Evidentials Do Project Above Negation: Evidence from Shilluk

Introduction. It has often been assumed that evidentials escape the scope of clause-mate negation via projection, yielding interpretations where the evidential claim survives negation (Izvorski 1997; Matthewson et al. 2007; Koev 2017). However, Murray (2010) and Korotkova (2020) show that the interpretation typically available is not projective: evidentials pattern as taking wide scope over negation rather than triggering genuine projection. If evidential propositions do project, we would expect the projective interpretation in (ii) to be available, rather than the wide-scope interpretation in (i).

(1) Ivan ne **izkaral** izpita. (adapted from Izvorski 1997)
Ivan not passed.IND the.exam
p = 'Ivan passed the exam.'

(i) = [I have indirect evidence for ¬ p] wide scope of evidential
≈ 'Ivan didn't pass the exam, *I hear/infer*'

(ii) ≠ [I have indirect evidence for p] ∧ [¬ p] projection of evidential
≈ 'Ivan passed the exam, *I hear/infer*. Ivan didn't pass the exam.'

In contrast to this cross-linguistic pattern, we argue that evidentials in **Shilluk** (Western Nilotic; South Sudan) *do* project above negation. This proposal is motivated by a striking puzzle: the direct evidential is banned under clause-mate negation in Shilluk, even when the speaker has direct evidence. We show that this projective behaviour becomes empirically visible because Shilluk permits two independently interpretable evidential markings within a single clause.

Puzzle. Shilluk has a two-way distinction of evidentiality in the Past tense (R&A 2018). A verb in the Past tense is either marked as DIRECT evidential or INDIRECT evidential, see (2a, 2b).

(2) a. Kul **á-càm** ràaw
Kul DIR-eat millet
'Kul ate the millet, *I have direct evidence*.'

b. Kul **càaam** à ràaw
Kul eat:IND FOC millet
'Kul ate the millet, *I have no direct evidence*.'

Under negation, however, the system behaves unexpectedly: the verb is forced to appear in the INDIRECT form, even in contexts where the speaker has direct evidence, as in (3a) (Remijsen et al. in prep). Crucially, the negation marker itself also bears evidential morphology, independently from the verb. We argue that this second, structurally higher evidential position is the key to understanding why Shilluk evidentials project.

(3) a. Kul nūutí càaam / ***á-càm** ràaw.
Kul NEG:DIR eat:IND / *DIR-eat millet
'Kul didn't eat the millet, *I have direct evidence*.'

b. Kul nūutɔ̀ **càaam** ràaw.
Kul NEG:IND eat:IND millet
'Kul didn't eat the millet, *I have no direct evidence*.'

Why does clause-mate negation block the verb from taking the DIRECT evidential morphology? Why can the evidential markings on the negation and verb be asymmetric? These questions lie at the heart of the puzzle.

Solution. We propose that the ungrammaticality of the verb marked as DIRECT in (3a) follows from the fact that Shilluk evidentials genuinely project above negation, rather than merely taking wide scope over it as reported for evidentials elsewhere. We assume (i) that the evidential morphology on both the negation marker and the verb is interpreted, and (ii) that surface structure in Shilluk faithfully represents the semantic scope order. Under these assumptions, allowing the DIRECT evidential to project in (3a) would generate a contradiction: the speaker would assert *not p* while they have direct evidence for *p*. Given that a Shilluk verb in the past tense must inflect as either the DIRECT form or the INDIRECT form, the verb in (3a) can only take the INDIRECT form to avoid this conflict of beliefs. If, instead, we attempted to analyze Shilluk like languages in which evidentials obligatorily take wide scope over negation, we obtain incorrect predictions. For (3b), a wide-scope analysis would require both evidentials to outscope negation, yielding the interpretation in (4), which is always contradictory, as the speaker normally has direct access to their own evidence.

(4) LF: [INDIRECT [INDIRECT [¬ *p*]]]
= 'I have no direct evidence for [INDIRECT [¬ *p*]]'
≈ 'I have no direct evidence for I have no direct evidence for ¬ *p*.'

This problem disappears once we treat Shilluk evidentials as projective. When the two evidentials in (3b) project, the resulting interpretation is shown in (5), which is coherent with the attested meaning. Moreover, (5) aligns with vF & G' (2010) reformulation of the evidential presupposition associated with English *must*.

(5) LF: [$_b$ INDIRECT [$_a$ ¬ [INDIRECT *p*]]]
a = ¬ *p* ∧ [INDIRECT *p*]
b = ¬ *p* ∧ [INDIRECT [¬ *p*]] ∧ [INDIRECT *p*]
b ≈ ¬ *p* ∧ *I have no direct evidence for* ¬ *p* ∧ *I have no direct evidence for p*

The projective analysis also explains why the double DIRECT configuration in (3a) is impossible. Interpreting ⟦DIRECT *p*⟧ under clause-mate negation yields a contradiction: ¬*p* ∧ *the speaker has direct evidence for p*. Thus, the grammar forces the verb to appear with the INDIRECT form in negative clauses. When the verb under negation takes the INDIRECT form in (3a), the projective interpretation gives rise to the attested meaning.

(6) LF: [$_b$ DIRECT [$_a$ ¬ [INDIRECT *p*]]]
a = ¬ *p* ∧ [INDIRECT *p*]
b = ¬ *p* ∧ [DIRECT [¬ *p*]] ∧ [INDIRECT *p*]
b ≈ ¬ *p* ∧ *I have direct evidence for* ¬ *p* ∧ *I have no direct evidence for p*

Upshot. By demonstrating that Shilluk evidentials genuinely project rather than simply taking wide scope, we expand the empirical landscape of evidential systems. We argue that Shilluk's distinctive behaviour stems from the fact that the language allows two independently interpretable evidential markings within a single clause, which is a configuration unattested elsewhere and one that makes projection effects empirically visible. We also show that Shilluk provides a counterexample to a major critique of presuppositional approaches to evidentials: the assumption that evidentials do not project above negation (see Faller 2002). Even though we do not take a stand on the exact species of projective content involved, our analysis demonstrates that evidentials can behave projectively when the morphosyntax offers the right diagnostic environment. This pushes existing theories to accommodate a richer space of evidential–negation interactions than previously assumed.

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