How much does your question cost me?

Self-repaired questions in Estonian Spoken interaction: between social economics and epistemic stance

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Introduction

Topic

Self-repaired questions in Estonian Spoken interaction: (1) completed question is (2) replaced by (3) another type of question (4) about the same topic (5) in the same turn (6) without a gap.

Research questions

Which types of self-repaired questions are used in Estonian?

What factors influence the choice between different question types?

Question formats in Estonian

Wh-questions: interrogative word (e.g. *mis* 'what')
Polar questions:
- interrogatives: sentence-initial particles (*kas, ega*) or inversion
- presumptive tag questions: sentence-final particles and tags (*vä, jah, eksole, eksju* etc)
- declarative questions (queclaratives)
Alternative questions: sentence-initial particle *kas*

Material and Method

Conversations from Corpus of Spoken Estonian of the University of Tartu

Interactional linguistics

Image: https://inquestmarketing.com/Renderers/ShowMedia.ashx?id=MediaArchive:a9aefd51-76ff-4362-af8f-32eec9fc588e

Social economics (Levinson 2012)

Speakers ask questions at a certain social cost. Answering a question requires effort from the answerer.
(I) „Questioners will never ask a Wh-question where a polar question would do."
(II) „speakers should ask for the smallest informational increment they think they need."
An informational scale of questions: Wh-Qs > polar (interrogative) Qs > presumptive tag Qs
(III) „If speakers can ask a question without being on record as doing so, they will do so.", i.e. they exploit declarative questions. (Levinson 2012: 23)

If questioners replace one question type with another then they replace Wh-questions with polar questions and not vice versa (Levinson 2012: 30).

Epistemic stance (Heritage 2012; Hayano 2013)

Questioners try to put themselves in a suitable position in terms of epistemics. Epistemic stance is expressed through different grammatical realizations of the same propositional content (Figure 1).
(1) A Wh-question (example 1) suggests that the speaker has no knowledge about the topic/person in question. Wh-questions have an unlimited number of answers.
(2) A polar interrogative question (example 2) suggests that the questioner has minimal knowledge as she has picked Steve out of a number of possible people. There are two possible answers, while the probability of a yes/no answer is relatively equal.
(3) A tag question (example 3) suggests that the questioner strongly believes that the person mentioned is correct and seeks confirmation.
(4) A declarative question (example 4) expresses a knowing epistemic stance and expects confirmation.

The Wh-question indexes the deepest epistemic gradient between a questioner and a recipient. The other formats express increasingly shallow K− to K+ epistemic gradients.

(1) Kellega sa rääkisid?
'Who were you talking to?'

(2) Kas sa rääkisid Stevega?
'Were you talking to Steve?'

(3) Sa rääkisid Stevega, eks?
'You were talking to Steve, weren't you?'
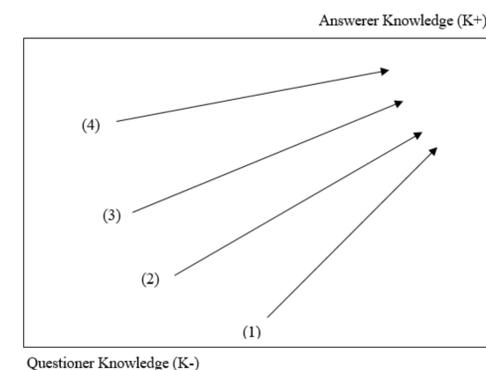
(4) Sa rääkisid Stevega?
'You talked to Steve?'

Figure 1: Epistemic stance represented in terms of epistemic gradient (based on Heritage 2012: 7; Hayano 2013: 399)

Results

I. Repairs that reduce the cost of the question

Wh-question > polar question

(a) *Aga **kuhu**   see uus hoone tegelikult tuleb*
But where-ILL this new building really   comes
*sinna metsamaja   lähedale **ve?***
there forest house-GEN near   Q-particle?
'But where will the new building be built, near the house of forest?'

(Interrogative) polar question > (presumptive tag) polar question

(b) ***Kas**   see laev sõidab siis nagu **eksole** öösel?*
Q-particle this ship sails   then like Q-tag night-ADE?
'Does this ship then sail at night, right?'

The questioner has received information that the ship is sailing in the evening, and she can spend a whole day in Stockholm. Hence, the ship sails at night and arrives in the morning. At first, the questioner formulates a polar interrogative question by *kas*, which expresses a steep epistemic gradient. She changes it into an *eksole* tag question, which refers to a flat epistemic gradient.

II. Repairs that increase the cost of the question

Polar question > Wh-question

(c) *Õpid   sa või **mis** sa teed?*
Study-SG2 you or what you do-SG2?
'Are you studying or what are you doing?'

(Declarative) question > (presumptive tag) polar question

(d) *Siin on piimakombinaat olemas vist*
Here is dairy plant   be-SUP perhaps
*või ei ole   **vä**?*
or NEG be-NEG Q-particle?
'There is a dairy plant here perhaps or isn't there?'

Discussion

- A repair requires additional work from the speaker. Why does the speaker initiate a repair and replace one question format with another? Since a repair changes the epistemic gradient, a repair indicates that the problem was with the chosen epistemic gradient of the first question. A repair demonstrates that the questioner at first asked more (Extracts a, b) or less information (Extracts c, d) than she needed.
- Levinson (2012: 30) claims that in his material the only pattern of self-repair that appears is that in which a Wh-question (= expensive question) is replaced by a polar question (= cheaper question). This replacement reduces the answerer's labour and it is in accordance with the model of the social economics of questions. This pattern also prevails in Estonian (Extracts a, b).
- We have demonstrated that repair which increases the cost of the question and demands more labour from the answerer also appears (Extracts c, d). This pattern is in counter to the social economics model. In some ways it damages the face of the addressee by acting in opposition to his/her wants and desires (Brown, Levinson 1987).
- Why does the questioner increase the labour of the answerer? The speakers cannot ask less information than they need. If the speaker increases the cost of the question, then she needs more information than the first question had given to her.
- The data demonstrate that the epistemics takes precedence over the social cost.

Acknowledgements

Glossing abbreviations

Q question particle/tag
2 second person
SG singular
ADE adessive
GEN genitive
ILL illative
NEG negation
SUP supine

References

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