the command, but the listener acts only as an intermediary who may but need not forward the command.

**SOURCE OF COMMAND** → **INTERMEDIARY** → **DOER**
**SPEAKER**               **LISTENER**

**Figure 4.** The relationship between the speech situation and the information-forwarding situation in the case of the 3rd person of the direct imperative

In the case of the reported imperative (17) and (18), the role relationship is shifted as well.

(17) *Mina lahku-gu, kui sina jää-d siia*
    leave-EV:IMP when thou stay-2SG here
    ‘I am told to leave / I must leave, whereas you’ll stay here.’

(18) *Peremees ütle-s äkki, et me lahku-gu kohe*
    host say-PST suddenly that we leave-EV:IMP immediately
    ‘All of a sudden the host told us to leave immediately.’

There are three participants; the shift concerns only the speaker, who does not act anymore as the source of the command but as the intermediary of the command coming from elsewhere.

**SOURCE OF COMMAND** → **INTERMEDIARY**
**SPEAKER**               **LISTENER**

**Figure 5.** The relationship between the speech situation and the information-forwarding situation in the case of the reported imperative

The reported imperative form originated from the third person imperative form that had developed the meaning of a reported command and came to be associated with all the persons, as shown in Figure 6. One might assume that
this functional shift was supported by the absence of one-to-one correspondences in the role structure of the third person imperative and the spread of the evidential meaning. The grammaticalization of the reported imperative spread into the other persons in the following sequence: the 3rd person → the 1st person → the 2nd person, whereas the second-person usage (sa lahkugu ‘you leave’) still sounds rather awkward.

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<tr>
<th>DIRECT IMPERATIVE</th>
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<td>ma ‘I’</td>
<td>lahkugu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sa ‘thou’</td>
<td>lahku</td>
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<tr>
<td>ta ‘he / she’</td>
<td>lahkugu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>me ‘we’</td>
<td>lahkugem</td>
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<tr>
<td>te ‘you’</td>
<td>lahkube</td>
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<td>nad ‘they’</td>
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**Figure 6.** Forms of the direct and reported imperative

The reported imperative was introduced into the Estonian grammatical description relatively recently. Until the 1970’s, grammarians had avoided incorporating it into the system, nor had they been able to explain its nature. Nonetheless, one could find examples of the reported imperative both in spoken dialects and texts of the written language dating from the 17th century.

Due to its limited spread the reported imperative is an interesting phenomenon from the typological point of view. Of the circum-Baltic languages, in addition to Estonian, it occurs in Livonian, which is related to Estonian, with different forms for the singular and the plural (19).

(19) The reported imperative in Livonian:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>EN</th>
<th>LV</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I be-EV:IMP</td>
<td>meeg vol-gō-d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘I am told to be’</td>
<td>‘We are told to be’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. **Evidential strategies**

The morphological evidential conveys only reported evidentiality, but the main evidential strategies allow one to express reported and inferential indirect evidentiality. The main evidential strategies include the use of the compound tense forms — the perfect and the pluperfect — and the modal verb *pidama* ‘must, have to’.
The pluperfect has a distinct implication of reported evidentiality, for example, sentence (20) is appropriate in a situation, where one has heard from someone — from the boy himself or someone else — that the boy has been fighting.

(20) Poiss ol-i jälle kakle-mas käi-nud
boy be-PST again fight-mINF:INESS go-PST:PART
‘It is said that the boy had been fighting again.’

The perfect (meaning the perfect of result) can be treated as inferential indirect evidentiality. Example (21) is an appropriate comment about the black eye suffered by the boy.

(21) Poiss on jälle kakle-mas käi-nud
boy be-PRS again fight-mINF:INESS go-PST:PART
‘the boy has been fighting again.’

The auxiliary evidential verb that has developed from the modal verb pidama ‘must, have to’ is one of the most important means of expressing evidentiality. The pidama-verb is foremost a modal verb expressing necessity, as in sentence (22):

(22) Te pea-te lahku-ma
you must-2PL leave-mINF
‘You must leave.’

It has also some meanings that have developed from modal ones. Evidentiality is one of the postmodal meanings of the pidama-verb. The past form of the modal construction is commonly used as a strategy of the reported indicative as in (23) and (24).

(23) Juta pid-i haige ole-ma
Juta must-PST ill be-mINF
‘Juta was reported to be ill.’

(24) Homme pid-i ilus ilm tule-ma
tomorrow must-PST fine weather come-mINF
‘It was reported that the weather would be fine tomorrow.’
Sentence (23) indicates that the speaker heard from someone that Juta is ill. In this case the past form of the *pidama*-verb has lost its past meaning and is used as an evidential (both lexicalized and grammaticalized) auxiliary. In its role as an evidential, the past tense form of the *pidama*-verb expresses some indirect information about present (23) and future (24) events. The widespread use of the past form could be explained by the fact that the information had been received sometime before.

The form of the present tense that conveys inferential evidentiality is also used, e.g. (25).

(25) Ta pea-b küll rumal ole-ma, et niisuguse
    He must-3SG indeed stupid be-mINF that such:GEN
    võimaluse kasuta-ma-ta jätt-is
    opportunity: GEN use- mINF-ABESS leave-PST
    ‘He must be stupid to have missed such an opportunity.’

In some dialects (mainly in the North Estonian dialect area) and in the older written language the present indicative of the *pidama*-verb was used in the meaning of reported evidentiality, e.g. (26).

(26) Kuusalu dialect:
    Sie viga pidä-b jää-ma ka lapse-sse
    this handicap must-3SG remain-INF too child-ILL
    ‘It is said that this handicap will remain also in the child.’

It has been asserted that this usage can be explained by the German influence (Kask 1984: 70), cf. *Er muss krank sein* ‘He must be ill’. This particular usage, however, is not characteristic of contemporary Standard Estonian.

Piret Toomet has studied the use of the means of expressing the reported indicative in common spoken Estonian. According to her study, the use of the evidential strategies — the pluperfect and the modal construction of the *pidama*-verb — is widespread. The former is used when retelling past events, and the latter is used when reporting about what one has heard about the present and the future. The grammaticalized evidential, the *vat*-form, is relatively uncommon in everyday speech. Rather it has remained a formal means that is used in the standardized language (Toomet 2000).
5. Conclusion

In Estonian, evidentiality is expressed as a morphologically marked category, which is related to both the indicative and imperative. In both cases the evidential expresses reported evidentiality. Similarly to the other circum-Baltic languages, the reported indicative has developed on the basis of participles; the reported imperative, however, must have developed on the basis of the third-person imperative. In addition to the morphological evidential, Estonian employs a number of evidential strategies, which allow the speakers to express also inferential reported evidentiality.

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Abbreviations

ABESS – abessive; GEN – genitive; dINF – da-marked infinitive; EV – evidential; ILL – illative; IMP – imperative; IMPS – impersonal; IND – indicative; INF – infinitive; mINF – ma-marked infinitive; NOM – nominative; PART – participle; PFCT – perfect; PL – plural; PRS – present; PRTV – partitive; PST – past; SG – singular.

Notes

1. A part of this work was supported by the Estonian Science Foundation, Grant No. 6147.
2. The impersonal mood stands in opposition to the active and eliminates the subject from the sentence. Unlike the Indo-European passive, the object of an active sentence remains the object of the impersonal verb and does not become the subject, see (6) and (7).
3. For a more detailed discussion see Hakulinen and Leino 1987; Campbell 1991.
4. Finitization of the past participle is discussed in greater detail in Muižniece et al. 1999.
5. Estonian has two infinitives: the da-infinitive and the ma-infinitive. Typically, the da-infinitive is associated with verbs that have a modal meaning (võib õppida ‘can study’, tohib õppida ‘is allowed to study’, kavatseb õppida ‘intends to study’). The ma-infinitive, on the other hand, is associated with verbs of direction and beginning (läheb õppima ‘goes to study’, hakkab õppima ‘begins to study’, õpib lugema ‘learns to read’) and with the modal verb pidama ‘must, have to’ (peab õppima ‘must study, has to study’).
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