Connecting perception, inference, and temporality: nominal and propositional evidentiality

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In recent times, we have heard a lot about "firsthand knowledge" vs. "non-firsthand knowledge" on the news, and how these notions connect to whose testimony can be trusted or not. In this talk, I will explore the fundamental basis of knowledge – how do human beings connect a piece of evidence to a piece of information and form core justified beliefs? Most formal semantic accounts of evidentiality focus on propositional evidentiality [PE], i.e. where an evidential scopes over a proposition, and can have DIRECT flavor (sensory perception) or INDIRECT flavors (inference, hearsay, etc). In this work, we venture into the sparsely studied domain of *nominal/non-propositional* evidentiality [NPE], where an evidential scopes over a nominal. A striking fact about NPE systems is that the only available flavor of evidence is overwhelmingly DIRECT (Jacques 2018, Aikhenvald 2018). Why does such a fundamental divide exist among languages with PE and NPE? More succinctly, what is it about nominals that favors only sensory perception? This work is the first comparative formal semantic account of perception of nominals and propositions that tackles these questions, and adds another dimension: temporality. Drawing data from South Asian languages and beyond, I first discuss how perception is intertwined with nominal tense in NPE, and vital contrasts with tense in PE perception. With an analysis couched in modal logic, I argue that at the semantic core of evidentials are *spatio-temporal accessibility relations* that are grounded in *historical necessity*, allowing us to provide a unified and holistic view of the phenomenon across NPE & PE systems in a principled way.