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## Motivations behind the Prominence of Evidentiality in Spoken Chinese Question-and-Answer Interactions

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### Abstract

Evidentiality in daily conversations serves as a means of indicating information sources and carries extended epistemic and affective meanings. Based on previous studies and analysis of actual conversational data, this paper categorizes evidentiality into four types: firsthand experience, inference, hearsay, and quotation. The findings reveal that in spoken Q&A interactions, evidentiality typically appears at the beginning of intonation units, and sequences involving evidentiality often occur in pairs. The use of evidentiality in Q&A sequences mainly reflects scenarios where the questioner elevates their epistemic stance or the respondent lowers theirs. This highlights concerns about others' epistemic status and adjustments in one's own expressions. The principles of facework, communicative accommodation theory, and conversational implicature theory are identified as key factors influencing the use of evidentiality.

### Keywords

Evidentiality, question-and-answer behavior, epistemic stance, epistemic status

### 汉语口语问答中示证语凸显动因分析

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### 摘要

示证语在日常会话中是信息来源交代的一种方式，具有外延的认识情态意义。本文在前人研究的基础上，结合实际语料分析，将示证语分为亲历、推断、传闻和引语四类。

研究显示，在口语问答中，示证语通常在语调单元之首，并且凸显示证信息的问答序列基本成对出现。问答序列中凸显示证语的情况，大多体现提问者提高认识立场或回答者降低认识立场的情境。这反映了对他人认识地位的关切和自身表达的调整，面子原则、交际顺应理论和会话含义理论是示证语使用的关键因素。

### 关键词

示证语，问答行为，认识立场，认识地位

### Introduction

Evidentiality is used to express information sources and speaker perspectives (Aikhenvald, 2003:1; 2014:1). Research on evidentiality has a long history and is mainly conducted from three perspectives: semantics, form, and function. Semantic studies focus on the classification of evidential expressions and cross-linguistic comparisons (Hu, 1994a, 1994b; Zhu, 2006). Formal studies explore the syntactic positioning of evidential markers and their interaction with other components (Chen, 2009; Xu, 2012). Functional studies investigate the communicative role of evidentiality in discourse, such as indicating information sources, expressing attitudes, and enhancing textual coherence (Zhang & Tang, 2013; Le, 2014; Li, 2016; Fang & Le, 2017).

However, existing research has mainly focused on written discourse, with relatively little attention given to the use of evidentiality in spoken interactions. Tian Ting (2017, 2022) pointed out that evidentiality in natural conversations is influenced by interactional structures, yet related studies remain fragmented and lack systematic analysis. Particularly, the timing and strategies of evidential usage in communication still require further exploration. For instance, in Example (1), the conditions under which a speaker emphasizes the source of information require further study.

- (1) Zhang    I heard that in the workplace, some companies prefer hiring  
 Min:        local employees. Is that true?  
 张敏:        我听说在职场上，有些公司更喜欢招聘本地人，是这样  
               吗？  
 Wang        Yes, small companies prefer local employees because they  
 Lei:         adapt faster.  
 王磊:        是的，小公司更喜欢本地人，觉得适应快。

In this example, Zhang Min uses “heard” to indicate the source of information while posing a question. In contrast, Wang Lei responds based on personal knowledge without specifying an information source (e.g., “they say” or “I heard”). This suggests that in actual spoken communication, explicitly stating the source of information or encoding evidential information is not necessarily a determining factor in sentence acceptability or listener comprehension.

It is noteworthy that evidential expressions are not limited to question-and-answer interactions; they also appear in narration, informing, reasoning, and other speech acts. However, Q&A sequences possess unique structural characteristics in interaction, making them an ideal context for studying the motivations behind the prominence of evidentiality. First, as core units in conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974), Q&A sequences operate on the mechanism of information asymmetry: the questioner typically seeks information, while the respondent is responsible for providing it. Consequently, respondents often use evidential expressions to indicate the source, reliability, and epistemic stance of their information (e.g., “I think,” “I heard,” “probably”), all of which contribute to the prominence of evidentiality.

Second, compared to one-way information transmission (e.g., narration or informing), Q&A interactions involve immediate feedback. Respondents must quickly adjust their tone or mark information sources to adapt to communication needs. Therefore, the prominence of evidentiality in Q&A sequences is more easily observed and analyzed.

This study recorded 12 hours of conversations, comprising 58 segments, to form a corpus for analyzing the prominence of evidentiality in Q&A behaviors using conversation analysis. The data involve eight native Mandarin speakers, all fluent in standard Mandarin and from diverse academic and professional backgrounds to ensure interactional diversity. The conversations were unstructured, involving two to three participants discussing topics related to learning, daily life, and personal interests to reflect natural Q&A behaviors.

Based on this, the study focuses on two core questions: (1) the distribution of evidential prominence in Q&A sequences and (2) the relationship between the use of evidential expressions and speakers' epistemic stance in interactions.

## The Positioning and Prominence of Evidentiality in Q&A Sequences

### Definition and Positional Distribution of Evidentiality

This study follows the semantic overview of Aikhenvald (2014), the evidentiality criteria for Mandarin proposed by Le Yao (2014), and the classification framework of Tian Ting (2022) to categorize evidential expressions in the corpus into four types: firsthand experience, inference, hearsay, and quotation. Table 1 presents examples of lexical forms and fixed structures for each category.

Table 1  
*Semantic Classification of Evidential Expressions*

Evidential Category	Lexical Forms and Fixed Structures	Example <sup>1</sup>
Firsthand Experience	I see <sup>2</sup> (我看) V-up <sup>3</sup> (V起来)	((Discussing a friend's new car)) 1 F1: What do you think of.. his new car 你说..他新车怎么样 2 F2: It looks pretty new [right] 看着挺新的[吧] 3 → F3: [I see that it's not great... (0.9) not worth the price] [我看那个不行...(0.9)不值那个钱]
Inference	Should (应该) Probably (可能) I think (我觉得)	((Discussing members in a chat group)) 1 M1: You are in the group right-You know Li Qiang 那你在群.群<XliX>-你认识^李强是吧 2 M2: Yes..I was the one who invited him 对..李强是我拉进来的

		3 → M3: Then you should know Wang Hui too 那王慧你 <b>应该</b> 也认识
Hearsay	I heard (听说) It is said (说是)	(( Talking about the concept of 'ceremony')) 1 F1: Ceremony..It's like our high school friend-- 仪式感..<A 就是 A>我们高中那个谁来着-- 2 → F2: I heard she's with.. Xiao Wu now 我 <b>听说</b> 她跟那个谁..小五在一起
Quotation	He/She said (他 她说) Someone said (某某说)	(( Discussing classmates who didn't move out of their hometown)) 1 F1: I just feel that maybe they prefer staying in their hometown 我只是觉得..可能还是更愿意在<L 老家 L>吧 2 → F2: (H) Just like Manman also said... (1.0) She—wasn't she in City before? (1.8) People like them... <A If they didn't go to grad school A>... (1.1) would just stay locally. (H) 就像 <b>曼曼也说</b> ...(1.0)她--之前不是在 D 市嘛...(1.8)像她们那些人..<A 如果没有考研的话 A>...(1.1)也就在本地了

In this study, 217 pairs of Q&A sequences were analyzed, based on the structure of adjacent pairs (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson, 1974), which consist of a question and an answer. The aim was to explore the distribution of evidential expressions within conversational units and their underlying motivations. Therefore, the study adopted Turn Constructional Units (TCUs) as the analytical framework for processing spoken data.

In defining TCUs, we followed the methods of Tao (1996) and Le Yao (2016, 2017), using pitch reset and pauses as key prosodic features. However, it is important to note that TCUs do not necessarily correspond one-to-one with intonation units (IUs), although they tend to overlap significantly (Ford & Thompson, 1996). IUs are primarily defined based on prosodic boundaries such as pitch changes, rhythm, and pauses, whereas TCUs involve syntactic structures and interactional functions. Based on this relationship, the present study primarily relied on IU definitions while incorporating TCU perspectives to examine the distribution of evidential expressions in Q&A sequences.

This framework was used to observe the positioning of evidential expressions. For example, in the “Quotation” category, F2’s utterance in the following example contains four syntactically complete clauses but is actually divided into six IUs. See Example (2):

- (2) 1 F2: (H) Just like Manman also said...  
(H)就像曼曼也说  
2 ...(1.0) She—  
...(1.0)她--  
3 She was in D City before, wasn't she

- 4            之前不是 D 市嘛  
 ... (1.8) People like them—  
 ... (1.8) 像她们那些人
- 5            ..<A If they didn't go to grad school A>  
 ..<A 如果没有考研得话 A>
- 6            ... (1.1) would just stay locally  
 ... (1.1) 也就在本地吧

Analysis of the corpus reveals that most evidential expressions appear at the beginning of intonation units (IUs). However, expressions such as "should" and "probably," although occurring within an IU, are typically positioned before the subject-predicate structure. See Table 2 for details.

Table 2

*Distribution of Evidential Expressions in Intonation Units (Occurrences)*

Category	Evidential Expression	IU-Initial	IU-Middle	IU-Final	Independent IU	Total
Firsthand Experience	I see	33 (91.7%)	0 (0)	1 (2.8%)	2 (5.5%)	36
	V-up	22 (81.5%)	5 (18.5%)	0 (0)	0 (0)	27
Inference	Should	34 (30.4%)	42 (37.5%)	12 (10.7%)	24 (21.4%)	112
	Probably	27 (20.1%)	78 (58.2%)	21 (15.7%)	8 (6%)	134
	I think	59 (67.8%)	4 (4.6%)	3 (3.4%)	21 (24.2%)	87
Hearsay	I heard	38 (55.1%)	6 (8.7%)	25 (36.2%)	0 (0)	69
	It is said	14 (60.9%)	6 (26.1%)	0 (0)	3 (13%)	23
	Isn't it said	4 (28.6%)	9 (64.3%)	1 (7.1%)	0 (0)	14
	Not said	35 (60.3%)	13 (22.4%)	10 (17.3%)	0 (0)	58
Quotation	He/She said	19 (55.9%)	3 (8.9%)	0 (0)	12 (35.2%)	34
	Someone said	11 (44%)	6 (24%)	5 (20%)	3 (12%)	25

It is important to note that there is a noticeable imbalance in the frequency of use among the four types of evidential expressions in the corpus. Inference-type evidential markers (e.g., "should," "probably") are the most common, while quotation-type evidentials (e.g., "he/she said," "someone said") are used less frequently. This distributional difference may be related to communicative functions, topic types, and discourse organization.

For instance, the initial position of an intonation unit is often a crucial place for expressing personal stance, a feature observed in both English and Mandarin (Kärkkäinen, 2003; Schiffrin,

1987). The use of prominent evidential expressions in this position can effectively convey the speaker's attitude and facilitate interaction with listeners. Aikhenvald (2014) noted that evidentials not only indicate information sources but also express the speaker's degree of certainty, serving as discourse markers that enhance coherence and guide listener comprehension (Schiffrin, 1987; Heritage, 2012).

Cross-linguistic research has shown that different languages vary in their evidentiality systems. Russian and Turkish have complex grammaticalized evidential systems, while English mainly relies on modal verbs (e.g., must have, seems like) and prepositional phrases (e.g., according to) (Chafe & Nichols, 1986; Aikhenvald, 2004). Compared to these languages, Mandarin relies more on lexically flexible evidential expressions such as "it seems," "I heard," and "it looks like," which also have strong interactional functions.

Understanding evidentiality in Mandarin spoken discourse contributes to the broader study of evidential systems across languages, revealing both universal and language-specific patterns.

### Prominence of Evidentiality in Q&A Sequences

Given the constructive role of evidentiality in interaction, it is necessary to examine the usage patterns of evidential expressions in the antecedent (question) and consequent (response) parts of Q&A sequences. Four main usage patterns emerge (omitting "evidentiality" for brevity): (1) prominence in both antecedent and consequent, (2) prominence in antecedent but implicit in consequent, (3) implicit in antecedent but prominent in consequent, and (4) implicit in both antecedent and consequent.

By constructing a 2×2 contingency table (see Table 3), we can apply the chi-square test to assess the correlation between these combinations.

Table 3

*Distribution of Evidentiality Prominence in Q&A Sequences (Occurrences)*

		Consequent Prominent			Consequent Implicit			Total <sup>5</sup>
Antecedent Prominent	Total	Count	Chi-square	p-value	Count	Chi-square	p-value	
	142	132	5.07	0.0244	21	182.03	1.74*10 <sup>-41</sup>	153
Antecedent Implicit	Total	Count	Chi-square	p-value	Count	Chi-square	p-value	Total
	99	54	0.11	0.735	52	0	1.0	106

From Table 3, we observe that when evidentiality is prominent in the antecedent, its occurrence in the consequent is significantly correlated ( $P < 0.05$ ). However, when the antecedent lacks evidential prominence, the consequent does not show a consistent pattern ( $P > 0.05$ ). Additionally, among cases where the antecedent is prominent, the proportion of implicit evidential expressions in the consequent is relatively low (approximately 13.7%), reducing the statistical persuasiveness.

Thus, we conclude that the use of evidential expressions in the antecedent of a question correlates positively with their presence in the consequent, indicating that evidential prominence often appears in pairs.

The co-occurrence of evidential expressions in Q&A sequences aligns with Aikhenvald (2014), who argues that evidential prominence is closely related to the direct experiential distance of information. Firsthand evidential expressions are used most frequently due to their high certainty, followed by quotation evidentials, which relay others' statements with moderate certainty. Hearsay evidentials express collective opinions with vague sources, and inference evidentials indicate subjective speculation with the lowest certainty.

Based on this framework, we analyzed the distribution of evidential expressions in Q&A sequences. See Table 4 for details.

Table 4

*Distribution of Evidential Expressions in Q&A Sequences (Occurrences)*

Category	Evidential Expression	Antecedent in Q&A	Consequent in Q&A	Total
First hand Experience	I see	24 (66.7%)	12 (33.3%)	36
	V-up	15 (55.6%)	12 (44.4%)	27
Inference	Should	43 (38.4%)	69 (61.6%)	112
	Probably	22 (16.4%)	112 (83.6%)	134
	I think	49 (56.3%)	38 (43.7%)	87
Hearsay	I heard	43 (62.3%)	26 (37.7%)	69
	It is said	12 (52.2%)	11 (47.8%)	23
	Isn't it said	9 (64.3%)	5 (35.7%)	14
	Not said	55 (94.9%)	3 (5.1%)	58
Quotation	He/She said	27 (79.4%)	7 (20.6%)	34
	Someone said	19 (76%)	6 (24%)	25

The results indicate that inference-type evidentials are primarily used in responses, while firsthand, quotation, and hearsay evidentials are more frequently found in questions. This suggests that questioners tend to use evidentials to reinforce their certainty about information, whereas respondents use evidentials to highlight uncertainty about information sources.

This distribution pattern contradicts the common intuition about Q&A sequences, where the questioner is typically perceived as less certain, and the respondent as more confident. For example, in lines 05 and 06 of Example (3), M1 employs the lower-certainty inference-type evidential “should” in the question, whereas M2 responds using a higher-certainty firsthand evidential.

- (3) ((Discussing rent prices, but M2 lives in a partitioned section of the living room, and the "room" referred to in the conversation is actually M2's roommate's room))
- 1 M2: Oh, no wonder I was thinking... you guys live so close... why is it [so cheap]  
哦怪不得我就觉得..你们明明这么近...为什么[挺便宜]
- 2 M1: [Yeah, only 2100.]  
[对只有两千一]

- 3 I think if you rent on your own... (0.9) it might be around 3000.  
我觉得如果要是自己租的话...(0.9)可能得有三千.差不多
- 4 M2: My place is exactly 3000.  
我那边就是三千
- 5 → M1: (0) Yeah, but your room is bigger than that, right  
(0)对但你的房间比那个大吧应该
- 6 → M2: ...(1.0) Not really... I see their rooms are quite small...  
(0.7) but the living room is quite big  
... (1.0) 没有很大..我看他们房间挺小的...(0.7)客厅倒是挺大的
- 7 M1: Oh=  
哦=
- 8 But yeah, you just can't find another place like this  
但是^就是找不着了
- 9 F1: Hmm... it's fine... it won't fall apart  
嗯==还行..它又不会掉

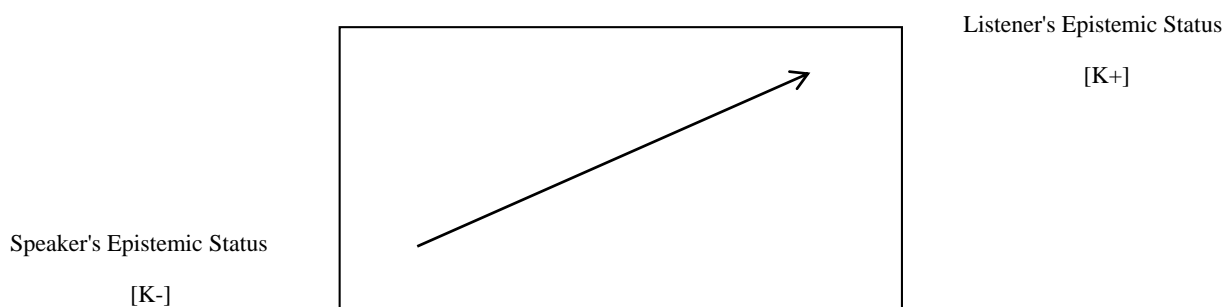
Thus, Aikhenvald's (2014) proposed model alone is insufficient to explain these opposing tendencies in real interaction. This suggests that speakers and listeners use evidential expressions not solely based on fixed patterns but as deliberate strategies tailored to specific communicative goals. The underlying motivations behind these strategies will be further explored in the following sections.

### Evidential Prominence and Epistemic Stance in Q&A Sequences

Question-and-answer interactions are a key means by which speakers seek information from listeners. The premise of this speech act is that the questioner assumes the respondent possesses information that they do not know. According to Heritage (2012), this interaction implies that the speaker holds a lower epistemic status (K-), while the listener has a higher epistemic status (K+). If represented on a coordinate system, the difference in knowledge levels between the questioner and respondent can be visualized as an upward-sloping line, reflecting the contrast in epistemic status.

Figure 1

*Comparison of Speaker and Listener Epistemic Status in Q&A Sequences*



Although the questioning process generally follows an upward slope from the speaker to the listener, the actual slope varies. Heritage (2012) describes this inclination as the epistemic



stance. Epistemic status refers to a speaker's stable relationship with information, whereas epistemic stance represents a moment-by-moment dynamic expression of this relationship, influencing the grammatical form of the same proposition. For example, in English interrogative sentences regarding marital status, a speaker may choose one of the following forms:

A. Are you married?(你结婚了吗?)

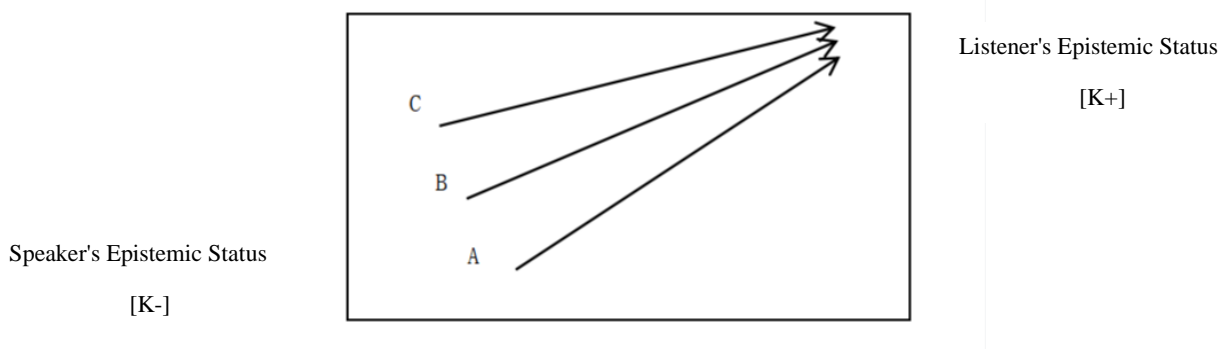
B. You're married, aren't you?(你结婚了, 不是吗?)

C. You're married(你结婚了。)

All three sentences target information within the listener's territory of information. From an epistemic status perspective, the speaker is undoubtedly positioned at [K-], while the listener is at [K+]. If we quantify their knowledge about the listener's marital status, a higher level of certainty corresponds to a higher position on the vertical axis, while the speaker and listener's respective epistemic statuses are located on opposite ends of the horizontal axis. This relationship can be visually represented in the following figure (see Heritage, 2012: Figure1).

Figure 2

*Gradient Representation of Epistemic Stance in Interrogative Sentences A, B, and C*



Sentence A, using a direct interrogative form, indicates that the questioner has no prior knowledge of the listener's marital status. In contrast, sentences B and C demonstrate a greater epistemic commitment, with sentence C's declarative form implying that the questioner is already somewhat informed and merely seeking confirmation.

Epistemic status and epistemic stance respectively represent the stability of a speaker's relationship with information and the dynamic expression of that relationship in interaction, emphasizing the former's fixed nature and the latter's immediacy. Therefore, exploring the motivations behind evidential prominence in Q&A sequences requires an in-depth analysis of the epistemic stance underlying this discourse behavior.

#### Evidential Prominence in Questions and Higher Epistemic Stance of the Speaker

First, we examine examples of question-and-answer interactions where evidential expressions are not explicitly used. See Example (4):

- (4) ((Three participants discussing F1's advisor ))
- 1            F1: My senior... my eldest senior is a student of Professor Lulu.  
                  我那个师姐..大师姐是露露老师的学生
- 2     →   F2: ...(.7) A student of Professor Lulu

- ...(7)露露老师的学[生]
- 3 F1: [Mm]... She's already in the fourth year of her PhD.  
[嗯]...博 sh-博博博四了都
- 4 F3: ...(2.0) [[XXXXXX]]  
...(2.0)[[XXXXXX]]
- 5 → F2: [[Professor Wu]]—^Doesn't Professor Wu [3supervise  
PhD students3]  
...[[吴老师]]-^吴老师不带-[3 不带博士吗 3]
- 6 F1 [3He doesn't supervise PhD students; he is not a PhD  
:  
advisor.3]  
[3 他不带博士, 他不是博导 3]
- 7 ..(2.5)He can only— [4He—4]  
... (2.5) 他只能- [4 他-4]
- 8 → F2: ..[4He's ↑not^ a PhD advisor4]  
..[4 他↑不^是博导 4]
- 9 F1 Mm=  
:  
嗯=
- 10 F2: I always thought<Ahe is a PhD advisorA>.  
我一直以为<A 他是博导 A>

In this conversation, we observe three interrogative sentences appearing in lines 2, 5, and 8. Syntactically, the questions in lines 2 and 8 belong to the category of echo questions. Echo questions often indicate a focus on understanding, introduce new topics, or express doubt (Shao Jingmin, 2014:181). The response to the question in line 2 is a confirmation (“Mm,” line 3), which verifies the previously provided information. In contrast, the response to the question in line 8 is affirmative (a high-pitched, emphatic “Mm,” line 9), affirming the proposition’s content. Thus, both echo questions express the speaker’s uncertainty, but to varying degrees—the former seeks confirmation of the discourse content (“verification question”), while the latter doubts the proposition’s validity (“challenge question”) (He Yang & Jin Song, 1992).

The question in line 5, containing a negation, might be considered a rhetorical question. However, the response to this rhetorical question does not align with expectations. Furthermore, F1’s response does not simply confirm or deny but provides additional information, overlapping with the previous turn. This suggests that the question in line 5 serves to elicit information.

Notably, these three questions arise from comprehension difficulties based on information provided by F1, yet none of them explicitly use evidential expressions. To compare, we examine a similar context where evidential prominence occurs, as seen in Example (5):

- (5) ((Discussion About a Dress Hanging in F2’s Dormitory ))
- 1 F1: This dress- has such a wide waist, yet you’re still wearing  
it @@  
你这个-裙子腰这么肥你还在穿@@
- 2 F2: I have no choice... [I can’t just not wear it... <@because I  
have nothing else to match it with@>@@]  
那没有办法呀..[我总不能不穿它了呀..<@因为没有别的  
衣服配这件儿衣服呀@>@@]

- 3 F1: [@@@@@@@@@]  
[@@@@@@@@@]
- 4 F2: ...Mainly, I feel like... (0.7) I remember it originally had  
a lining.  
...主要是我这个觉得...(0.7)原来我记得有一个衬儿的
- 5 [[But I can't find it.]]  
[[但是我找不着了]]
- 6 → F3: [[Didn't I see a belt?]] That—[3Isn't there a wide one?3]  
[[不是我看有个腰带吧]]那-[3 那不是有个宽宽的  
3]<XbierX>
- 7 F2: [3Yes, there is.3]  
[3 对=它就是有的 3]
- 8 But yeah, you just can't find it.  
但是^就是找不着了
- 9 F1: Hmm== It's fine... It won't fall off.  
嗯==还行..它又不会掉

In a setting similar to Example (4), Example (5) features questions derived from inferred information. Syntactically, both examples involve yes/no questions ending with interrogative particles, containing negation—Example (4) uses “ma,” while Example (5) uses “ba.” According to Shao Jingmin (2014:52), yes/no questions with “ma” indicate stronger doubt, while those with “ba” suggest the speaker already has some knowledge and merely seeks confirmation.

F2's response is affirmative, further emphasizing her interpretation of F3's prior turn and indicating that F3's question is based on subjective judgment rather than speculation, reflecting F3's relatively higher epistemic status.

The use of evidential expressions is closely related to the epistemic status of both parties. In Example (4), F2 has a lower epistemic status regarding whether Professor Wu is a PhD advisor, whereas in Example (5), F3 has a higher epistemic status regarding whether the dress has a belt. In both cases, the speaker has a lower epistemic status, while the listener has a higher one. When a negative yes/no question moves from a lower to a higher epistemic status, as in Example (4), its function is to seek information, whereas in Example (5), the question is closer to a request for confirmation, with weaker doubt and stronger verification. This indicates that, compared to purely information-seeking yes/no questions, evidentially prominent verification questions reflect a relatively higher epistemic stance of the questioner.

Similar to Example (5), cases where the speaker uses evidential expressions to request confirmation of judgmental information are even more apparent in rhetorical questions, such as in Example (6):

- (6) ((F1 previously mentioned not wanting to go out with friends))
- 1 F1: Oh (H), I need to think of an excuse to decline.  
哎呦(H)我想一个什么理由婉拒呢
- 2 (15 turns omitted)  
(删略 15 个话轮)

- 3 M1 Na—wait, aren't you guys also dealing with buying a gift  
:  
na-不是..你们怎么还得<XmaiX>-还涉及到买礼物的  
事儿啊
- 4 F1: ...(1.4) What gift? No, we're not buying anything. Who  
said [we were buying a gift]?  
... (1.4) 买啥礼物啊..不买啊.谁说买[礼物了]
- 5 M1 [Didn't you just say you were thinking about buying a  
:  
gift?]  
[你刚才不是想着要买礼物嘛]
- 6 F1 ...(8) You misheard me, I never mentioned that.  
:  
...(8)你听茬了吧我从来没提过这茬儿啊
- 7 M1 ...(1.0) Then it was about thinking of—  
:  
...(1.0)那是想一个--
- 8 F1 You—you heard it, right? ((to M2))  
:  
你-你听见了吗((对着 M2))
- 9 M2 No, I didn't.  
:  
没有啊
- 10 F1: <@You—you just imagined it.@> [[@@@]]  
<@你-你是自己@>[[@@@]]
- 11 M2 [[Where did the gift come from?]]  
:  
@@@  
[[礼物<@是哪儿来的@>]]@@@
- 12 F1: <@I don't know, I've been[3 saying3]—@>  
<@不知道, 我就一直[3 说--3]@>
- 13 M1 [3That's—3]  
:  
[3 那是--3]
- 14 → Wasn't it you who said you needed to think of an excuse?  
[4Excuse==4]  
难道是你说, 你想要一个什么=[4 理由==4]
- 15 F1: [4Excuse==4] I said I needed  
to think of an excuse.  
[4 理由==4]我想一个什么理由=
- 16 M2 @@[5@@5]  
:  
@@[5@@5]
- 17 F1: [5Sorry, I wasn't speaking clearly.5]  
[5 对不起, 我口齿不清 5]

From a syntactic perspective, the question in Example (6) contains the rhetorical adverb “难道 (nándào),” which transforms the sentence into a rhetorical yes/no question, referring back to F1's prior statements. The critical function of rhetorical yes/no questions lies in their expression of the speaker's subjective stance. In this case, the prosody indicates that M1's

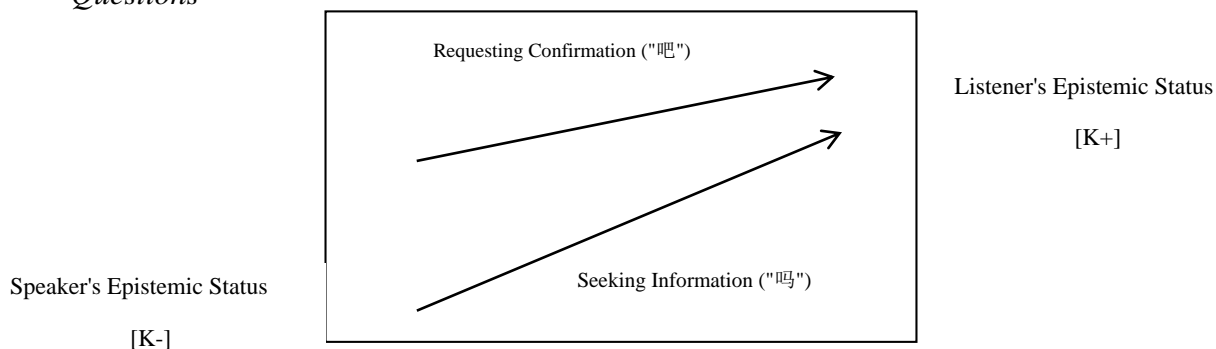
question arises due to an inconsistency between the information they heard and F1's earlier remarks, prompting M1 to express doubt rather than seeking new information. Consequently, the "inquiry" function of this question is relatively weakened. The response sequence further supports this interpretation.

In the sequential environment, F1's response in line 14—"Excuse, I said I needed to think of an excuse"—reveals several key aspects: First, F1 preemptively takes the floor before M1 completes their turn, suggesting a higher epistemic stance regarding the information being questioned. Second, since the preceding turn contains a rhetorical yes/no question with an epistemic stance, F1's response does not include a simple affirmative or negative reply. Finally, F1 partially repeats M1's phrasing, which functions as a form of confirmation or validation rather than an answer to an information-seeking question.

We observe a clear tendency in question turns containing explicit evidential markers: the syntactic form and the choice of sentence-final particles show significant regularity. Generally, interrogative structures incorporating evidentiality tend to be used for providing information and seeking confirmation. Additionally, when these questions include sentence-final particles, "吧 (ba)" and "呀 (ya)" are more commonly used, while "吗 (ma)" is less frequent. Previous studies have suggested that "吗" conveys a stronger degree of uncertainty, emphasizing the need for an answer, whereas "吧" indicates a lower level of uncertainty (XuJingning, 2008; Shao Jingmin, 2014).

Thus, when speakers use evidentiality to pose a question, their choice of sentence-final particles further corroborates their relatively high epistemic stance. Rather than purely seeking new information, they are presenting their own judgments and seeking confirmation from the listener. This process reflects the speaker's evaluation of the epistemic status of both parties and their expression of their own epistemic stance, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3  
*Speaker's Epistemic Stance in Confirmation-Seeking ("吧") vs. Information-Seeking ("吗") Questions*



In conclusion, whether seeking or confirming information, the speaker's epistemic status remains lower than that of the listener. However, through these two types of questioning behaviors, the speaker can adjust their epistemic stance. Evidentially prominent questions indicate a relatively higher epistemic stance of the speaker.

### Evidential Prominence in Responses and the Speaker's Lower Epistemic Stance

Respondents in an answer turn are generally assumed to hold a higher epistemic status. Therefore, when responding to a question, speakers typically adopt a higher epistemic stance. Based on information sources and epistemic status, direct experiences are usually conveyed without explicit evidential markers, while indirectly acquired experiences may employ expressions with marked evidentiality. See Example (7):

- (7) ((F2 says they just ate an entire plate of nuts left on the table))
- 1 F1: Your appetite has been pretty good lately... is it because of the acupuncture  
最近胃口不错嘛..扎针扎的吗
- 2 F2: Yeah= I used to worry about overeating and digestion issues  
对啊=之前吃多了就怕消化不了
- 3 M1: do you get acupuncture once a week  
<X 这 X>每-每周扎一次吗
- 4 F2: ... (1.5) Em= twice a week.  
... (1.5) em=扎两次
- 5 F1: So, a total of two sessions  
一共扎两次
- 6 F2: Mm.  
嗯
- 7 ... (1.6) Mm.  
...(1.6)嗯
- 8 F1: One treatment course is just two sessions  
一个疗程就两次
- 9 ... (2.0) Or <@is it just@> that you only had [two sessions? @@@@@]  
...(2.0) 还是说<@ 就是陆续地 @> 只扎了 [两次? @@@@@]
- 10 F2: [One course—one course consists of two sessions... does it matter? @@@@@]  
[一个疗程扎-一个疗程两次..有意义吗@@@@@]
- 11  
12 ((8 lines omitted: humorous exchanges))  
((删除 8 行双方互开玩笑的插入扩展序列))
- 13 F2: No, I mean... (.7) Mm==  
没有就是说..(.7)嗯==
- 14 → One course consists of about 10 sessions, [I guess= I didn't ask whether it's a full course.]  
一个疗程也就 10 次吧 [应该=我没有问他是不是..疗程]
- 15 M1: [Oh=== that's expensive.]  
[哦===好贵啊]
- 16 F2: (0) But since , I've had four sessions so far.  
(0) 但是就是^<L 开学以来 L>..我目前为止是第四次

Based on the analysis, it is evident that the response containing an evidential marker directly addresses F1's confirmation-seeking question (line 11). Examining F2's response, we find that

F2 does not actually know the exact number of sessions in one treatment cycle, placing them in a lower epistemic position regarding the target information. However, F1's confirmation-seeking question exhibits low uncertainty but strong demand for an answer, creating pressure for F2 due to the mismatch between epistemic status and stance. To align with the expected epistemic stance of a response, F2 uses the evidential marker "I guess" to lower their epistemic stance.

The information targeted by this question is something that the respondent is assumed to possess or have direct access to, even though they may not actually have firsthand experience. In the next example, while the question does not pertain directly to the respondent's personal experiences, it still involves information where the respondent holds a higher epistemic status.

- (8) ((F2 introduces a friend's salary situation))
- 1 F2: Her colleagues... she said she earns around 40,000 yuan a month  
她的那些其他的..她说一个月能拿四万块的样子
- 2 F1: @@  
@@
- 3 F2: And then she... and then she—she==  
然后她...然后她-她那个==
- 4 F1: Is she in tech or [xxx]  
她是技术还是[xxx]
- 5 → F2: [No] she—she should be doing something like... she majored in advertising.  
[不是]她-她应该是做那种...她是学广告专业的
- 6 F1: Oh==  
哦==
- 7 F2: But it seems like she's doing something related to ad placements [though]...  
但是她好像是做那种..广告投放[的].就是-
- 8 F1: [Mm] media management or something  
[嗯]媒介管理什么的
- 9 F2: Mm  
嗯
- 10 F1: Maybe marketing  
可[能吧, 营销]
- 11 → F2: [Anyway, I see her dealing with—she frequently travels to Beijing for business trips... (.7) and she's always working with those in promotion-related fields.]  
[反正我看她打打-打电-打交道的都是..她常来北京出差...(.7)然后都是跟那种..就是做-做推广的那种]

Analyzing the contexts of the questions and responses indicated by arrows 1 and 2 in Example (8), we observe that both involve making judgments or opinions and requesting confirmation or refutation. In these cases, F1 asks F2 about information directly related to F2, which F2 may have obtained through indirect means. When F1 inquires about the work of a third party, F2 responds using the inferential evidential marker "应该 (should)" to lower their epistemic stance. Similarly, in response to F1's request for confirmation, F2 uses the firsthand evidential marker

“我看 (I see)” to structure their reply. In both instances, F2 mitigates their epistemic stance to align with F1’s more specific questioning.

A broader analysis of responses containing evidential markers reveals that most such responses address confirmation-seeking questions. In essence, responses with evidential prominence tend to be directed at questions seeking confirmation rather than purely informational inquiries.

To further validate this observation, we selected representative interrogative pronouns—“谁 (who),” “哪里 (where),” “什么时候 (when),” and “怎么 (how)” —and conducted a targeted search within the corpus. We first excluded non-interrogative usages of these terms and then analyzed whether responses in information-seeking question sequences exhibited evidential prominence. The findings are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5

*Frequency of Specific Interrogatives and Evidential Responses (Unit: occurrences)*

Interrogative	Who (谁)	Where (哪里)	When (什么时候)	How (怎么)
Specific Interrogative	36	7	20	54
Response with Evidentiality	0	0	0	7

From Table 5, we can see that except for interrogatives using “how” (怎么), none of the responses to specific interrogative questions contained evidential expressions. However, in questions formulated with “how” (怎么), responses exhibited prominent evidential markers. These responses generally occurred in two types of contexts: (1) when the listener answered a question about the process of obtaining information (Example (9)), or (2) when the speaker reproduced a Q&A exchange in the course of storytelling (Example (10)).

(9)

- 1 F1: Professor Wu doesn't agree  
吴老师不同意
- 2 F2: Yes  
对
- 3 F1: What did Professor Wu say  
吴老师怎么说啊
- 4 → F2: Professor Wu just said, “Renew for another year first...  
and then decide after finishing.”  
吴老师就说你先续一年..到时候做完再说什么的



- (10)
- 1 → F1: He asked, “How do you write my name in Chinese?” I said, “Richard  
他就说.我的名字用中文怎么写..我说=理查德写得实在是  
2 looks too plain... just write it as .”  
太土了..然后你就写<XrRui-RuiX>吧@@@  
3 F2: @@@  
@@@

We believe that specific interrogatives are typically used for genuine information-seeking purposes, without an inherent bias from the questioner toward a particular answer. As a result, respondents have greater freedom in shaping their responses, allowing them to adopt a lower epistemic stance based on their actual knowledge. Consequently, the presence of evidential markers in responses to such questions is relatively rare. In contrast, responses with prominent evidentiality are generally directed at questions where the questioner has made an inference and seeks confirmation from the respondent.

### Analysis and Discussion

By examining the prominence of evidential expressions in both the pre-question and post-answer positions of Q&A sequences, we summarize the general conditions and positions where evidential expressions appear. In the following table, "K+" indicates that the sequential position is expected to reflect the speaker's higher epistemic status, while "K-" indicates a lower epistemic status. The "+" sign denotes positions where evidential expressions typically appear, while "-" signifies contexts where evidential prominence is generally absent. Upward and downward arrows indicate adjustments in epistemic stance expression. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6

*Relationship Between Evidential Prominence and Epistemic Stance in Q&A Sequences*

Sequential Position	Question (K-)	Answer (K+)
Speaker raises epistemic stance (↑)	+	—
Speaker lowers epistemic stance (↓)	—	+

Evidential prominence in questions indicates that the questioner has some prior knowledge about the topic. Rather than merely seeking information, the questioner is often requesting confirmation and tends to expect an affirmative response. To elevate their epistemic stance under the listener's cognitive advantage, the questioner needs to demonstrate evidence-based inquiry, leading to the prominence of evidential expressions in questions.

From the perspective of responses, evidential prominence typically signifies that the respondent lacks absolute epistemic certainty in their answer. According to the cooperative principle in conversation, respondents should strive for informational accuracy. However, when certainty is unattainable, emphasizing the indirectness of the information can help mitigate doubt and challenge, serving as a strategy to lower one's epistemic stance.

### **The Principle of Face**

When analyzing the use of evidential expressions in questions and answers, the principle of face further explains their underlying mechanisms. As a communicative process, conversation requires continuous adjustments in language structure to align with social interaction norms. As Goffman emphasized, “face” plays a crucial role in communication, while Brown and Levinson (1987) classified it into negative face and positive face (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Negative face refers to a speaker’s desire to act without interference, whereas positive face reflects a speaker’s wish for their needs to be accepted and respected by others.

In questions, the prominence of evidential expressions can be seen as an effort to maintain the questioner’s positive face. By demonstrating a cognitive foundation on the topic, the questioner not only seeks a response but also expects the listener to acknowledge their epistemic position. This “evidence-based inquiry” strategy enhances the questioner’s credibility and reliability, earning greater recognition and respect in the conversation. Cross-linguistic studies show that similar evidential strategies are employed in languages such as English and French to enhance a questioner’s credibility, as seen in English phrases like “I think” or French expressions such as “je crois que.”

On the other hand, the prominence of evidential expressions in responses is more closely tied to the protection of negative face. When respondents lack full confidence in their answers, emphasizing an indirect source of information helps reduce their responsibility and mitigate potential challenges. This strategy not only preserves the respondent’s autonomy in expression but also maintains conversational harmony. For example, in Japanese discourse, expressions such as “そうかもしれません” (That may be the case) or “らしい” (It is said that) function similarly to Chinese expressions like “听说” (I heard that) or “好像” (It seems like) in reducing conversational risk when conveying uncertain information.

### **Communicative Adaptation Theory**

Communicative Adaptation Theory (CAT), proposed by Howard Giles, provides another theoretical framework for explaining the use of evidential expressions. CAT explores how conversational participants adjust their speech behaviors to accommodate the expectations of their interlocutors and the communicative context (Giles, 1973; Giles & Ogay, 2007). According to this theory, speakers can adopt convergence or divergence strategies to achieve more effective communication.

In questions, the prominence of evidential expressions can be seen as a convergence strategy. By emphasizing evidential information, the questioner not only demonstrates their cognitive foundation on the topic but also expresses their need for understanding and confirmation. This prominence reduces the cognitive gap between the questioner and respondent, making it easier for the respondent to align with the questioner’s expectations. This, in turn, enhances conversational coherence and strengthens interaction. A similar phenomenon can be observed in Spanish, where expressions like “según dicen” (according to what they say) are used to reinforce topic framing and increase engagement.

In contrast, divergence strategies are more commonly employed in responses. When respondents are uncertain about the information, the prominence of evidential expressions serves to imply indirectness and uncertainty. This divergence strategy not only alleviates the pressure of potential inaccuracies but also helps reduce conflict with the questioner’s stance. According to CAT, maintaining a moderate level of distance can prevent excessive confrontation while preserving conversational harmony. For example, in English, phrases like

“it seems that” or “it appears that” make responses appear more tentative, reducing the speaker’s responsibility for the information. This is functionally similar to Chinese expressions like “好像” (it seems like) or “听说” (I heard that).

### **Conversational Implicature Theory**

Finally, the use of evidential expressions can also be interpreted through Conversational Implicature Theory (CIT). Proposed by Grice (1975), CIT explores how conversational participants achieve effective communication by adhering to the Cooperative Principle while conveying implicit meanings that compensate for explicit linguistic expressions. CIT posits that speakers follow maxims of quantity, quality, relation, and manner while also relying on implicature to express deeper meanings (Levinson, 1983).

In questions, the prominence of evidential expressions reflects the questioner’s adherence to the maxim of quality. By emphasizing their familiarity with the topic, the questioner enhances the credibility of their inquiry and subtly implies that the respondent should provide confirmation. This implicit meaning bridges the cognitive gap between the questioner and the respondent, fostering conversational coherence. Similarly, in responses, the prominence of evidential expressions also serves as an indirect handling of the maxim of quality. When respondents cannot fully guarantee the accuracy of their statements, highlighting the indirectness of the information source reduces their responsibility while maintaining cooperative communication. For example, in Mandarin, Korean, and Russian, different evidential markers adjust the tone of speech to ensure discourse coherence and credibility. Korean expressions like “-다고 하다” (it is said that) and Russian “говорят” (they say) function similarly to Mandarin expressions such as “听说” (I heard that) and “据说” (it is reported that) in mitigating speaker responsibility when conveying uncertain information.

Additionally, in some cultural contexts, the use of evidential expressions may be influenced by differing cultural values. For instance, in Japanese, evidential markers tend to emphasize politeness and indirectness, whereas in German, their use is more focused on factual accuracy and source credibility. Such cross-linguistic comparisons not only enhance our understanding of the communicative functions of evidentiality but also highlight both the uniqueness and universality of evidential expressions in Mandarin within the global linguistic landscape.

### **Conclusion**

In natural spoken discourse, the prominence of evidential strategies frequently emerges in both questioning and answering processes, closely tied to the speaker's epistemic stance. When questioners express their judgments or viewpoints and seek confirmation, they may employ evidential strategies to reinforce their stance and manage potential challenges or doubts. Conversely, while respondents typically hold a default higher epistemic status, they may also emphasize evidential markers when they lack a definitive answer but still face the pressure of confirmation requests.

Overall, the use of evidential information in verbal communication helps speakers adjust their epistemic expressions to meet conversational demands, though it remains influenced by interactional dynamics and individual subjectivity. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the differences between spoken and written discourse, as well as the linguistic phenomena found in evaluation and repair sequences.

## Notes

1. For space-saving purposes, this study does not follow intonation unit segmentation. To protect speaker identities, male (M) and female (F) initials are used, with different speakers numbered accordingly. Real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

2. The phrase “我看” (I see) in spoken Chinese primarily conveys visual perception rather than subjective speculation. For example, in “我看那个不行...不值那个钱” (I see that it's not worth the money), the evaluation is based on direct observation, aligning with firsthand evidentiality.

3. The Chinese middle construction “NP + 看起来 + AP” is used to express subjective impressions and descriptive states, typically derived from visual perception. Therefore, it falls under firsthand evidentiality. This study only analyzes instances where “我看” and “V 起来” describe objectively perceptible phenomena to ensure categorization accuracy.

4. An adjacent pair refers to a sequence of two related utterances: a first pair part (FPP) and a second pair part (SPP), organized based on conditional relevance (Schegloff, 2007). This study applies the adjacent pair framework in analyzing question-answer behaviors. Additionally, in cases where a question is followed by responses from multiple participants, all responses are considered part of the adjacency pair. This approach reflects the interactive nature of the two- to three-person dialogues examined in this study.

5. As indicated in the previous note, the corpus includes three-person dialogues, meaning question-answer sequences are not always structured as simple one-question, one-answer exchanges. The number of FPPs and SPPs is not strictly equal.

## Transcription Conventions

(H)	Inhalation
<A A>	Accelerated speech
<X X>	Unintelligible speech
@ @ @	Laughter
(( ))	Non-verbal descriptions
^	Emphasis within a turn
(0)	Seamless turn transition
%	Glottal stop
<L L>	Slowed speech
[ ]	Overlapping speech (numbers indicate instances)
...(0.7)	Pause of 0.7 seconds or more (number in parentheses indicates seconds)
(.)	Pause between 0.3 and 0.6 seconds
(.)	Pause less than 0.3 seconds
-	Word truncation
--	Incomplete intonation unit
=	Lengthened segment

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