Abandoning dead ends: The Estonian junction marker *maitea* 'I dont know'

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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 eit tea represented by 94 cases and the variant with the long (emphasized) pronoun mina eit 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.
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.

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’) – 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’, etsi ‘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

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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-constructional 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-constructional 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. vói midagi ikka organ nitakse 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. 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 having 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.
In principle, the storyteller M may designedly leave the conclusion open for the recipient. The concluding particle nicht, 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) 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-interactional 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

It is perhaps not coincidental that the et in the Estonian compound nicht ‘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:  arvd 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:  ^maitea.  
   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 tulin 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
In this example, the extent of the daughter’s trouble becomes clear across lines (1–5). After she accepts the state of affairs in line (7) both remain silent. It is a sensitive moment, as the mother might offer her help (see the discussion on preferred first actions in Schegloff, 2007:81–86), or the daughter could ask for it. The mother could also start scolding the daughter and the silence may in fact be heard as a disapproval from her side. Instead, the daughter proposes another topic of how her various worries have affected her sleep and how she therefore lacks the strength to deal with her problems. This is a complaint that makes relevant comfort and sympathy by the mother, and thus initiates a completely different sequence. At the junction to the new topic, the daughter uses maita. It is furthermore produced with a high onset (↑), which at least in English data has been shown to indicate a move to the main topic of the call, thus also accomplishing an initiation (Couper-Kuhlen 2004). Crucially, the initiation in this example is not marked as an out-of-the-blue transition, but distinctly constitutes a break from the troublesome topic, a disavowal of its continued relevance. The maita could perhaps be glossed as ‘I don’t know what else to say’ but apart from that, it is hard to trace a clear epistemic function of maita here, as the daughter goes on to talk about matters that she is an expert on, her own cognitive and physical state. Knowledge is neither made relevant in the current conversational sequence, nor is anything in talk epistemically ‘hedged’. When used for topic-abandoning maita seems to bear functional similarity to other boundary markers, such as nojah, approx. ‘oh well’. It is thus quite devoid of epistemic meaning, and constitutes the most distinctly interactional use among all.

The interactional-structuring function dominates also in the next instance (6), where maita 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 maita makes salient a topical disengagement. Both open up for a new initiation.

(6) K2A2

1 T:  =tobedad kujud [raisk].
   Dumb:PL quy: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
   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
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:

\[
\text{topic closure} \rightarrow \text{*maitea* + initiation of a new sequence}
\]

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-constructional 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
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 *(aga)* ‘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.
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-constructional 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-constructional 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
given moment. The following section looks at how this interactional device of abandonment fits into the bigger picture of *maitea*-usage in Estonian, asking whether there is any family-similarity between its epistemic and non-epistemic uses.

6. *Maitea* and epistemicity

As shown above, dead-ends are managed in the context of abandoned units and stalled sequences, where *maitea* is a device of recovery via disengagement and simultaneous projection. In contrast, in sequential contexts where a response is due, *maitea* can be an effective means of expressing disalignment and disagreement with the first-pair part by way of overtly appealing to lack of knowledge. Even in these cases, the ultimate result may be a dead-end for the topic, which suggests some functional similarity across otherwise different contexts. Example (9) displays an instance where *maitea* navigates the socially problematic task of disagreeing with the prior speaker. Before the excerpt T has been arguing that “light” cigarettes actually become stronger halfway through. In line (1) he claims that this is his personal experience. After no response in line (2) T repeats his main point in lines (3–4) but only receives a surprise token *noo* and a *maitea* as a response. This answer effectively not only declines to take a position on the matter of light cigarettes but also implies disagreement, without overtly producing this socially problematic action.

(9) P3A8
1 T:   mai  tea  kurat. nii - (.) nii ma olen  tundnud.
I:NEG know devil so  so  I be:1SG feel:PPT
I don’t know damned, this is what I have felt.
2 (0.8)
3 T:  et  kuradi kuskilt ä alates  poole  suitsu  pealt
that devil somewhere starting half:GEN cigarette:GEN from
That damned starting from about half the cigarette
4 läeb asi  ilgelt  kangeks  noh,  järsku.
goes thing extremely strong:TRA NOH suddenly
it becomes extremely strong, suddenly.
5 (0.9)
6 P:  noo. h  mai  tea.
NOO I:NEG know
Really. I don’t know.
7 (1.8)
8 P:  no ma:  kardan,  et  ma läen  üldse
NO I  be afraid:1SG that I go:1SG altogether
Well, I’m afraid that I’ll switch to a different
9 mingile  muule:  margile  üle. /---/
some:ALL other:ALL brand:ALL over
brand altogether. /---/

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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>epistemic meaning</th>
<th>non-epistemic meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>knowledge disclaimer</td>
<td>disalignment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>subjective statement/stance</td>
<td>intersubjective concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge relevant for sequential action</td>
<td>knowledge evoked for social cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ex. 1</td>
<td>ex. 9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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
underline – 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 -gi (a phonological variant of the clitic -ki/-gi)
ILL – illative
IMP – imperative
INF – infinitive
JUS – jussive
NAME – name
NEG – negation (particles ei, åra)
PAR – partitive
PAS – passive
PL – plural
PPT – past participle
QUES – question particle
SG – singular
SUP – supinum
TRA – translative
Other capital letters – an untranslatable particle

References


