'I understand’-initiated formulations of the other: a semi-fixed claim to the intersubjective

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'I understand’-initiated formulations of the other: 
a semi-fixed claim to the intersubjective

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Abstract

Some language patterns appear fixed at a certain time, enabling their description as grammatical structures. Semi-fixed patterns that routinely accomplish specific social actions constitute more of an analytical challenge. This chapter targets the phrase ma saan aru ‘I understand’ in Estonian together with the ensuing other-attentive formulation ‘2nd person expression + a cognitive concept’ and argues that it is a semi-fixed expression, a “claim to the intersubjective”, that manages a misalignment between participants. While claiming to have successfully accessed the other’s motives or feelings, the speaker regularly advances her own agenda through the formulation of the other. This suggests a systematic relationship between cognitive lexicon, grammatical structure, and interactional function, and calls for a language theory that incorporates semi-fixedness.

Key words

semi-fixed expressions, formulaic language, conversation analysis, intersubjectivity, complement taking predicates, misalignment, formulation, cognitive verb, Estonian

Short title
A semi-fixed claim to the intersubjective

**Introduction**

There are more and less fixed structures in language and while there is relatively little controversy as to the extreme ends of this continuum, patterns that are somewhere in between have always constituted an analytical challenge. This gray area has been addressed in various traditions of language research, including formulaic language studies, construction grammar, interactional linguistics, and typology. Research into formulaic language has been up till now largely based on written language corpora and collocations found with computational methods (Wray 2008, Wood 2015). Construction grammar has established that meaning and function are also characteristics of structures larger than single words and morphemes (e.g. Goldberg 2006). Interactional linguistics essentially deals with language patterns in relation to their sequential and pragmatic function. It has also raised the question whether traditional categories of grammatical analysis are at all relevant for the mundane users of a language (e.g. Ford, Fox and Thompson 2013), while typologists have suggested that such categories need not be crosslinguistically relevant (e.g. Haspelmath 2010). It may be the case that the chunks of language that speakers operate with are larger than words but smaller or less distinct than clauses. There is a steadily growing interest in fixed expressions, or ‘prefabs’ as deployed in, and emerging from, talk (Pawley and Syder 1983, Hopper 1987, Erman and Warren 2000, Bybee 2010, Wood 2015) which witnesses of the centrality of
these phenomena to several functional linguists’ conceptualization of language. We still know very little about what kinds of structures speakers orient to, and operate with, in real-time conversation. This knowledge, however, is crucial for dealing with language categories in more dynamic and pragmatically realistic terms, ultimately aiming to build sufficiently flexible theories of language.

One way to tackle the question of relevant structures is to dissect, one by one, specific recurrent language patterns in ordinary conversation. Casting the net wide, one could also reveal the different degrees of fixation in the form-function packages deployed by the speakers. This chapter examines a pattern of language use that is loosely fixed in Estonian, and similarly loosely fixed in Swedish and English. The study began with a noticing that in all the three languages one could combine the counterpart of ’I understand’ with a formulation of a cognitive state of the recipient with the purpose of addressing some misalignment between the two. The expression thus seems to have a distinct interactional home environment, a clear social function in conversation. In addition, speakers of all the languages seem to have a clear intuition that the pattern targets misalignment (which we have heard from the audience, again and again, when presenting this study), and that it can be used strategically to project a contrastive move in interaction.

From an interactional analytic point of view, it is a curious fact that a speaker explicitly claims understanding at all. As has been widely established in the conversation analytic literature, understanding is displayed by default in every next turn (Heritage 1984, Schegloff 2007,
Mondada 2011). To utter a claim of understanding is therefore a marked social action that needs to be explored for its import and meaning for the participants. In a similar vein, it has been shown that claims of lack of understanding serve a variety of disaffiliative and recruiting purposes in a classroom (Lindwall and Lymer 2011). The current study focuses on a recurrent two-part practice where the speaker first makes an explicit claim of having arrived at an understanding of her recipient, and then immediately formulates a cognitive state or process of the recipient. This is typically accomplished with the verb ‘understand’ in the first part but can sometimes also be done with the verb ‘see’. By looking at a complex grammatical pattern of ‘I understand (that) you/your + cognitive concept’, the chapter addresses the tension between more and less fixed facets of linguistic units in relation to social action. At the same time, the structure to be explored is more complex than what has been common in studies of routinization and grammaticalization, as most of them target two- or three-word combinations (Traugott and Dasher 2002, Kärkkäinen 2003, Brinton 2008, Keevallik 2003, 2010, Wood 2015). It is also not entirely fixed but allows some variation.

Mutual understanding between people constitutes the core of intersubjectivity. Specific conversational mechanisms are available to deal with any trouble in understanding, such as initiating a repair (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977; Schegloff 1992). However, even in repair sequences explicit claims of having arrived at an understanding are rare (Keevallik 2015) and the phrase ‘I understand’ seems to be reserved for a different kind of social task. Importantly, several cognitive verb phrases
have been shown to accomplish non-literal tasks in practical everyday use. Examples include ‘I think’, ‘I thought’, ‘I guess’, and ‘you mean’ (Kärkkäinen 2007, 2012, Laury and Okamoto 2008, Endo 2010, 2013, Antaki 2012, Smith 2013, Helasvuo 2014, Deppermann and Rineke 2017). While ‘I think’ and ‘I guess’ are involved in stancetaking, ‘you mean’-prefaced turns have been analyzed as candidate understandings (Antaki 2012). Discursive psychology in particular seeks to explain the rhetorical deployment of psychological words and concepts such as thinking, knowing and feeling (Potter 2006). Taking cognitivism as a theoretical point of departure it treats psychological descriptions as deriving their intelligibility from their contexts of use and not from being referential to some actual mental state (Edwards 1997). The first endeavor in our study is thus to reveal what kind of action is accomplished by ‘I understand’ when used to initiate formulations of the recipient’s cognitive state or process.

Formulations, on the other hand, have been a major focus of interest in conversation analysis. They are usually divided into gists of the talk thus far and upshots from it (Heritage and Watson 1979). Starting from early studies by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970:350), different settings have been explored. In news interviews, formulations such as “(so) what you’re saying is”, “so you mean” mark prior talk as newsworthy, while in radio call-in programs they can be used for challenging others (Drew 2003). In psychotherapy formulations are used for highlighting, rephrasing, relocating and exaggerating, with the rephrasing ones focusing on subjective experience (Weiste and Peräkylä 2013). It seems that explicit formulations of other’s internal world are not very common, since roundabout practices are used
even in therapy, such as comments on how a person looks externally (Muntigl and Horvath 2014). Another roundabout strategy is to deploy an impersonal format, such as “it feels” (Drew 2003). In general, literature on formulations rarely features cognitive concepts, as formulations can of course have more a matter-of-fact character.

The complex expression we are about to scrutinize is particular in its components – a claim to ‘understand’ followed by formulation of a co-present participant’s mind. This expression furthermore seems to us an ultimate way of displaying access to the recipient’s mind and therefore clearly intriguing. Nevertheless, we do not hypothesize from the start that the actual function will have to be cognitive. It is therefore we call the practice a ’claim to the intersubjective’. The structure in focus – ma saan aru ’I understand’ + formulation of other’s cognitive state – is usable in various types of settings and it is functionally closely related to concessives. Among other places, formulations such as ”I understand that you want X but…” are routinely recommended to handle disobedient kids in parenting guides. For example, when a child insists on purchasing toys a parent can say ”I understand that you want that toy and that you are angry at me. But I’m not buying it because we don’t need it.” (original in Estonian, http://peresuhted.ee/artiklid/kui-laps-jonnib/). It has been unclear, though, how these strategies are put to practice in real life. We argue that this level of explicitness in claims of understanding the other’s motives is necessary in situations where there is a major misalignment between the parties, as well as sufficient interest in bridging it. Considering the coherent use, our objective is to display more and less fixed aspects of the expression and
discuss the place of this kind of semi-fixed patterns within the language system.

**Data and method**

The data for this study were drawn from a large variety of naturally occurring recorded interactions from mundane, workplace and institutional settings, including telephone calls and co-present interactions. The fact that we found the target phenomenon – claims to the intersubjective – in this wide range of data sources supports the argument that this is a general pattern, and not one that is restricted to particular kinds of settings or cultures. The data were in New Zealand English, Estonian and Swedish. In the corpora searched for the current study (15 hours in Estonian, 5 in Swedish, and 18 in New Zealand English), our expression turned out to be relatively rare (which is characteristic of many types of formulaic language (Wood 2015)). This suggests that our target pattern is either in some sense socially extreme or used for solving interactional problems that do not occur very often. Well over a hundred candidate instances were collected, more than half of which were in English, around 40 in Estonian, and 8 in Swedish. Since we worked with several family resemblances in structure and use, the core cases were considerably fewer: 43 in English, 10 in Estonian and 3 in Swedish. The different frequency of occurrence in the three languages could be explained with the widely divergent contexts represented in the corpora, or not (we did not carry out any systematic sampling). While about 2/3 of the English data came from institutional
settings (complaint calls to a service for resolving disputes about gas and electricity provision), only about 1/3 of the Estonian and Swedish data did. The latter included dance classes in Estonian and Swedish, and telemarketing calls in Estonian. Our target structure is used recurrently at some institutions (such as telemarketing or consulting, where the interactional problem may arise more frequently – a service provider not being able to provide the kind of thing the caller showing they want – i.e. a kind of complaint that lies outside the purvue of the service), and possibly also in specific cultural contexts more so than in others. We considered the number of cases large enough to discover regularities in the specific forms it took and the actions it accomplished. The current chapter primarily scrutinizes the expression and its variation in Estonian, with some parallels presented in the other two languages.

A conversation analytic approach was used to discover general features of the deployment of the expression across its idiosyncratic manifestations in individual instances (Schegloff 1996). Each case was examined in detail for its particular composition (semantically and syntactically) and position (within turn and sequence) and the ways it was implicated in observably relevant aspects of action. In order to identify as well as properly delimit the practice, we also constantly considered alternatives to our expression. The following aspects were considered:

a) the meaning/function of the expression vs. semantics of its component lexical items
b) frequency of the target phrase *ma saan aru* ‘I understand’ in relation to structurally similar routinized phrases, such as *ma arvan* ‘I think/I guess’

c) variability in the grammatical structure where one speaker claims access to the other’s mind, such as one or two clauses, involving the adverb *nagu* ‘as’ or not, as in *nagu ma aru saan* ‘as I understand’ (these variants will be discussed in the section “Degree of routinization”)

d) the combination of *ma saan aru* with various kinds of turn-continuations, including grammatical objects, complement clauses, and other clauses

e) signs of phonetic or phonological assimilation, and the relative prosodic prominence of the two main components (‘I understand’ vs. ‘you’ + cognitive concept)

f) functional coherence across the instances; the role of the two components in achieving the specific function

We will start by looking at the importance of the first component, the claim of understanding, and then proceed to the second component before summarizing the aspects of routinization in Estonian. In the final section we will discuss the implications of a cross-linguistic comparison.

**Formulating the other’s mind: with and without ‘I understand’**
We will start by two contrastive examples from an institutional setting, which provides relatively transparent uses from talk between strangers. In both cases the telemarketer, while trying to sell a newspaper subscription, formulates the gist of what the client has been saying as “not being interested”. In excerpt (1) the telemarketer accomplishes the formulation without the ‘I understand’-component and in excerpt (2) together with the component. The question is how that changes what is accomplished in the turn.

In excerpt (1) the potential client CLI says that she is subscribing to an alternative paper, Hommikuleht (titles changed for anonymization). The telemarketer TM inquires about the details of this alternative subscription, whether the client gets it at home (rather than at work), and whether the subscription covers a whole year (lines 2, 4). He then moves on to ask about the next year and the answer is that the client has subscribed to the other paper for the first three months of the coming year too (line 8). In lines 11-13 the telemarketer expresses a conclusion with the initial nii et, approx. ‘so that’, a particle chain in Estonian that is routinely used for this function (Keevallik 2000). He uses construction but nevertheless formulates a cognitive state of the client’s mind (or the “collective” mind of her household): ‘so (you) are not interested in Liivi Linnaleht at the moment’. Already after the first half of this formulation the client answers with negation ei ‘no’ and a confirmation jah ‘yeah’ (line 12). The latter is responsive to the pragmatically projected negative statement by the telemarketer in line 11. After the completion of the telemarketer’s turn in line 13 and a further confirmation by the client the call moves to a closure.
Transcription conventions can be found in the appendix.

(1) R A24

1 CLI:  
   ei: meil käib (0.6) Hommikuleht.  
   No, we have (0.6) Hommikuleht

2 TM:  
   käib Hommikuleht koju juba jah,=
   You have it at home already

3 CLI:  
   =jaa,  
   Yeah

4 TM:  
   ja: aasta lõpuni on tellitud.  
   And you have subscribed to it till the end of the year

5 CLI:  
   jaa,  
   Yeah

6 TM:  
   ja kas olete nüüd mõelnud ka järgmise aasta peale  
   And have you thought about the next year, will you

7 CLI:  
   =e ja:h? ma tellisin juba esimese kvartali ka.  
   Um yeah, I subscribed to the first three months too

8 TM:  
   ah:aa. tellisite ära juba.  
   Oh you have already subscribed (to it)

9 CLI:  
   jaa,  
   Yeah
In spite of being a cognitive concept, *huvitatud* ‘interested’ in line 13 here means something like “ready to subscribe”, i.e. a practical readiness for action. Like several other cognitive concepts, it can apparently be put into interactive use to achieve a specific social aim.

In a contrastive case from another telemarketing call in the same series, excerpt (2) displays our target practice where a similar formulation is preceded by ‘I understand’. This client has already been receiving the newspaper for a while and as a response to the telemarketer’s inquiry about her satisfaction (line 1), she assesses the newspaper in a negative way in regard to both its format and its content (lines 6, 21). The otherwise neutral
statement in line 6 gets its negative meaning from the sequential context, as
the telemarketer has just asked what she does not like and suggested the
format. The affirmative particle küll (Keevallik and Hakulinen 2018) agrees
with this suggestion. After these brutal judgments the telemarketer builds a
turn formulating an upshot from what the client has been saying (lines 24,
26).

(2) S1 B16

1 TM: pretensioone on.
      Do you have any complaints

2 (0.9)

3 CLI: ehh m(h)is möttes.
      In what sense

4 TM: <@ no kõige otsemas möttes. @> ka:s lehe sisu.
      In a direct sense, whether the content

5 või vormaat. või mis teile ei meeldi.] 
or format or whatever you don’t like

6 CLI: [ no formaat on ] küll väga suur.
      Well the format is very large indeed

7 TM: .hhhh on suur jah,
      It is large

8 CLI: jaa.
      Yeah
((11 lines omitted where the client describes her problems with the large format))

20 TM: aga sisu kuidas on.
But what about the content

21 CLI: n:::o ei tea, ma ei oska ütelda. m::: eriti ei istu.
Well (I don’t know I can’t say um::: I’m not a big fan

22 TM: ei istu.
Not a fan

23 CLI: ei.
No

24 TM:--> .hh n: e nii nagu ma te jutust
so as I your talk:ELT
.hh So as I understood

25 TM:--> [nüüd aru] sain, e:t te ei ole nagu uvit:at:ud
now understand:IMF:LSG that you NEG be like interested
from your talk now you are not interested

26 CLI: [ khhe ]

27 TM:--> tema tellimisest edasi.
it:GEN subscribing:PAR further
in extending the subscription

28 CLI: ei[:],
No

29 TM: [ja]h,
Yeah,
The focus turn in lines 24, 25 and 27 is initiated by a formulation of the subjective state of speaker’s own mind: ‘as I understood’. In the same clause the telemarketer also explicitly formulates the source of her current understanding, ‘your talk’, i.e. the talk of the co-speaker, the current interlocutor who has expressed substantial critique on the paper in the conversation thus far. In the first component of our complex expression, ‘as I understand from your talk’, the telemarketer thus formulates her own cognitive effort and her resulting success in ‘understanding’.

This component is also clearly formulated as initiating a longer structure. It grammatically projects a continuation, as it is a subordinate clause and therefore projects a main clause. which indeed follows\(^1\). Prosodically there

\(^1\) Indeed, the next clause begins with an *et*, that can be used as a complementizer, which makes it possible to see this as a pivot
is no termination, the pitch rises high up on the last word sain (part of the complex verb ‘understand’), showing incompletion. Also, the deictic nii ‘so’ may project more talk, either a single phrase or an entire clause, because it can be used cataphorically (Keevallik 2011). In short, the first component of our target structure is here clearly a ”projector phrase” (Aijmer 2007, Günthner 2011). It indicates how the current turn is tied to previous talk and simultaneously projects the nature of what is yet to come in the continuation of the turn.

The second component of our target pattern, the upshot, is formulated as a subjective stance by the interlocutor in excerpt (2), as ‘you are not interested’. “Being interested” is essentially an individual cognitive state and a statement like this should necessarily be confirmed by the person it concerns. In the current case, she is addressed directly (2nd person pronoun ‘you’) and therefore accountable for an immediate confirmation or disconfirmation. Furthermore, the initial particle et ‘that/so’ in line 25 is regularly used to show that the current speaker is not the principal of the utterance. Et ascribes upcoming content to the prior speaker, which also makes relevant a confirmation by that speaker in the next turn (Keevallik 2008). Indeed, the client confirms the telemarketer’s formulation of her disinterest (lines 28, 30, 32-33). The second component of the claim to the intersubjective has thus here accomplished an interpretation of the recipient’s cognitive state and intention to not subscribe.

construction. However, et has several pragmatic uses in Spoken Estonian, among other things as an initial particle.
While the telemarketer in (1) was able to draw the conclusion of disinterest in a matter-of-fact manner, the telemarketer in (2) chose to initiate a similar upshot with an extended ”as I understood from your talk”. Why is that? In contrast to (1) where practicalities of an alternative subscription were checked, in excerpt (2) the client provides a serious negative judgment on the offered newspaper. The second case is thus considerably more socially sensitive and perhaps strategically harder to handle for the representative of the paper. This circumstance appears to favor the use of a claim to the intersubjective that at least ostensibly claims affiliation, i.e. understanding between the parties. The first component of the expression orients to social solidarity while the second component proceeds to formulate the recipient’s subjective stance. A similar basic pattern of ostensible initial agreement when disagreeing with assessments has been described, for example, by Pomerantz (1984) in American English. In our excerpt, this strategy helps the telemarketer to transit from the client’s critique to an institutionally relevant formulation of “not interested”.

A claim to the intersubjective centrally involves the verb to ’understand’, which therefore deserves a closer scrutiny here. ‘‘Understand’’ is not intuitively a process-verb like ‘play,’ but an achievement- or terminus-verb like ‘win’: to say of oneself, ‘I understand,’ or of others, ‘You (he, she, they) understand(s)’ is generally to mark out a success-claim, and never to be describing a temporally-extended course of action’’ (Coulter 1979:37, using Ryle 1949:149ff). In fact, in a sentence such as “I understand German” it refers to a temporally extended state but it nevertheless designates an achievement and an action. Along similar lines, an expression
such as ‘I understand’ in the current pattern is deployed to denote an effort by the speaker that comes to a successful end: the speaker has made a transition from a state of not understanding to understanding. At the same time, a claim to ‘understand’ does not necessarily imply that an achievement of understanding has actually taken place (Mondada 2011:544). Rather than describing a mental event or predicate, declarations of understanding signify ‘‘knowing how to proceed, knowing how to use a word, instrument, map or any contextually relevant item, knowing how to behave, knowing what is to happen, and any of a vast variety of things’’ (Coulter 1979:39). The goal of the current analysis is of course not to find the core meaning of the verb “to understand” but to register and characterize one of its interactional tasks. The phrase ‘‘I understand’’ is a thoroughly strategic element of language that serves certain interactional aims in this specific sequential position. It is unlikely, for example, to be uttered at the position of receipt tokens, such as oh (e.g. in line 9, excerpt 1). Its regular position after sequence closure indexically reflects the rational calculation and careful consideration that ostensibly goes into the achievement of an ‘understanding’. This is also reflected in the development of action sequences in the above excerpts: while in (1) the client had already answered negatively to the offer (in line 1) and the telemarketer’s further questions concerned possible future openings for a deal, in excerpt (2) the offer had not yet been made by the time of the telemarketer’s upshot. Action-wise the upshot in (2) is thus considerably more complex than in (1): it formulates the recipient’s mind at the same time as it reveals the institutional goal of the call. This allows the telemarketer to regain the initiative and move to a closure of the conversation. The demonstration of understanding is done in a manner that
is relevant to the institution: the client will either extend the subscription or not.

A claim to the intersubjective thus accomplishes a sequentially intricate action in an ostensibly recipient-sensitive manner. Through the semi-fixed grammatical format and the precise lexical items denoting cognitive matters, \textit{aru saama} 'understand' and \textit{huвитатud olema} 'be interested in', our target expression has accomplished a claim to, and a demonstration of, intersubjectivity. One participant is formulated as having successfully accomplished a mental process, and the other one is ascribed a certain mental state or decision. The first component can be characterized as a \textit{claim} and the other one as a \textit{demonstration}. The analytical distinction between \textit{claiming} and \textit{demonstrating} or \textit{showing} originates from Sacks (1992b:137ff, 249ff, 425ff). It is further developed by Schegloff (1984a:42), who pointed out the distinction between \textit{asserting/claiming} agreement and \textit{showing} agreement. \textit{Showing} something involves the speaker explicitly bringing in something by which s/he does the demonstration, while \textit{claiming} means that the speaker simply claims something without giving any evidence on it. The target expression in our study combines a claim of understanding with a demonstration of what is understood of the other's mental state.

This is also the reason why a claim to the intersubjective is highly efficient in managing misalignments: it displays an effort by the speaker and an ostensible affiliation with the recipient, while at the same time enabling a formulation of the recipient’s cognitive state and eliciting a confirmation, an
aligning action, from her. In other words, the expression is a device of getting harsh business done in a face-saving manner. In this particular setting of telemarketing calls, a claim to the intersubjective serves to make a refusal simple for the client. Among other things, it deals with the negative affect in the previous talk by neutralizing it into an institutional category of “not interested”. In contrast with formulations of the other’s mind without the ’I understand’, making one’s own mental work public has the benefit of displaying effort to see the prior speaker’s point, thus at least giving an impression that his/her perspective has been taken into consideration. This promotes sociality. The ordering of the components in the expression is thus of utmost importance: first tying backward in the conversation by stating ”my effort to make sense of your talk”, and then formulating a further step in the institutional business through the wants and wishes by the other. A claim to the intersubjective constitutes a specific temporally ordered turn-construction that is used for pivoting the sequential structure of the conversation, such as from complaining to an official decision, and from misalignment to alignment.

Claim to the intersubjective and social sensitivity

Claims to the intersubjective are used at moments of misalignment. In this section we will provide two more examples of its use in order to delimit the function of the expression, and to disclose its formal variation. Excerpt (3) comes from a workplace meeting where the participants are building a stage for an opera performance. A claim to the intersubjective is here used by the
artist in order to bring forward the sensitive issue of an apparent clash between her original ideas and the structures that have just been built in the workshop.

At the focal point in the meeting two people are talking, the artist who originally drew the sketches of the stage design and the head of the workshop. The workshop head is responsible for supervising the building of props and later transporting them to the opera house. There are four people present: the artist, the head, his assistant, and a welder. They have stopped in front of some metal structures that will become oriental roofs on the stage. At the beginning of the excerpt the parties talk about the size of the stage and the problem that the roofs are quite small (lines 1-30). This topic comes to a completion with the welder mentioning some aspects that have to do with the number of roofs (lines 23-30). The artist then turns slightly toward the head of the workshop and brings up another aspect of the structures in front of them – that some of them were originally thought as cloth “plates” that would emerge dynamically as a result of twirling. In other words, they were not supposed to be welded out of metal. In this way, the pile of observable structures in front of the group enables the artist to raise a touchy issue of ‘centrifugal plates’ that she envisioned instead of the metal roofs they are currently looking at. This is accomplished via a claim to the intersubjective (lines 31-34), which elicits a defiant response from the head of the workshop.

(3)

1 Head: noh:, ûesõnaga pool lava on olemas juba.
See, half the stage is done

2 Artist: mheh heh

3 Head: ma ütleks,
I’d say

4 Artist: jah, aga ma: ma loodan et mõned on suuremad ka.
Yeah, but I: I hope that some will be bigger

5 (0.5)

6 Artist: onju.
right

7 Head: =suuremaid ma arvan näed augustis.
You’ll probably see the bigger ones in August

8 Artist: jaajaja. ei aga mõtn et kas üldi- üld:se tulevad.
Yeah yeah I mean there will be some after all

9 (.)

10 Head: (kui üldse) tu[leb.]
(If there’ll be (some))

11 Artist: [ a]ga ka sel- ei no ses mõts-
But also - I mean -

12 Head: a mul pole selle vastu midagi ku
But I have nothing against if

13 me jätamegi umbes: e nii suured.
we only have this size
15 Artist: <Q no aga SEITseteist meetrit lava laius.Q> 
Well but the stage is SEVENteen meters wide

16 Head: mis see sis on.
That’s no big deal

17 Artist: KUdas sa selle ãra täidad.
HOW will you fill it

18 Head: no nääd, siin ju küll ju.
See, there is enough (stuff) here

19 (0.8)

20 Artist: ((shakes her head, smiling))

21 Head: inimestega.
With people

22 (1.7)

23 Welder: seITseteist meetrit, noh, phuhh,
Seventeen meters well phuhh

24 siin on neid nii palju et.
there are so many here

25 (2.0)

26 Welder: veel tuleb neid.
There’ll be more

27 (0.6)
28 Welder: see pole j(h)u k(h)ök. h
   This is not all

29   (3.7) ((the others smile, 
        assistant and head look around))

30 Welder: siin ju-
       Here -

Figure 1. Artist is turning to the head of the workshop, line 32.

31 Artist: a ma saan aru et e se- seda nagu no-
       -> but I understand that thi- the/this:PAR like PRT
       But I understand that thi- this like-

32 -> nagu #ned #tsentrif#uugiga taldrikutega
    like the/these centrifuge:KOM plates:PL:KOM
    you didn’t consider/take into account
    #Fig.1 #Fig.2

33 -> sa nagunii ei arvestanud onju.
    you anyway NEG consider:PPT right
the centrifugal plates anyway right

34 \(\Rightarrow\) \'{et se ei ole vaet.}°
so we can forget about that

Figure 2. The apex of the artist’s point towards the roofs, line 32.

35 Head: eino mina kutujasin ette et
PRT I imagine:IMF:1SG that
Well I was imagining it

36 oopis teistmoodi on millegipäras.
totally different is for.some.reason
totally differently for some reason

37 see on see kus see spiraal on eksole.
It’s where the spiral is right

38 Artist: EI, spiraal on eraldi,
NO the spiral is separate
Similar to excerpt (2), the current case features the use of the claim to the intersubjective after sequence closure: the welder’s contribution about the numerous roofs in lines 26 and 28 does not attract any reaction (the others are smiling and gazing away) and our focus expression initiates a new topic, effectively cutting off welder’s further talk (which he initiates in line 30). In contrast to excerpt (2) the basis of this topic is to a great extent in the materials in front of the speakers.

Let us look closer at the artist’s turn in lines 31-34. It is initiated with a ‘but’ that shows a disjunction and contrast with prior talk, simultaneously marking a continuation at a more abstract level, a next issue to be dealt with at the meeting. At this point the artist competes with the welder who quits his project while the artist produces a claim of understanding ma saan aru ‘I understand’. This cannot be a response in this sequential position, nor is it in alignment with any immediately prior action. It can be heard as occasioned by the structures in front of them, especially because the artist does not change her body orientation facing the roofs. She merely half-turns her head (see Figure 1). The first component of our target expression ends in a projecting complementizer et ‘that’ (Keevallik 2008) with the pitch kept level. A ma saan aru et ‘but I understand that’ thus constitutes a projector
phrase, an initial component to show that a continuation is due. The continuation has to be an entire clause, as projected by the complementizer.

The artist then goes on to mention the sensitive issue of the ‘centrifugal plates’ (line 32) and arriving at it takes several perturbations in talk. Throughout the disfluencies it is nevertheless clear that a noun phrase is underway, since there is no restart of the entire turn. The mentioning of the centrifugal plates relates to the metal roofs that constitute material evidence of the lack of centrifugal plates. At exactly the first syllable of tsent- ‘cent-‘ the artist also launches a point mid-air, to the direction of the structures (see Figure 2). The ‘centrifugal plates’ thus refers to the stiff metal structures in front of them but at the same time highlights their incompatibility with the original ideas of the artist.

The artist then goes on to formulate a cognitive process of the workshop head, that sa nagunii ei arvestanud ‘you didn’t consider (the plates anyway)’. This is a negative observation which raises the issue of accountability. Like ‘interested’ in excerpts (1,2), the cognitive concept ‘consider’ here has a practical reading, such as “not transforming the artist’s drawings into the technical blueprint for the workshop”. The concrete built objects also constitute a proof of the mental processes by the recipient of this claim to the intersubjective. Similar to excerpts (1,2), a formulation of the mental process of a co-present person makes relevant a confirmation or disconfirmation. Indeed, in the following turn the head goes on to provide an explanation for “not considering the plates” which implicitly confirms the artist’s formulation and accepts accountability for the mistake.
The artist’s turn in lines 31-34 thus constitutes a socially sensitive action by which she successfully brings to the fore her concern that some props will not look as planned on the stage. What is at stake is the quality of the stage design, which the artist will be judged upon. She is also a customer of the workshop and therefore entitled to demand the end result that she has envisioned. Indeed, the production team goes on to discuss where exactly the ‘plates’ were to be placed and how they were to appear as a result of twirling. By using our target expression, the artist has thus successfully launched a trajectory in her own interest through first claiming and then demonstrating the understanding something about the mental processes of the head of the workshop. The first component of the claim to the intersubjective has enabled her to express social affiliation, ‘understandability’ of what had happened, while the second componentformulates a critique. Paradoxically, this actually accentuates the separation of subjectivities: by formulating herself and the addressee as separate subjects the speaker distances herself from the other’s cognition. She merely ‘understands’ something about the other’s cognition rather than sharing the cognitive process. Accordingly, the head of department accepts that his ‘imagination’ of the props was different in the following turn (lines 35-37), which functions as an account for the implicit accusation. The conversation continues to deal with further misunderstandings about the objects in the blueprint, and the meeting ends in a compromise.

Claim to the intersubjective can thus be used to draw attention to, and make public, the misalignment of the participants’ projects or standpoints, and
thereby potentially launch a reconciliation or a resolution. Another example is presented in excerpt (4). Helle has tried to persuade Vilma to use more computer programs that she herself is currently learning about and that would be useful for Vilma to maintain her skills in Hungarian (data not shown). In the very first lines of the transcript Vilma rejects this advice. She claims that she is done with the subject and does not attend ‘their meetings’ any more, thus taking a strong negative stance towards the necessity of practicing Hungarian as well as using more computer programs. In lines 5-6 Helle receives the negative response and resigns with a statement that Vilma does not have to do everything. At this point, it is clear that the two participants are of very different opinion regarding the opportunities of the computer: while Helle endorses them, Vilma has discarded the whole idea as not relevant for her. After a considerable pause Vilma goes on to formulate a positive attitude by her conversation partner, *sulle meeldib see kursus* ‘you like the course (on computer linguistics)’ (lines 8-9). This formulation of ‘liking’ is preceded by *ma saan aru et* ‘I understand that’. The claim to the intersubjective here too underlines the separation of subjectivities, offered as a recognition of the divergent opinions of the participants, and at the same time endorses further talk on the computer course.

(4)

1 Vilma: .jah (.).
   ei mul ei ole aega selle jaoks. (1.0) ma (.)
   Yeah (.). I don’t have time for that

2 .hh ma: ee olen selle: selle asjaga lõpetanud. (0.5)
   .hh I am done with that
I don’t even attend their meetings any more

Okay (.). Of course you don’t have to

do everything at once

But (.). I understand that you uh: well

But (.) I understand:1SG that you uh: well

you:ADE PRT like:2SG this course or

like the course or

It’s useful yeah I can use

these things elsewhere too
The claim to the intersubjective here effectively bridges the general misalignment between the conversation partners by offering a claim of understanding the other as well as a demonstration of the understanding. By recognizing Helle’s enthusiasm as different from one’s own, Vilma manages to prepare for an affiliative exchange on a matter related to the one they were disagreeing about. Lines 12-14 feature an assessment sequence, where the two speakers fully agree with each other that the course is useful. They have thus effectively abandoned the discussion whether V should use more computer programs and practice her Hungarian, an issue where they turned out to have different opinions.

As is common for linguistic constructions (Goldberg 1995), a claim to the intersubjective accomplishes more than its component parts (see also Thompson and Couper-Kuhlen, this volume). Especially since understanding is as a rule achieved and displayed implicitly in interaction (Heritage 1984, Schegloff 2007, Mondada 2011), the actual role of our expression is beyond the literal. As shown above, it deals with a major misalignment between the parties. In excerpt (2), the misalignment is occasioned by the client’s critique of the paper on sale, in excerpt (3) by the mistaken metal objects that evidence of a faulty reading of the artist’s blueprints, and in excerpt (4) by the divergent standpoint on whether Vilma should practice her Hungarian. In summary, we have been able to see that the complex expression is used at points of misalignment between participants in order to proceed with the institutional agenda, to formulate critique in a socially sensitive manner, and to pursue alignment.

“Understanding” the other, even though an essentially affiliative process, is
in the expression used as a resource to display the separation of subjectivites in regard to the topic at hand.

**Degree of routinization**

After having established the function of the lexically defined complex linguistic expression, we will now return to the issue of its exact composition and fixedness. In the above excerpts (2-4) we have seen three closely related structures where a formulation of a recipient’s cognitive state is preceded by a version of *ma saan aru* ‘I understand’. There are elements that are always present in the claim to the intersubjective, such as *m(in)a* ‘I’, *saan aru* ‘understand’, and *s(in)a/s(in)u* teie ‘you/your’. In addition, the first component of the complex pattern can contain words such as *nagu* ‘as’, *teie jutust* ‘from your talk’, et ‘that’, and others. The formulation of the other’s cognition is considerably more variable. There is no evidence of phonetic reduction or assimilation either, as is common with grammaticalizing and lexicalizing structures of language (e.g. *ma ei tea* > *maitea*, Est. ‘I don’t know’ (Keevallik 2008), *jag vet inte* > *venne*, Swe. ‘I don’t know’, *I don’t know* > *I dunno* (Scheibman 2000)). The structural and functional features of a claim to the intersubjective can be summarized as follows:

1) syntactically relatively fixed (but not necessarily in this order): 1st person pronoun + *saan aru* ‘understand’ + 2nd person pronoun
2) involves the cognitive verb *saan aru* ‘understand’ in 1st person (first component)
3) involves a cognitive formulation of the other (second component)
4) may involve a discursive back-linking element at its beginning
5) addresses participant misalignment
6) ultimately serves the speaker’s agenda which diverges from that of the interlocutor.

The pattern is more fixed in its first component and less so in the second, enabling minor local adjustments at the beginning and major freedom later on. It is thus considerably less fossilized than an idiom (Wood 2015:40-44).

In regard to the first component, many similar shorter phrases have become completely fixed and phonetically reduced in specific pragmatic usages in Estonian. Examples include *ma arvan* ‘I think’ and *ma ei tea* ‘I don’t know’ (Keevallik 2010). These phrases are considerably more frequent than our target pattern. In one conversational corpus (Keevallik 2003) *ma ei tea* ‘I don’t know’ occurred 352 times and *ma arvan* ‘I think/believe’ 102 times, while *ma tean* ‘I know’ only occurred 28 times, *ma usun* ‘I believe’ 19 times, and *ma saan aru* ‘I understand’ only 22 times (7 of which were claims to the intersubjective, also included in the current study, and the rest were not combined with a cognitive statement about the other). The very frequent and/or invariable combinations in this list can be syntactically and prosodically analyzed as phrases and not as complement taking predicates (for similar phenomena in English, see Thompson 2002), while our target expression is more transparent and variable (see also Laury et al. in this
collection on the variability of this kind of expressions). It is also not sufficiently mobile within a clause to be considered a phrase.

Similar to all the other above 1st person verb phrases, the ‘I understand’-component conveys epistemic meaning, that of speaker certainty. However, while most 1st person + cognitive verb structures, such as *mai tea* ‘I don’t know’, *ma arvan* ‘I think’, and *ma usun* ‘I believe’ downgrade the certainty, *ma saan aru* ‘I understand’ increases it. This stems from the factive verb ‘understand’ that establishes the content expressed in its object as truth. Thus, the first component of our expression is a marker of high level of certainty. This is true of all instances of the use of this structure, including those where there is no formulation of the recipient. It marks epistemic certainty even when preceding a statement about a first or third person, or some state of affairs. Those cases, however, do not have the interactional function described in the current study. Often, they involve a contrastive item (e.g. *ma saan aru et ma tahan imelikke asju aga ma tahaks erialast tööd* ‘I understand that I want crazy stuff but I’d like to have a job that fits my education’). They may be seen as more elaborate versions of the ‘yes but’-formats that have recently been described in languages such as Danish, Finnish, and German (Steensig and Asmuss 2005, Niemi 2014, Scszepek Reed 2015), and they are closely related to concessives, as described for English data (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson 2000). In contrast, what we are describing in the current chapter is a specific combination of the variable ‘I understand’-component with the ensuing formulation of the cognition of the co-present other. It is a semi-fixed structure.
The usefulness of the claim to the intersubjective as an interactional strategy seems to originate in the verb ‘understand’ that presupposes the factual truth of its syntactic object. This makes the formulations of the co-present other in the object position, including object complement clauses, hard to contest. Likewise, by formulating the other in a certain way, alternative matters that could potentially be understood are effectively excluded (such as, problems with the newspaper (ex.2), thinking that the twirling plates would have cost too much (ex.3), hating Hungarian (ex.4), etc.). Thus, the speaker can deploy the expression to impose her own agenda on the other’s inner world, which makes the pattern a useful strategic device for telemarketers and laymen alike. It is nevertheless only a family of linguistic structures that constitutes this semi-fixed expression, recognized intuitively by speakers as a specific interactional practice (as evidenced in, e.g., parenting guides) but not easily describable in precise grammatical categories.

Parallel cases and the abstract pattern

Interestingly, similar expressions can be observed in at least two other languages, Swedish and English. While not claiming that the lexical items involved have exactly the same meaning extensions in the respective languages, there seems to exist a similarly flexible form – function mapping in all of them. Speakers use claims to the intersubjective in order to display capability of seeing the recipient’s point of view, while at the same time underscoring the separation of subjectivities. The existing parallels in other languages inevitably evoke the question whether a claim to the
intersubjective emerges somehow “naturally” from the combination of the core elements.

In one instance from our Swedish collection, a host of a small informal gathering utters the following: *hh ni:- ja förstår att ni längeg efter kaffe? ’You- I understand that you are craving for coffee?*\(^2\) She does so after uttering an invitation for the guests to gather at a table, but nobody moves. As the guest are not aligning to her directive, she formulates their urgent inner wish that her current invitation is about to satisfy. She then continues to joke about being late with the coffee, accounting for a misalignment between the guests’ assumed wishes and her own actions as a host. The formulation of the others’ cognitive state of “craving” is thus deployed to promote the speaker’s agenda as a host and defines the insipient activity as coffee-drinking. By uttering a claim to the intersubjective the host succeeds in bringing her guests to the table, aligning with her invitation.

Another instance from our English collection comes from an institutional setting, a dispute resolution service of energy companies. The conciliator uses a claim to the intersubjective to formulate the client’s problem with a prospective high energy bill as her “concern”: *yeah I I understand your co-your concern about that*\(^3\). This formulation enables the conciliator to progress the institutional business of giving advice without explicitly affiliating with the client’s personal stance that the bill would be

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\(^2\) For a detailed analysis, see Weatherall and Keevalik (2016:175-176).
\(^3\) For a detailed analysis, see Weatherall and Keevalik (2016:169-171).
unreasonable. It manages the inherent misalignment between what the client wants (affiliation with her complaining stance) and what the energy companies and the conciliator can do. The target expression furthermore skilfully adjusts the locally relevant activity not as a complaint but as a concern, which is something the call-taker can legitimately handle by giving advice on how the caller could more accurately estimate their own usage.

In short, expressions denoting “my mental effort of understanding your mind” are deployed at least across three languages. This suggests that there is a generic interactional task of bridging misalignments that may be resolved with a similar language practice: a claim of “my understanding” in combination with the formulation of the other’s cognition, which is simultaneously a demonstration and a delimitation of the understanding.

The semantics and the grammar are of course variable. Among other things, the verb 'understand' can occasionally be replaced with another one that, perhaps metaphorically, expresses a similar concept. An example would be the English 'see', as in 'I see that you don’t like it'. This is yet another argument for considering the pattern only semi-fixed, variable and relatively abstract, which makes it different from regular constructions as well as idioms. A claim to the intersubjective is lexically and grammatically somewhat variable, less so at the beginning and more so towards its end.

Schematically, the speaker accomplishes the following in real time in a single turn:

Context: misalignment emerges between the participants in terms of stance or agenda
Component 1: claim of understanding (claiming access to the other’s mind)
Component 2: demonstration of (the limits of) understanding
Optional component 3: ‘but/although’ + moving on with own/institutional agenda

The first two components are essential parts of a claim to the intersubjective, uncovered in this study, and one can already express own agenda in component 2, which we saw above in excerpts (2-4). The optional third component is often deployed by institutional representatives, such as the above resolution service (English data). As such it bears some resemblance to the cardinal concessive structure that is similarly grammatically flexible and has been described for English (Couper-Kuhlen and Thompson 2000) and Finnish (Niemi 2015). In contrast to those structures with a broad applicability, our pattern explicitly targets the relationship between the speaker and the hearer, the two subjectivities at a current interactional moment. Similar to (some of) the concessive patterns, the first component in the claim to the intersubjective affiliates with the prior speaker, at least *pro forma*, while a later one progresses the agenda in the speaker’s terms. Anecdotally, it is also the optional third component that some native speakers of English and Swedish in our audience have claimed to be an essential part of the pattern. There thus seems to be conventional knowledge about the expression leading to some kind of a disclaimer already when component 1 and 2 have been uttered.
Conclusion

Our study describes a semantically specified language pattern that we call “a claim to the intersubjective”, that seems to originate in social interaction. The pattern is not among the very frequent and the most routinized expressions in the data we have at our disposal, but it is recurrent and recognizable. Neither does our pattern display any phonetic assimilation or prosodic reduction, as would have been the case with a fully lexicalized or grammaticalized pattern (see Laury et al, this volume). Nevertheless, a claim to the intersubjective is regularly used at moments of more or less serious misalignment between the participants and their agendas, where an earlier action has been problematic in that regard. Misalignment, which often also implies social sensitivity of the issue at hand, seems to be the main reason why an explicit claim about intersubjectivity is warranted. It helps to transform problematic moments into manageable formulations and thereby promote pro-sociality. As a structure that both claims and demonstrates access to the recipient’s cognition, the target expression addresses intersubjectivity. Paradoxically, a formulation of the other’s mind, her motives and feelings, is limited to the precise words used by the speaker on this occasion, such as ‘you are not interested in extending the subscription’, ‘you like the course’. This is exactly where the strategic potential of our expression can be found – in the formulation of the other.

The structure of a claim to the intersubjective, at the same time, turned out to be a challenge for formal description, as it is only semi-fixed. It consists of two main components: a claim to understand the recipient and a
demonstration of the nature and limits of this understanding. The more fixed features involve the counterparts of ‘I’, ‘understand’, and ‘you/your’ Similar to many other 1st person + cognitive verb structures, ‘I understand (that)’ displays a routinized usage with a specific epistemic meaning. While most of the hitherto studied ‘I’ + cognitive verb structures downgrade epistemic certainty, ‘I understand (that)’ increases it. The continuation of our target pattern, the demonstration component, is either an object or a complement clause, so the pattern may be mono- or biclausal, and the content of the demonstration reflects the issue at hand. This partial syntactic fixation is apparently sufficient for the pattern to be deployed strategically, and even be explicitly taught as a rhetorical device of getting out of an interpersonal impasse. Our study thus goes beyond the widely documented routinizations of pronoun + verb combinations and describes a considerably longer structure with a considerably lower degree of fixation. We addressed just one complex syntactic-semantic structure and showed that it has become a routinized practice for accomplishing what is assumedly a very general interactional task.

The claim to the intersubjective is thus a partial ”prefab”, a semi-fixed structure consisting of two components, where the first one is more routinized than the other but nevertheless not totally fixed. As it happens, we may be observing initial phases of fixation that can be strengthened with repetitive use. It is more likely, though, that there are numerous form-function patterns in any language that are used exactly like that – with some degree of fixation but nevertheless recognizable as distinct strategies by the participants. We are thus suggesting that language theories should also
consider lower degrees of fixation, as semi-fixedness could be considered on a par with grammatical categories and highly fixed syntactic structures.
The above patterned ways of getting things done are not describable in neat grammatical categories, nor in terms of lexical choice. Instead, they seem to be built on analogy, a continuous reuse of similar patterns in new situations.
The functional advantage of semi-fixed structures lies in their flexibility that makes them easily adaptable to a variety of local contingencies and immediate strategic needs in interaction.

Transcription conventions

underlining – emphasis
CAPS – strong emphasis
[ ] – overlaps
= – latching of units
(0.5) – pause length in tenths of a second
(.) – micropause
((comment)) – transcriber’s comment
: – lengthening of a sound
boldface – target structure
(h), heh, ha – laughter
°soft° – soft voice
<@ @> – smiley voice
<Q Q> – specific voice quality
. – 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
↑
– distinct pitch movement upwards
(space) -
– unfinished intonation unit
#
– moment of the figure
/
– alternative translations

Abbreviations

ADE – adessive
ELT – elative
GEN – genitive
IMF – imperfect
KOM – komitative
NEG – negation
PAR – partitive
PL – plural
PPT – past participle
PRT – particle
SG – singular
SUP – supinum
1,2,3 – person number

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