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Leelo Keevallik

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Abandoning dead ends: the Estonian junction marker *maitea* ‘I don’t know’

Abstract

This paper studies the claim *ma ei tea*, lit. ‘I not know’, often pronounced as *maitea* in Estonian conversation. In contrast to earlier findings on ‘I don’t know’ as an epistemic hedge and non-answer (based on, among others, English data) the current study shows that *maitea* accomplishes a specific non-epistemic function in Estonian conversation, as a means of recovering from dead ends in real time. It is deployed for abandoning units-in-progress and discarding stalled topical sequences, and then contingently launching new ones. The paper demonstrates how the meaning of *maitea* emerges differently in sequential contexts where displays of knowledge have been made relevant, as opposed to when they have not, and thus contributes to the theoretical understanding of meaning as a situated achievement, in particular when it comes to ephemeral cognitive concepts such as “knowing”.

Keywords

epistemics, conversational sequence, progressivity, grammar in interaction, Estonian

Highlights

- Estonian *maitea* ‘I don’t know’ is a device of recovering from dead ends
- *Maitea* abandons units-in-progress and stalled topical sequences
- The (non-)epistemic meaning of *maitea* emerges in a specific conversational sequence

1. Introduction

During the recent decades it has become clear that words designating cognitive processes are put into use in a variety of non-cognitive ways. Conversation analytic methodology (Sidnell, 2010) has been used to disclose emergent semantic and interactional features of phrases involving these words, both in positive and negative formulations. For example, *jag förstår inte* ‘I don’t understand’ in Swedish is used for soliciting teacher’s help in a classroom (Lindwall and Lymer, 2011), *I don’t remember* in English is a device of avoiding confirmation at trials (Drew, 1992) and *du ved* ‘you know’ in Danish pursues agreement (Asmuss, 2011) (For negative formulations, see this special issue: Helasvuo & Laury on Finnish; Helmer et al. on German; Lindström & Karlsson on Swedish; and Pekarek Doehler on French). The current paper will continue in the same methodological vein to explore the single phrase *ma ei tea* ‘I don’t know’ in its non-cognitive use. Among the conversation analytic research streams, discursive psychology in particular seeks to explain the rhetorical deployment of psychological words and concepts such as thinking, knowing and feeling, and showing how they are used discursively to construct cognition (Potter, 2006). It shows how psychological descriptions derive their intelligibility from their contexts of use and not from being referential to some actual mental state (Edwards, 1997). Within this broader framework, the present study aims to demonstrate how a specific claim about the mental state of “knowing” is regularly exploited for the strategic task of structuring interaction, thus constructing cognition as a by-product of interaction.

Disclaiming knowledge, in particular the phrase meaning approximately ‘I don’t know’, has been studied across several languages and varieties (Tsui, 1991; Scheibmann, 2000; Karlsson,

2006; Rivas and Brown, 2010; Keevallik, 2011; Weatherall, 2011; Maschler, 2012) as well as across institutional contexts (Beach and Metzger, 1997; Hutchby, 2002). In addition to the specific sequential functions of this phrase as a non-answer (Stivers and Robinson, 2006:372–373) or a disaligning answer (Keevallik, 2011), the predominant finding has been that the phrase is a ‘hedge’ signaling that the speaker does not take the full epistemic responsibility for a related claim. Most of the earlier studies have addressed the prospective capacity of the ‘hedge’, its ability to modify what is yet to be uttered (Keevallik, 2011; Weatherall, 2011). A few studies have also considered the retrospective usage of ‘I don’t know’, which places it among the stance markers, such as ‘I think’ (Keevallik, 2003; Kärkkäinen, 2003; Maschler, 2012). In Estonian, at least, the phrase *ma ei tea* ‘I don’t know’ (often pronounced as *maitea*) can also be deployed as a hedge utterance-internally, in which case it is possible to analyze it as an epistemic adverb (Keevallik, 2010). In about 20% of the cases in Estonian phone conversation – also used for the current study – there are syntactic, phonological and prosodic reasons that support the analysis of *maitea* as an adverb. Similarly to adverbs, these phrases display syntactic optionality, mobility, and lack of propositional content. In many other instances *maitea* is perhaps generally characterizable as a kind of an ‘epistemic hedge’, while its precise function is of course specified by its temporal relationship to preceding and following utterances, as well as the actions accomplished by them. Building on studies of the above epistemic uses, the current paper will instead focus on cases where only a vague trace of epistemic meaning can be spotted. It asks how a cognitive claim can be used for the temporal organization of interaction – the least epistemic function of the Estonian *maitea* that covers approximately 10% of its overall occurrence.

Accounting for the real-time production of spoken language can make an essential difference in the practices of language use that we discover. In grammars based on written language many cognitive phrases have been analyzed as complement taking predicates. In interaction, however, they are not necessarily used together with a complement and the clauses following them need not be subordinate in any sense, as was originally shown by Thompson (2002). Thompson’s examples include the phrases *I’m not sure*, *I don’t know*, *I remember* and *I thought*. In conversation these epistemic, evidential or evaluative fragments should instead be analyzed as formulaic stance markers (ibid. 143–144). In a more top-down analytic tradition some of them, such as *you know* and *I mean*, have been treated as “discourse markers” that bracket units of talk (Lenk, 1997; Schiffrin, 1987; Jucker and Ziv, 1998). The current study targets the phrase *ma ei tea* ‘I don’t know’ in Estonian as used in real time between specific participants, thus aligning with the more bottom-up methods of discovering function in conversation analysis.

Taking the evolving turn and sequence as a starting point, the analysis focuses on the ongoing social action and the temporal attunement of the interactants. Accordingly, the paper argues that one function of *maitea* is to structure interaction by marking a major conversational junction. It is used as a pragmatic particle to abandon a line of talk, an argument, or a turn. It is thus a device of metalanguaging, which is used for communicating about the process of using language (Maschler, 2009). Maschler has disclosed the analytical difference between the interpersonal, textual and cognitive realms in the functioning of pragmatic items (what she calls *discourse markers*). The current paper explores how a seemingly cognitive claim of “not knowing” is deployed for textual and intersubjective purposes and, crucially, manages the temporal constraints and interactional obligations in conversation.

2. The data

The study is based on an Estonian telephone call corpus that consists of 324 calls of two types: telemarketing calls from a daily newspaper and everyday calls between family members, friends, and colleagues. The corpus, recorded in 1998–99, includes more than ten hours of conversation and more than 100,000 words. Approximately one third of the data come from institutional settings, where the junction marker use described in the current study is rare.

The Estonian epistemic disclaimer displays a variable format *m(in)a (e)i tea* ‘I NEG know’. The negation word *ei* has a general tendency to latch on to the preceding short pronoun forms in spoken Estonian, resulting in such forms as *mai* from *ma* ‘I’ + *ei*. In the present corpus there are altogether 352 instances of the item, with the non-assimilated variant *ma ei tea* represented by 94 cases and the variant with the long (emphasized) pronoun *mina ei tea* by 18. The rest of the 240 instances are assimilated to a various degree. In these cases *mai* and *tea* can constitute a single prosodic word with either the first or second syllable carrying the main stress. The item displays phonological reduction that is characteristic of frequent functional items. The diphthong *ai* in the first syllable may furthermore be considerably reduced, resulting in something like *mitea* or even *mtea*. As a practical shortcut, the item will be generally referred to as *maitea* in the following text, while the transcripts display a variety of concrete pronunciations. It is considered important not to homogenize the transcription, as phonetic-phonological variation is an essential feature of these kinds of pragmatic items, and can furthermore be of functional relevance. However, for the function discussed in this paper all variants apart from the most assimilated ones are used, with the tendency for the unit-abandonment to be carried out with shorter versions, and topic abandonment with fuller and prosodically more prominent items.

Out of all the 352 instances of *maitea* 102 could be analyzed as “literal” disclaimers of knowledge, 89 as hedges (epistemically modifying a preceding or following utterance), 124 as disaligning answers, and 11 as final items in lists, with plenty of overlap between these functional categories (Keevallik, 2003:78–100). The current study is based on 32 instances of *maitea* chosen because a) claims about knowledge are not sequentially relevant at this point in conversation, b) they are not used as accounts for not producing a responsive action, c) they do not clearly modify an adjacent utterance, d) they do not terminate lists. This selection resulted in cases coming almost exclusively from informal everyday encounters, and in the course of further analysis two cores emerged, one involving instances of abandoning turn-constructional units (8 cases, discussed in section 4), and the other the abandonment of sequences (24 cases, discussed in section 5).

3. The focus pattern

Let us start by comparing a literal usage of the cognitive verb phrase and a sample case of the junction pattern in focus in the current paper. In real-life conversation the use of an epistemic phrase, such as *maitea*, is regularly triggered by specific first actions, such as questions or proposals (Keevallik, 2011). By uttering an epistemic disclaimer the speaker basically denies having the necessary knowledge for accomplishing the action that is currently due, such as answering or complying. In example (1), E asks when she last met her current interlocutor, and he claims to have no knowledge about that. The *maitea* in line 2 constitutes an account for being unable to produce the relevant next action. E orients to this by continuing her pursuit with a concrete suggestion of a time-frame for their last meeting.

(1) K3A7

- 1 E: .hh ota millal ma sind viimati nägin.
wait:IMP:1SG when I you:PAR last saw:1SG
Wait when did I last see you?
- 2 K: ma ei tea.
I NEG know
I don't know.
- 3 (1.7)
- 4 E: kuskil ee hh (0.2) kuskil kolmeteist aastaselt vä.
sometime sometime thirteen age or
Sometime (0.2) around the age of thirteen or?

In contrast, in example (2) a projected syntactic unit is abandoned and the abandonment is made salient with the help of *maitea*. Here the speaker is telling about an exam where she received the grade “four”, which is the second best grade in Estonia. When we join the action, she is arguing that she and her friend had a chance of earning “fives” but the teacher did not bother to ask more questions and they themselves did not want to come back another day.

(2) M2B6

- 1 M: ja:, (.) ja rohkem ei viitsind meiega vaeva näha, ja
and and more NEG bother:PPT we:COM pain:PAR and
And (.) and (s/he) didn't want to take any more trouble with us
- 2 ütles et avansiks saame neljad. m.hhh
said:3SG that advance:TRA get:1PL fours
and said that we get fours ((the grades)) as an advance
- 3 (0.7)
- 4 niet kui ta oleks küsind normaalselt, sis me oleks
so if s/he be:COND ask:PPT normally then we be:COND
So if s/he had asked in a regular manner then we would
- 5 viied ka saand ma arvan. st et noh - (0.4)
fives too get:PPT I think:1SG because NOH
have got fives I think because- (0.3) I dunno
- 6 mai tea. .hhh aga ta ei viitsind seal: -
I:NEG know but s/he NEG bother:PPT there
.hh but s/he (couldn't be) bothered
- 7 L: saite neljad.=
got:2PL fours
You got fours

The punchline of the story comes in lines (1–2), but the recipient does not react to it in any way, which results in a considerable pause. In lines (4–5), the claim about the two friends potentially getting a better grade is terminated by a phrasal epistemic hedge *ma arvan* ‘I think’ produced with final intonation (Keevallik, 2003; 2010). After this completion a response from the recipient would also be appropriate. M, however, launches an explanatory clause with *st et* ‘because’, but never completes it, possibly because of the awkwardness of boasting about her own qualifications. After the delay item *noh* and a pause (0.4), she simply

claims “not to know” (line 6). With this *maitea*, the speaker basically abandons her explanation, having not attracted any reaction across several opportunities. After an inbreath (.hhh) she goes on by repeating a piece of previously produced information (prefaced with *aga* ‘but’¹) – that the teacher could not be bothered with further inquisition.

The initiation with ‘because’ indeed projects a continuation, another syntactic and turn-constructional unit. This is also evident in the ensuing pause during which the recipient of the story refrains from talk. Indeed, several recent studies have shown how turn-final conjunctions can accomplish distinct actions (see Lindström (2001) on *või* ‘or’ in Estonian, Mulder and Thompson (2008) on *but* in English, and Koivisto (2012) on *mutta* ‘but’, *että* ‘that’, and *ja* ‘and’ in Finnish). The *st et* ‘because’ could also be studied from this perspective. In any case, the *maitea* with falling intonation is here a signal that the speaker will not continue on the projected path. The overt claim being that she has insufficient knowledge for advancement, the *maitea* in practice amounts to sealing the abandonment of the initiated unit. After this kind of *maitea*-use, speaker change may or may not be relevant; the new unit may be initiated either by the speaker herself, or the recipient. The latter shows that the item can occasionally be turn-final. In the current example the speaker continues by simply restating that the teacher could not be bothered. After that the recipient offers a summary of the entire exam story as having resulted in a specific grade (in line 7). Schematically, the *maitea*-pattern in focus can be outlined as follows:

unit-initiation (‘because’) > delay (*noh*, pause) > abandonment (*maitea*) > new unit

In the current case, the new syntactic unit ties back to the one prior to the one initiated last, namely, to the upshot of the story that the two students could have received a higher grade: *sis me oleks viied ka saand ma arvan* ‘then we would have got “fives” I think’. The ‘because’-segment is cancelled while the *aga* ‘but’ re-establishes the continuity to the last non-abandoned unit. The issue of hypothetical success and perfection is abandoned and replaced by the description of the teacher’s mindset (‘s/he couldn’t be bothered’ in line 6). The units before and after *maitea* are grammatically separate and independent, but nevertheless related topically, insofar as the new utterance cancels the relevance of the prior reflection: it is of no use to speculate about better grades because the teacher could not be bothered. In any case, *maitea* here does not primarily work as an epistemic hedge but as a marker of having definitively abandoned the just initiated unit. The final prosody on *maitea* as well as the degree of phonetic assimilation strongly support the analysis that it is not used as a literal claim about speaker knowledge. Instead, the *maitea* cancels the relevance of a current projection and potentially opens up the conversation for something new.

The first two examples serve to illustrate how *maitea* can be used to a) literally answer a question that presupposes recipient’s knowledge and b) overtly divert a trajectory of talk and halt the progress of the ongoing action sequence. In the literal case (example 1), the responsive phrase specifies why the previously suggested action cannot be carried out, while in the non-literal usage (example 2) the speaker marks the abandonment of a projected action in order to progress on a different track. While the *maitea* in example (1) is an epistemic disclaimer, the one in (2) is not an epistemic comment on the prior or upcoming talk, i.e. a hedge. The word ‘because’ cannot be hedged and a modifier cannot occur before the conjunction/particle ‘but’. Instead, *maitea* in (2) demarcates the prior unit as abandoned, even though it could still be argued to vaguely invoke cognition and epistemicity in the service of

¹ This resumptive use of *aga* ‘but’ seems to be similar to the Dutch *maar* (Mazeland and Huiskes 2001).

the current interactional task. The *maitea* in (2) is thus a marker of a conversational junction that enables a launching of an alternative trajectory (here: returning to an earlier claim with the help of *aga* ‘but’). It furthermore implies that the trajectory projected by *st et* was in some way imperfect, perhaps irrelevant. In this way *maitea* is a strategic device of managing conversation as a real-time activity, marking that the just-prior unit or topic was a dead end and launching a recovery.

In the following we will first look at the abandonment of units, also discussing the potential entry of the recipient after *maitea*, and then continue with how larger conversational structures – sequences – are discarded in order to launch new ones. Finally, the analytical distinction between more and less epistemic uses is outlined, arguing that the meaning of *maitea* always emerges in a local context. Among other uses, a cognitive claim may be strategically deployed to solve interactional problems arising from the fact that the speaker has committed to some grammatical structure or topical trajectory that needs to be changed.

4. *Maitea* and abandoning the turn-constructual unit

Giving up an initiated unit is by no means a serious breach in everyday conversation but a regular side effect of the real-time production of talk-in-interaction (e.g. Selting 2001). The mechanisms of taking care of production, hearing and understanding problems have been generally analyzed as repair (Sidnell, 2010:110–138). “Self-repair involves a break in the current course of action in order to return to and repair some prior bit of talk” (Sidnell, 2010:117). *Maitea* plays a part in the perturbations of a single speaker’s talk and specifically deserts a turn-constructual unit. The speaker more or less cancels the stream of thought that has been evolving and only optionally then ties back to an earlier stretch of talk (as also described in Schegloff, 2013: 52–55). In example (2) the speaker deserted the projected explanation, and returned to the already expressed claim that the teacher could not be bothered. In the current section of the paper we will look more closely at this type of mid-unit abandonments.

In example (3) the ongoing unit is abandoned but instead of completely cancelling its content, the speaker reformulates it from a different angle. P has just told a story about a choir trip, when an apparently disliked person entered a bus with her boyfriend and nobody made space for them to sit together. At the beginning of the example P is summarizing the morals of her story: when people like someone, they make space for them.

(3) P7A11

- 1 P: =@@ <@ s mõts et noh kui ikka tuleb lahe inimene,
 this sense that NOH if IKKA come:3SG cool person
 I mean, when a cool person shows up
- 2 kellest kõik lugu peavad onju. @> sis noh, .hh
 who:ELT all respect:3PL ONJU then NOH
 that is respected by everybody, then
- 3 kolitakse ikka. või midagi ikka orgunnitakse onju.
 move:PAS still or something:PAR IKKA organize:PAS ONJU
 people move or organize something anyway, right
- 4 K: mmmh=
 Uhuh

- 5 P: =aga kuidagi nad sis ikka - n: maitea, noh
 but somehow they then still N I:NEG:know NOH
 But somehow they then nevertheless - I dunno, well
- 6 ühesõnaga see situatsioon kuidagi lahenes,
 in.one.word the situation somehow solved:3SG
 I mean the situation was solved somehow
- 7 aga noh sellest (XX).
 but NOH this:ELT
 but like this (XX)
- 8 K: mm[mh]
 Uhuh

The recipient of this story does not display any appreciation of it. The minimal receipt in line (4) avoids taking a clear agreeing stance on P's evaluative standpoint. In line (5) P initiates a formulation of the next event in her story *aga kuidagi nad sis ikka* 'but somehow they then nevertheless'. This sounds as a potential resolution of the story, as so far P has built up tension in the narrated situation and the words *aga* 'but' and *sis* 'then' signal both a disjunction and a next story event. However, the initiated turn-constructional unit is never terminated. Instead, P produces a *maitea*. After the delay item *noh* and an 'I mean' (*ühesõnaga*, lit. 'in one word') a new syntactic unit is initiated, one that perhaps reformulates the content of the prior abandoned one. It seems to constitute an alternative way of describing the resolution: while the deserted utterance formulated an active agent *nad* 'they', the new one is constructed without overt naming of an agent (line 6). The deserted and the new utterance share the word *kuidagi* 'somehow', which allows an interpretation that the latter is a replacement of the prior. Similar to example (2), *maitea* is here deployed between the abandoned unit and the next utterance. Again, *maitea* cannot be interpreted literally in this case, as a sudden attack of cognitive failure, nor as an epistemic hedge modifying an adjacent utterance. The speaker continues immediately with a description of the events and presents herself as a "knowing" person. It seems that *maitea* is instead a strategic device of cancelling the unit-in-progress that was perhaps in some sense unfortunate for how the speaker wanted to present her characters, and alerts the recipient for the upcoming change of trajectory. Accordingly, as an exit device *maitea* is used before the item *ühesõnaga* 'I mean' which clearly projects a reformulation.

One consequence of saliently marking the abandonment of an initiated unit with a *maitea* is that it can be heard as abandoning the turn as a whole. As shown in example (4), after *maitea* another speaker can take the turn and contribute to the ongoing line of talk. The excerpt is taken from the same conversation as example (2), where M was telling about her exam experiences to a co-student L who missed the exam. In example (4) M tells yet another story about someone who received a lower grade after admitting to not to have attended more than three lectures. The story climax is at line (2): the student obtained a "four". After responding to L's expression of doubt in line (4) M initiates a conclusion with *niet*, approx. 'so' (Keevallik, 2000). This is our target turn. After a sound stretch *eee*, a short pause, and a delay item *noh*, M abandons the initiated unit with *maitea*, which leads to immediate turn transition.

(4) M2B6

- 1 M: /---/ Teras ütles: rumalukene et noh: (0.4)
 NAME said:3SG stupid that NOH
 Stupid Teras told (the teacher), well (0.4)
- 2 kolm korda tuleb ära vist. .h sai nelja.

- three time:PAR make:3SG probably got:3SG four:GEN
maybe three times at most .h (he) got a four
- 3 L: ongi nii või.=
be:3:GI so QUES
Really?
- 4 M: =<0 jah 0>
Yeah
- 5 (0.7)
- 6 M: niet eee - (.) noh: maitea.=
so:that NOH I:NEG:know
So um - (.) well I dunno
- 7 L: =ma parem ei lähe üldse sinna @
I better NEG go at.all there:ILL
It's better for me to not go there at all

In principle, the storyteller M may designedly leave the conclusion open for the recipient. The concluding particle *niet*, approx. 'so (that)' can imply a possibility for drawing joint conclusions from the information presented thus far (examples of this kind have been subject to substantial analysis in the case of Finnish *että* 'that' (Koivisto, 2011)²) but in this case (example 4, line 6) the sound stretch *eee* suggests that the speaker herself is aiming at a continuation. Apparently, however, the abandoning *maitea* invites the recipient to join in on drawing her own conclusions, as we can see in L's actions. In her next turn (line 7) she formulates the moral of the story for her personally: she will not visit the professor at all. By revealing unit abandonment, *maitea* can thus invite others to produce the next turn, functioning as a turn-final item. In fact, a similar sequential mechanism is valid for some claims of insufficient knowledge: if one speaker claims not to know something as in 'I don't know what the time is', the recipient is implicitly invited to provide the information. There is thus a connection between the structural-interactive usage of *maitea* as a device of unit-abandonment and its epistemic meaning of disclaiming knowledge. The usages of *maitea* could be imagined as forming a continuum that ranges from more to less epistemic (see also section 6 below), while the potential for speaker change seems to surface along the entire range. There is an inherent vagueness between the subjective claim of not knowing something, and the potential recruitment of a recipient to take the turn. Obviously, there are some activity contexts where the subjective function prevails, as the speaker is in the middle of a storyline (as in example 2), while in other sequential positions, such as when the moral of a completed story is to be formulated, the interlocutor can more easily join in.

In any case, by using *maitea* after indication of trouble in talk production and less than optimal recipient behavior, the speaker announces that the initiated unit will not be completed. By balancing the subjective and the intersubjective concerns, personal knowledge and recipient passiveness, it functions as a disjunctive marker diverting the trajectory of talk. In the following we will be exploring its role in accomplishing larger conversational boundaries.

5. *Maitea* and abandoning a stalled topical sequence

² It is perhaps not coincidental that the *et* in the Estonian compound *niet* 'so (that)' is historically related to the Finnish *että* 'that'.

Somewhat differently from the cases described in the previous section, *maitea* can be used to abandon a stalled topic and completed sequence. In my data, *maitea* is characteristically used for abandoning emotional topics that have turned out to be difficult to resolve. It thus seems to mark a juncture of a very special kind – that of moving from problem talk to a new initiation. Considering the literal meaning of *maitea*, the speaker may be disclaiming any knowledge of a solution, but functionally the item accomplishes an escape from the sensitive topic. We will first look at cases of *maitea* used in transitions from troublesome topics to new sequences, and then explore a combination of *a(ga)* ‘but’ + *maitea* as a complex disjunctive and projective practice.

In example (5), Mom is trying to convince her daughter P that all the banks will be closed the next day since it is a Sunday. P, who has just lost her purse, will thus not be able to withdraw any money, and her assessment of the situation as bad comes in line (7). With this, the sequence is technically terminated but the practical problem of obtaining money has not been solved. After a long pause (1.5 seconds), P initiates a new topic with *maitea*.

(5) P1A11

- 1 Mom: no omme on pühapäev ju.
 NO tomorrow be:3 Sunday JU
 Well, it's Sunday tomorrow

- 2 P: äkki midagi ikka lahti on.
 maybe something still open be:3
 Maybe something (will) still be open

- 3 Mom: ei ma ei usu.
 no I NEG believe
 No, I don't think so

- 4 P: arvad ve.=
 think:2SG QUES
 You think (so)/Really?

- 5 Mom: =mm,
 Uhuh

- 6 (0.9)

- 7 P: (siis) on muidugi alvasti.
 then be:3 of.course bad
 (That)'s too bad of course

- 8 (2.0)

- 9 P: ↑mai: tea. mai: jaksa üldse, ma ütlen: ma eile
 I:NEG know I:NEG have strength at all I say:1SG I yesterday
 I dunno. I don't have any strength I'm saying I came

- 10 tulini koju, ja s mai saand poole ööni
 came:1SG home:ILL and then I:NEG can:PPT half:GEN night:TER
 home yesterday and I couldn't sleep half the night

- 11 magada onju. ma mõtsin mis jama see on.
 sleep:INF ONJU I thought:1SG what crap this be:3
 onju I thought what a crap

The interactional-structuring function dominates also in the next instance (6), where *maitea* initiates the closing of the call after a terminated assessment sequence (lines 1–4). The topic has, similarly to (5), been quite emotional. Because of expensive plane tickets, T is unable to visit her Mom at Christmas. Mom and T jointly bemoan the price policy, and damn those responsible for it (lines 1–2). The sequence is closed down by T reacting with *ahah* 'right', and Mom responding *jah* 'yeah', both thereby declining the opportunity to elaborate. In line (5) T initiates a closing of the call by sending her greetings to the rest of the family. This sequence-initiation is implemented with the help of *noh mina ei tea*, approx. 'well, I dunno'. The *noh*-preface is regularly used for initiating routine transitions to new sequences in Estonian conversation (Keevallik, 2013), while *maitea* makes salient a topical disengagement. Both open up for a new initiation.

1 T: =tobedad kujud [raisk].
dumb:PL guy:PL damned
Dumb guys, damned.

2 Mom: [mm] täitsa tobedad,=
completely dumb:PL
(They're) completely dumb

3 T: =ah:ah.=
Right.

4 Mom: <0 =jah 0>
Yeah

5 T: noh, mina ei tea. no tervita siis [teisi inimesi.(X)]
NOH I NEG know NO greet:IMP:2SG then other:PAR people:PAR
Well, I dunno. pass my greetings to the others X

6 Mom: [olgu peale]
Be:JUS on

7 jah, siis ma sulle omme ei akka elistam /---/
 yeah then I you:ALL tomorrow NEG start call:SUP
 yeah, so I won't call you tomorrow

In the current example, the pronoun 'I' occurs in its extended form *mina*, which is mostly deployed for contrast in Estonian conversation. It may here be used to underline the opposition with the people called 'dumb' in the preceding sequence, i.e. those who set flight prices, and for establishing a contrastive stance, as in 'I don't know (what they are thinking)'. In any case, it achieves a disengagement from the prior topic. While topic closure has already been negotiated with the closure-implicative particles, *maitea* saliently marks the current turn as a major juncture and a transition to a new sequence.

Overall, the topic-abandonment in examples (5, 6) can schematically be described as follows:

topic closure > *maitea* + initiation of a new sequence

In this particular usage *maitea* features structural-textual as well as intersubjective functions, since it makes the relationship between the prior and the upcoming clear for the benefit of the recipient. After a prior sequence has been completed, it is a way of engaging in a new trajectory, albeit occasionally in a mere conversation closure. In its topic-juncture function, *maitea* could be compared to English *anyway* which has been characterized as a device of putting an end to interactional trouble, including stalled sequences (Park, 2010). In contrast to Estonian *maitea*, English *anyway* is regularly used as a stand-alone item in a turn. At the same time, it cannot mark the abandonment of initiated syntactic units, as *maitea* does. The Estonian *maitea* is a device of disengagement from the current trajectory in specific sequential slots as well as turn-positions.

Example (7) shows how *maitea* can be used both to abandon an initiated turn-constructual unit and to then launch a new topic. The excerpt is taken from a relatively strained call between two young people of opposite sex. While Rita keeps talking, Tom provides only minimal responses. This can be seen in lines (1–3) where Rita explains where exactly she spent her weekend. Tom receives this with a minimal *aa* 'right'. This is followed by Rita expressing no intent to elaborate, the stand-alone *no vot*, which constitutes an ultimate topic closure (Keevallik, 2008). After a long pause of 1.4 seconds, during which Tom could have taken the initiative, Rita herself produces the disjunctive and lengthened *a:ga*: 'but', which projects a continuation, even though the projection is neither structurally nor topically specified at this point. The 'but' is followed by an even longer pause, where the obligation and opportunity to continue falls on Rita, and Tom's chances are severely reduced because of the grammatical, prosodic, and pragmatic projection. Rita eventually discards the projection with *maitea* in line (7).

(7) P8A9

1 Rita: /---/ Pärnust kilt: siia sinna, mingi selline koht.
 NAME:ELT km about some such place
 One kilometer from Pärnu, a place like that

2 Tom: aa. h
 Right

3 Rita: no vot. h
 Yeah

- 4 (1.4)
- 5 Rita: .h a:ga: -
But
- 6 (1.9)
- 7 Rita: mm maitea. mu möte ei tööta praegu.
I:NEG know I:GEN mind NEG work now
Um I dunno my mind is not working right now
- 8 ma nägin täna öösel jälle - kurat: ma ei saa aru.
I saw:1SG today night:ADS again damned I NEG understand
Last night I had again - damned, I don't understand
- 9 ma nägin niukest und jälle täna öösel
I saw:1SG such:PAR dream:PAR again today night:ADS
I had a dream again last night
- 10 et see on õudne. /---/
that it be:3 awful
it's awful

As “knowing” what to say could be considered a prerequisite for progressing talk, the *maitea* in line (7) can be heard as an account for not continuing the *aga* ‘but’- unit and the trajectory initiated by it. However, the *maitea* is strategically deployed just before Rita fluently launches into more talk. The following claim about her mind ‘not working right now’ is clearly an account for her long pause, but simultaneously a preparation, as well as a justification, for launching the topic of her weird dreams, which continues well beyond the extract. Thus, the initial *maitea* is part of the strategy to launch another unrelated topic, and to keep the stalling conversation going. Therefore, *maitea* cannot here be interpreted as a true epistemic claim about a cognitive failure. Neither does *maitea* modify the upcoming utterance. First of all, it is produced with a falling prosody and not as a part of the following intonation unit, which is commonly the case with epistemic hedges (Keevallik, 2011:187–188). Secondly, there is no other hesitation in the turn. Instead, the speaker continues smoothly without hitches into a new topic. Third, the following utterance expresses personal information that the speaker can be expected to possess, the state of her mind – which actually seems to be another strategic way to invoke cognition in the service of current interactional goals, that is, to justify the preceding silence as well as the abrupt topical transition. In this context, *maitea* emerges as an interactional device that is used for abandoning the ongoing trajectory and re-engaging in a new one.

In a slight contrast to example (7) where the syntactic unit initiated by *aga* ‘but’ is abandoned, the fluent combination of *a(ga)* ‘but’ + *maitea* is regularly used for major topic shifts and sequence breaks. Example (8) is an instance in point. L is at the university and calls M. L and M have both missed an in-class essay that day and now talk about obtaining the course materials. In line (1–2) L reports that their course mates have left already, which makes the task problematic. After a long pause L comments on her surprise that M was not writing the essay either. M does not answer (due to lack of understanding, as becomes clear later in line 9), and L launches a future-oriented promise to continue looking for people who might have the materials. This transition to a new (closing) sequence in line (8) is initiated by a fluent *aga maitea*, that is furthermore prosodically a part of the ensuing utterance.

(8) M1B2

- 1 L: nad on laiali juba läinud ja. nim:o[di].
they be:3 dispersed already and like.this
They have left probably already
- 2 M: [m]
m
- 3 (1.4)
- 4 M: [mts noh mine-]
Well go -
- 5 L: [ma mõt]sin et äkki sa k:irjutad seal.
I thought:1SG that maybe you:SG write:3SG there
I thought that maybe you were writing there, y'see
- 6 või nii onju. hh
or like.that ONJU
y'see
- 7 (0.8)
- 8 L: aga: maitea ma vaatan veel, otsin kedagi ja küsin:.
but I:NEG:know I look:1SG still search:1SG someone and ask:1SG
But I dunno, I'll keep looking, I'll search and ask.
- 9 M: mida ma kirjutan.
what I write:1SG
Writing what?

While *maitea* suggests a new trajectory, the very frequent turn-preface *a(ga)* is a generic contrastive disjunction that projects something generally contrastive, and lacks the explicit abandoning profile of *maitea*. Together the two project a topic shift by the current speaker in the ensuing utterance and *maitea* could in this complex structure be analyzed as (a part of) a turn-preface. In contrast to *maitea*-prefaces in answers to information questions (Keevallik, 2011), this preface does not feature any epistemic connotations. It is a device of organizing topics and projection in conversation. As became clear in the examples in the current section (5,7,8), the impetus for topic abandonment in the (*a(ga)*) *maitea*-pattern can be due to problems in interaction. The preface use seems to be contingent on lack of recipient uptake or even resigned silence, which is slightly different from the cases of turn-abandonment described in the first section of the paper. However, in examples (3,4) the recipients also skipped opportunities for turn-entry before the units that were ultimately abandoned with *maitea*, so this may be an indication of *maitea* being especially fitted for handling exits from a stalling conversation.

We have now scrutinized the capacity of *maitea* to mark explicit disengagement from the prior, be it an un-finished turn-constructural unit or a sequence that has stalled. *Maitea* marks a metatextual and interactional juncture in the evolving conversation. It simultaneously implies that the ensuing utterance may involve either a proposal for a new topic and a new sequence (examples 5–8), or a different syntactic formulation (examples 2,3), depending on the prior conversational context. Alternatively, when the speaker abandons a turn-constructural unit the *maitea* can be heard as turn-final, and thus provide an opportunity for the interlocutor to enter the conversation (example 4). In short, the topical as well as grammatical structures with *maitea* emerge contingently, based on participants' actions at any

6. Maitea and epistemicity

(9) P3A8

In positions where a response, a token of agreement, or an appreciation is due, the *maitea*-response is regularly heard and interpreted as not agreeing (Keevallik, 2011; for similar analysis in English, see Tsui, 1991; Beach & Metzger, 1997; Hutchby, 2002). In addition, as

happens in example (9), this answer enables the current speaker to disengage from the other's topic. After a lengthy pause in line 7 P returns to her own earlier story (data not shown) and its implications. She has been telling how she bought her favorite brand of cigarettes that turned out to be fake. In lines (8–9) P outlines the implication of this experience – she plans to switch to a different brand. Similarly to the pattern in focus in this paper, the *maitea* thus accomplishes disengagement, even though it does not project an immediate continuation. Eventually the disalignment enables the speaker to make a transition to a new (or retrieved) topic. In contrast to the abandoning uses described in (3–5), the epistemic potential of *maitea* is here exploited for strategic ends to achieve a covert disagreement while maintaining sociality. It thus constitutes a strategic use of the subjective epistemic claim in a specific sequential position. It is not as clearly a structuring device, as was the case in the above dead-end use, where only faint traces of the epistemic meaning could be traced.

Example (9) thus illustrates how the interactional abandonment pattern fits into the network of pragmatic functions that *maitea* routinely accomplishes. It can be deployed for more or less epistemic tasks, and more or less interactional-structural ones. Occasionally these functions coincide in single instances. Figure (1) illustrates the *maitea*-usage as a continuum from more to less epistemic cases, even though we have no evidence of any of these uses being “original” or developing from others. The different patterns emerge in different interactional contexts and single instances reflect the relevance of actual knowledge to a greater or lesser extent. The meaning of *maitea* is accordingly a situated combination of its epistemic meaning potentials, as featured in dialogical sense-making processes (Linell, 2009:325–343), and the actual temporal and interactional contingencies of its local use.

Figure 1. A sketch of more and less epistemic usages of *maitea*.

Illustrating this continuum, the very first example of this paper represented an instance where a knowledge display was made relevant in a prior turn, and *maitea* was literally used for disclaiming it. The last example (9) targeted a sequential position where agreement was due, but lack of knowledge could be deployed as a strategic means for avoiding the socially problematic action of disagreement. This could be seen as a case half-way between the two extremes of the imaginary continuum. Finally, our focus pattern ends up at the far non-epistemic end of the continuum. It emerges in sequential positions where no knowledge display is due, as a device for structuring ongoing interaction, specifically for abandoning dead ends. Here, it does thus not function as a full clause, neither as a hedge. It is a relatively fixed and often phonologically assimilated phrase that is functionally similar to pragmatic particles. The different meanings of *maitea* are thus situated in various sequential positions, and are crucially dependent on participants' local actions.

7. Conclusion

By taking a strictly temporal perspective on the evolving turn and sequence, the study demonstrated yet another usage of the phrase ‘I don’t know’ in the service of interaction. It showed how the Estonian *maitea* is deployed to indicate a dead end and launch a recovery from it. *Maitea* marks a disengagement from the prior, i.e. that the initiated turn-constructional unit or current topic will not be pursued further. Simultaneously, though not always, *maitea* may function as a preface to an utterance that initiates a new topic or sequence. It takes on this distinctive interactional meta-task for structuring conversation in real time, both solving a problem of progressivity for the speaker and making the juncture salient for the recipient. The mental state of ‘knowing’ is only invoked in the service of this structural goal. In a sense, cognition is achieved as a by-product of an interactional concern for the interlocutors in real-time conversation (see e.g. Edwards, 1997; Potter, 2006).

As a complement to the multitude of studies on the functions of ‘I don’t know’ in various languages, this study presented yet a different, and perhaps language-specific, use of this epistemic claim. It is unclear whether we can at all distill a “literal” or “original” meaning of a linguistic item, especially when it comes to ephemeral matters, such as “knowing”. We generally use the word ‘know’ to designate a mental property whose nature is still widely discussed (Linell, 2009:109–142), and the understanding of which has clearly changed through human history. Claims about the historical semantic and pragmatic development of the phrase ‘I don’t know’ are accordingly problematic. It is actually plausible that *maitea* has always been used for abandoning dead ends, as described above, but since we do not have recordings of conversations from earlier epochs, we are limited in our pursuit. Crucially, however, we can trace a continuity and logic between the various more or less knowledge-related uses of *maitea*, as is reflected in the overlapping functions in single cases (such as in example 7). We can also see how knowledge of something may or may not be made relevant in sequences of action, and how a knowledge disclaimer can be put to different intersubjective uses, be it for reasons of social cohesion and accountability, or for structuring current talk and organizing participation around abandonment and re-engagement.

Transcription conventions

<u>underlining</u>	– emphasis
-	– truncation
[]	– overlaps
=	– latching of turns
(0.5)	– pause length in tenths of a second
(.)	– micropause
:	– lengthening of a sound
@	– a laughter syllable
<@ @>	– smiling voice
.hh	– breathing in,
hh	– breathing out
((snort))	– transcriber’s comments
(X)	– unhearable syllable
/---/	– something has been left out from the same turn
boldface	– the focused item in the excerpt
◦	– soft voice

.	– pitch fall at the end of an intonation unit
?	– pitch rise at the end of an intonation unit
,	– level pitch at the end of an intonation unit
-	– unfinished intonation unit
/	– alternative translations

Abbreviations

1, 2, 3	– person
ADS	– adessive
ALL	– allative
COM	– comitative
COND	– conditional
ELT	– elative
GEN	– genitive
GI	– clitic <i>-gi</i> (a phonological variant of the clitic <i>-ki/-gi</i>)
ILL	– illative
IMP	– imperative
INF	– infinitive
JUS	– jussive
NAME	– name
NEG	– negation (particles <i>ei</i> , <i>ära</i>)
PAR	– partitive
PAS	– passive
PL	– plural
PPT	– past participle
QUES	– question particle
SG	– singular
SUP	– supinum
TRA	– translativ
Other capital letters	– an untranslatable particle

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