



Epistemic complementizers: a cross-linguistic survey



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 December 2014

Received in revised form 2 April 2015

Accepted 6 April 2015

Available online 22 May 2015

Keywords:

Epistemic modality

Evidentiality

Complementizer

Complementation

Semantics

Typology

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a cross-linguistic survey of epistemic complementizers: complementizers that indicate degree of certainty about and/or type of information source of the proposition expressed by the complement clause. Based on data from a genetically stratified sample of 89 languages, the paper has two main objectives:

1. It presents a typological survey of patterns pertaining to epistemic complementizers, including their cross-linguistic frequency, the meanings they express, and the ways in which they combine into systems involving multiple markers.

2. It shows that a systematic treatment of the semantics of (epistemic and other) complementizers provides an explanatory framework for their relative morpho-syntactic markedness, for conditions on their omission, and for their combinability with other means of epistemic marking in the complement clause.

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1. Introduction

In the early 90's, Frajzyngier pointed to the existence of complementizers which, in addition to marking complements, have a modal function (e.g. Frajzyngier and Jasperson, 1991; Frajzyngier, 1995). In spite of this, and in spite of a continued strong interest in modality (recent publications include Narrog, 2012; Boye, 2012; Aikhenvald and Dixon, 2014; Nuyts and van der Auwera 2015), modal complementizers have until recently remained heavily understudied.

Nordström (2010) is a first attempt at remedying this situation. Based on an extensive cross-linguistic overview, including data from around 600 languages, Nordström documents the relationship between modality and subordinators (including complementizers) beyond doubt. Nordström's take on modality may, however, be seen as controversial in several respects. For one thing, she considers the concepts *declarative* and *indicative* to be epistemic (or 'propositional') modal concepts (Nordström, 2010: 22–33). This is at odds with standard views according to which, for instance, declarative is a sentence-type concept associated with illocutionary value (e.g. König and Siemund, 2007). Moreover, in opposition to scholars who argued that 'realis', 'irrealis' and 'subjunctive' are language-particular terms covering a variety of meanings (e.g. Bybee et al., 1994: 238; de Haan, 2012), Nordström sees them as epistemic modal concepts and seems to analyse all language-particular items referred to by means of these terms as epistemic items (see the discussion of Japanese complementizers in Section 2.2 for an example of where our analysis deviates from Nordström's).

Nordström's study notwithstanding, modal complementizers have still not been subjected to a systematic typological study which relates formal and functional aspects in a strict way. This is what we intend to do in the present paper. We focus

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on the subarea of modality known as *epistemicity*, and we take an approach which is better suited for cross-linguistic comparison than Nordström's, in employing comparative concepts rather than language-specific categories (Haspelmath, 2010). Following Boye (2012), we take *epistemicity* to include both *epistemic modality* and *evidentiality*. Accordingly, our study includes complementizers that indicate degree of certainty about and/or type of information source of the proposition expressed by the complement clause. A fuller definition of epistemic complementizers, couched in existing literature, will be proposed in Section 2. Our study surveys a genetically stratified sample of 89 languages, which we present in Section 3. Of our sample, 28 languages are covered also by Nordström, but as already indicated our analyses diverge from hers in several cases.

In the remainder of the paper we pursue two main objectives: Firstly, in Section 4, we provide a description of cross-linguistic patterns pertaining to epistemic complementizers, including

- i) an assessment of the cross-linguistic frequency of the relevant complementizers;
- ii) an identification of the types of epistemic meanings found in complementizers; and
- iii) an overview of attested epistemic complementizer contrasts.

Secondly, in Section 5, we argue that the semantics of epistemic complementizers, and complementizer semantics in general, is the key to understanding three grammatical phenomena:

- i) morphosyntactic markedness patterns pertaining to complementizers;
- ii) complementizer omission; and
- iii) combinability of complementizers with other epistemic markers in the complement clause.

Based on the data presented in this paper, we furthermore refute Frajzyngier's above-mentioned claim that all complementizers are modal (Sections 3 and 5.3). Finally, we briefly summarize and conclude in Section 6.

2. Theoretical preliminaries and definitions

In this section, we define what we understand by complementizers (Section 2.1); what we understand by epistemic meaning (Section 2.2); and based on this, what we understand by epistemic complementizers (Section 2.3). In each of the relevant subsections, we discuss problems associated with identifying complementizers, epistemic meaning, and epistemic complementizers, and outline how we tackled these problems.

2.1. Complementizers

As mentioned in Section 1, Frajzyngier (1995) claims that complementizers are always modal. In fact, he claims that complementizers should not be defined primarily as markers of complement clauses, but are first and foremost modal expressions; the function of identifying a complement clause being only secondary. An important empirical prediction following from this view is that complementizers will tend to exclude (other) modal elements from the complement clause. We will return to this point in Section 5.3. Frajzyngier's views are shared in a modified version by Nordström (2010), who defines complementizers as marking whether the embedded proposition is 'realis' or 'irrealis' (see Section 1 on these notions) and thus takes complementizers to be necessarily expressions of propositional modality.

If Frajzyngier's claim is to be understood as more than a terminological trick (in which complementizers are seen as one modality phenomenon among others), complementizers and modality have to be disentangled at least as a point of departure. Only if a principled distinction is maintained, it is possible to empirically assess Frajzyngier's claim. In this paper, accordingly, we do not presuppose that complementizers have epistemic meaning, but define the former independently. In this respect, we follow Bhatt (1999) and Noonan (2007), who make a distinction between modality and subordination in general (Bhatt), or between modality and complementation in particular (Noonan). Noonan (2007: 55) offers the following definition of complementizers: a complementizer is 'a word, particle, clitic or affix, one of whose functions it is to identify the entity as a complement'. This definition fits our purpose in that it defines complementizers functionally and allows for other functions in addition to the complementizing one.

Apart from using a complementizer, another very common strategy for coding complementation involves *deranked* clauses: a deranked complement clause (or another type of dependent clause) deviates formally – in some way and to some degree – from an independent clause, for instance because the former lacks verbal morphology and has nominal (i.e. possessive) argument expression. The term 'deranked', introduced by Stassen (1985), contrasts with 'balanced'; the latter term indicates that a dependent clause is formally (almost) identical to an independent clause, with the possible exception of being marked by a complementizer or other subordinator. The terminological pair 'balanced/deranked' has been adopted in several functional typological studies of dependent clauses (e.g. Hengeveld, 1998; Cristofaro, 2003).

For Noonan, markers of deranked complement clauses do not usually qualify as complementizers. Specifically, he states that 'derivational affixes, such as English *-ing* [...], are not considered [...] to be complementizers' (Noonan, 2007: 55). On the other hand, infinitival markers, such as English *to*, do belong to Noonan's category of complementizer. This is perhaps surprising, to the extent that both *-ing* and *to* combine with deranked complement clauses. In the present study, we basically

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