Optionality: Social Cognitive Factors in Changing Linguistic Complexity in the Dialects of Estonia

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Abstract

Estonian dialects provide several examples of increasing and decreasing linguistic complexity. The goal of the article is to clarify the notion of optionality. Optionality is clarified by discussing its relationships with social cognition in the Estonian dialect phenomena. Examples are derived from two areas of rapid grammatical change, negation and evidentiality in Standard versus South Estonian. In languages, it is possible to derive negative and evidential interpretations without grammatical encoding by using cognitive mechanisms to derive the intended interpretation. However, languages tend to encode negation and have negators. There are dialects in Estonia that optionally omit the negative auxiliary for language-internal reasons. Optionality may but need not result in an impoverished system. Some categories, such as evidentiality in Standard Estonian, are the result of enriched grammar. Evidentiality can be optionally encoded because of its interaction with social cognition. In the category of evidentiality the optionality of a grammatical form enhances the spread of a category instead of obstructing it.

Keywords: variation, social cognitive linguistics, Uralic languages, negation, evidentiality

1. *Introduction*

The defining property of a language is that it has grammar, but few descriptive grammars can escape a statement "but this marker can be omitted". Why are some parts of grammar optional? How optional are they? These naïve questions of a language learner rarely get a straightforward answer from the language instructor. Frequently, we find descriptions of language contact or historical overviews of languages, where some grammar markers become optional before disappearing. Similarly, new grammar elements enter a language, starting off as optional and then becoming established as part of obligatory grammar.

What are the mechanisms of becoming optional, and how are systems with optionality maintained? This article studies some of the mechanisms behind maintaining the pervasive optionality that we find in language, namely, those that pertain to social cognition. The material comprises the variation in the complexity of negation and evidentiality in the dialects of Estonia. Estonian dialects and registers display considerable variation that makes the area a suitable test-bed for investigations on optionality. The article explores two opposite dynamic processes involving optionality in Estonian: decreasing and increasing complexity. Complexity can be understood in the case of Estonian complexity changes as being analyzable along one dimension, as L2 difficulty (this is used by many authors, e.g. Trudgill 2012), or along two dimensions. Complexity can be estimated along two dimensions, one being system complexity (Dahl 2011, 154), pertaining to the content of the competence of the language learner, and the other being structural complexity, concerning one and the same expression at different levels, such as the number of nodes in a structural representation (Dahl 2011, 155). The decrease in complexity is discussed on the example of negation patterns of Estonian dialects, which have appeared under the influence of a less complex standard language. The negation pattern has become easier to learn in L2, systemically as well as structurally less complex. The example illustrates a process of an obligatory item becoming optional due to a shift in finiteness marking. The second example illustrates the opposite, namely, the increase in complexity in Standard Estonian under the influence of an optional category of evidentiality. The complexity has increased for an L2 learner, systemic complexity is increased, and structural complexity is increased with evidentiality and its marker. The article shows that optionality does not obstruct the import of this category, namely the partitive evidential, in the standard language.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 introduces the topic of dialects and variants in Estonian, more specifically, the situation with negation and evidentiality. Various categories are present across language variants, but not all of them are optional in the same way. The article discloses the nature of optionality in Section 3. Section 4 provides information on some cognitive factors that allow languages to maintain systems with high optionality. I propose that the mechanisms that help us deal with optionality are at least partly identical with those that help us deal with ambiguity. Section 5 concentrates on the optionality of negators and Section 6 on the optionality of evidentials. Section 7 offers some discussion and Section 8 the conclusions.

2. *Complexity in the dialects of Estonian*

2.1 *Estonian dialects*

Estonian is a language that is spoken as a native language by less than a million people in Estonia. Estonian has three main dialect areas (separated by

the thick black lines on Figure 1) that are divided into smaller dialect areas (separated by fine black lines on Figure 1), which can be subdivided in yet smaller areas (grey lines on Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Estonian dialect areas (image by courtesy of Liina Lindström, 2012)

The structural features of the dialects differ from each other considerably and dialects from the ends of two dialect areas can be mutually unintelligible. The Southern dialects of Võro and Seto are frequently considered a different language from the standard language. Why are there so many and even mutually unintelligible dialects packed on such a small territory as Estonia is? A situation of many variants occurs if there is either much contact with a different language, or, on the contrary, if there is too little contact with a similar communication system. Both conditions are present in different dialects of Estonia. Some dialects have been in considerable contact with other languages, others have been isolated. Trade, occupation, and the custom of marrying into another tribe or language group increase the chances of change. As far as isolation is concerned, consider the situation of home sign languages. Each of them is a language on its own. In many cultures, deafness is regarded a shame and the deaf live in isolation in their homes, in a situation where they communicate with a limited number of people. Isolation can lead to a high degree of variance due to geographical physical isolation, as on the islands of New Guinea, in the valleys of the mountains of the Alps, or simply vast geographical distances as in Siberia. In case of the multitude of language variants in Estonia, the reasons for diversification are more socio-historical. The country is flat, and the islands are separated by just tens of kilometres. Presence in the same territory for millennia, in a situation of communicational isolation for some and that of intensive trade for other dialects, and late emergence of

standardized language have contributed to the considerable linguistic diversity found in the Estonian dialects. The northern part has been under the Swedish and the southern part under the Polish rule, and the Northern coastal part of Estonia has had considerable trade contacts with the territory of Finland. Centuries of serfdom have added much to the isolation of groups of people, especially in the inland parts of the territory.

2.2 *Negation in Estonian dialects*

Four large dialect areas are identified in Pajusalu *et al.* (2002) with regard to negation. This article uses the results of the research by Klaus (2009)[1]. The northern and southern dialects are distinguished by the position of the negative auxiliary. In the North, the negative auxiliary occurs pre-verbally, as in (1a), in the South, it can appear post-verbally, as in (1b). In some Estonian dialects, as in the Southern dialects, the negator can distinguish the present from the past and mark the person, as in (1b). In South Estonian dialects, the items that are employed for negation are especially variegated across the Southern sub-dialects (Pajusalu *et al.* 2002, 114–115).

(1)
a. *ei*   *ole*

    NEG   be.CNG[2]

    'is not'
b. *olõ-s*

    be.CNG   NEG.PST3S

    'he she it was not'

The second borderline runs between the dialects of Kodavere in the Eastern part of Estonia and the North-Eastern coastline, on the one hand, and the rest of Estonian dialects, on the other. The dialects of Kodavere and the North-East have an inflecting negative auxiliary. The third group comprises the insular and Western dialects, which parade a wide variety of negation items. These constructions are referred to triple and quadruple negation.

2.3 *Evidentiality in Estonian dialects*

The partitive evidential belongs to a category that most European languages lack – evidentiality. The partitive evidential is one of the multitude of artificially introduced or regulated morphemes, one of the case forms of verb forms that were introduced to Standard Estonian in the course of shaping the literary language standards for Estonian at the beginning of the 20th century.

The vast majority of the artificial grammar markers failed. As opposed to those markers, the partitive evidential boomed[3]. It was taken from the South Estonian language, and it spread quickly in the written standard language[4]. It is widely used despite its optionality. In fact, it is always optional, since it is always up to the speaker and her pro-social attitude whether she chooses to use it to warn the hearer to be vigilant about the conveyed information, as in example (2).

(2)

Naabrimees	*ole-vat*	*vene*	*spioon.*
neighbour[NOM]	be-PART_EVID	Russia.GEN	spy[NOM]

'Allegedly, our neighbour is a Russian spy.'

3. *The problem of optionality*

Optionality is the phenomenon of the expression of linguistic categories that manifests itself in the optional nature of expression, such as grammatical encoding, within a language, its varieties, or across languages despite the presence of a certain interpretation. Consider the following Hungarian examples in (3), where the object accusative case is optional on objects that have 1st and 2nd person possessive suffixes[5].

(3) Hungarian

a.
Lát-om	*a*	*kocsi-m-at/*	*kocsi-m.*
see-1S.	DEF	car-PX1S-ACC	car-PX1S.ACC/-PX1S[ACC]/-PX1S

'I see my car.'

b.
Lát-om	*a*	*kocsi-d-at/*	*kocsi-d.*
see-1S.DEF	DEF	car-PX2S-ACC	car-PX2S.ACC/-PX2S[ACC]/-PX2S

'I see your car.'

The object *kocsi-d-at* is glossed as 'car-PX2S-ACC', where two grammar markers are separated by hyphens, because the morphemes of the 2nd person possessive and the accusative can be separated clearly in the overwhelmingly agglutinative Hungarian. However, the item *kocsi-d* does not have a morphological accusative on the object noun *kocsi* 'car'. There are three ways of glossing the example – glossing is not a part of the example or the language data, but part of the linguistic analysis – and the three ways can be found in the example above.

1. PX1S.ACC - this way of glossing reflects the mainstream generative analysis. The bound morpheme *-m* contains two functions, that of the possessive suffix of the 1st person singular, and the accusative.

2. PX1S[ACC] - this way of glossing reflects a functional-typological type of analysis. The bound morpheme -*m* contains two functions, that of the possessive suffix of the 1ˢᵗ person singular, and the unexpressed accusative. Several Uralic languages are described in this tradition, where objects show no grammatical marking and their form is identical with the nominative, but the form is analysed as being accusative.

3. PX1S - this way of glossing reflects perhaps most other types of analysis. The bound morpheme -*m* has only one function – that of the possessive suffix of the 1ˢᵗ person singular – and the accusative is missing. That this is an object is derived from the grammar rule system of the language and not from the morpheme itself.

The paradigm of accusatives expressed by possessive suffixes in Hungarian is defective, since the third person singular already does not allow the omission of the accusative marker, as illustrated in (4). Current theoretical frameworks have not targeted data such as in examples (3) and (4) sufficiently.

(4)

Hungarian

Lát-om   *a*   *kocsi-já-t*/   *kocsi-ja.

see-1S.DEF   DEF   car-PX3S-ACC   car-PX3S

'I see his/her car.'

4. *Social cognition*

Optionality in linguistic complexity occurs due to many factors, of which this article tentatively discusses some of the possible social cognitive factors[6]. Social cognitive factors relate to the processing of socially relevant information, such as possession, which is part of defining the value of a person in a society. There are no intrinsic formal phonetic differences between the possessive markers of the first, second, and third person that would warrant their different use in the object position. Perhaps it is rather the case that in a conversation, talking about entities that belong to me and you is different from talking about objects that belong to third persons. Something about the nature of our conversations makes the items that belong to me and to you to be understood as objects of joint attention or action than the items belonging to others, which are perhaps rather the subjects of our desires and wishes. We could test this hypothetical explanation to find out if this is true, but the main point is that grammar is there to get the message over in the best possible way. The mechanisms that help us deal with optionality are at least partly identical with those that guide us through ambiguity and help us interpret a finite set of forms arranged by a finite set of grammar structures. For instance, a generic bias helps us to get

culturally relevant knowledge for life. Our epistemic vigilance warns us against deception and inadequate information.

5. *Optionality in negation*

Klaus (2009) has observed that there are less sentences without a negative auxiliary in sub-dialects like Kihelkonna in the Insular dialect and southern sub-dialects like Karksi, Otepää, Hargla and Põhja-Setu. In those sub-dialects, where finiteness is expressed on the negative auxiliary (tense or person or both), the negative auxiliary is less optional. In the dialects where the expression of finiteness on the negative auxiliary is more optional, clauses lacking the negative auxiliary altogether are considerably more common than in the dialects with inflected auxiliaries.

(5)

ma	*tea*	*tea*
I[NOM]	know.CNG	anything

'I don't know anything.'

In standard Estonian, the negative auxiliary has lost its inflections but the lexical verbs stands in the connegative form. The presence of the connegative form in negation can be taken as an argument for considering the particle-like *ei* a negative auxiliary, but here the inflectionless connegative form appears as negation without an explicit negator, a rare phenomenon in typology. If the inflectionless and standard language-like dialects lose finiteness marking, the element that undergoes such change may become optional. The lexical verb started on its way to be reanalysed as the finite element of the clause. Some of the dialects have exceeded even the change towards optionality in the standard language. This change is dependent on system-internal properties of languages and cognition – reasoning in social contexts. Languages tend to have at least one finite element per clause. If the element that has been the carrier of finiteness loses its inflections, another element starts taking up the function of the finite element and the uninflected element becomes optional.

6. *Optionality in evidentiality*

Estonian has a two-term evidential A3 system (Aikhenvald 2004), where indirect (reported) evidence is morphologically marked and other types of evidence are unmarked. Languages may have an opposition of two possibilities in marking but still differ in terms of how obligatorily their grammars mark evidentiality. The Estonian traditional grammar calls the indirect-partitive evidential "quotative",

but this form is never used in, e.g., quotations as in Estonian scientific texts. Grammatical evidentiality marking in Estonian is optional, as demonstrated in (6), which tests indirectness by means of the adverb *kuuldavasti* "allegedly".

(6)

Kuuldavasti	on/	ole-vat	naabrimees	spioon
allegedly	be.3s	be-PART_EVID	neighbour[NOM]	spy[NOM]

"Allegedly, our neighbour is a spy."

The preliminary comparative data show that in Turkish, where has also two options, but the evidential has an inferential as well as reported function, marking indirect evidence is less optional, including child language (Aksu-Koç *et al.* 2009). The following Estonian excerpt is from CHILDES. A caregiver tries to convince a child not to wander off by presenting a discouraging narration. Narrative parts are set in small caps, since they could be marked with the partitive evidential. Underline shows the predicates that would stand in the evidential in Turkish, for comparison.

(7)

Estonian, CHILDES (<http://childes.psy.cmu.edu/>), andri1.cha
CHI=11;7.17|male[7]

*OBS1: sealt void end leida endale väga uvitavaid [: huvitavaid] tuttavaid ükski vanem ei ole õnnelik kui ta laps läheb kuskile kolama iseasi kui lapsel pole olla kuskil.

'You can find very 'interesting' acquaintances there, no parent is happy if their child goes wandering off somewhere, unless there is nothing else to do.'

*CHI1: ja ma ei akka [: hakka] kolama ma ei tea miks ma peaksin?

'I am not going to wander off anywhere, why should I.'

*OBS2: no ma väga loodan ka ÜKSKORD ÜKS SELLINE JUHUS OLI ET KA MINGID TÜDRUKUD POLNUD MIDAGI TEHA LÄKSID VIRU KESKUSESSE MÕTLESID ET TEEVAD AEGA PARAJAKS SIIS TULI ÜHE TUTTAV JA MINGI TEINE TUTTAV JA KUTSUTI ET KUSKIL KELLELGI OLID VANEMAD KODUST ÄRA JA SIIS SATTUS SINNA IGASUGUNE SELTSKOND KOKKU OSAD OLID NIUKSED [: NIISUGUSED] NOOREMAD OSAD OLID JUBA SIUKSED [: SELLISED] KARMO VANUSED MINGI KAHEKÜMNE RINGIS OLI MINGI SUUR SELTSKOND KUSKIL KORTERIS JA SIIS TULI KELLELGI PÄHE ET VÕIKS KASSI TORUSIILIGA ÜLE KALLATA.

'Well I hope so. ONCE THERE WAS A CASE WHERE SOME GIRLS HAD NOTHING TO DO AND THEY WENT TO THE SHOPPING CENTER VIRU. THEY THOUGHT THEY WOULD FILL THE TIME UNTIL SOMETHING ELSE THAT THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO DO. THEN AN ACQUAINTANCE OF ONE OF THEM TURNED UP AND THEN SOME OTHER ACQUAINTANCE AND THEN THERE WAS AN INVITATION THAT SOMEONE'S PARENTS WERE NOT AT HOME AND ALL KINDS OF PEOPLE ENDED UP THERE, SOME OF THEM WERE LIKE YOUNGER AND OTHERS WERE LIKE KARMO, SO AROUND TWENTY, A HUGE CROWD IN A FLAT SOMEWHERE AND THEN SOMEONE GOT AN IDEA THAT YOU COULD POUR PIPE CLEANING CHEMICALS ON THE CAT.'

*CHI2: no mis siis kassiga juhtus?
<u>'so what happened to the cat?'</u>
*OBS3: no mis sa arvad tead mis torusiil teeb vä?
'so what do you think pipe cleaning chemical does?'
*CHI3: söövitab.
'It burns.'
*OBS4: söövitab just nimelt KASSIL VAESEKESEL SÖÖVIS KÕIK KARV JA NAHK JA KÕIK ÄRA millistes piinades võis see loom olla.
'It burns, exactly, SO THE FUR AND SKIN OF THE CAT GOT ALL BURNED imagine how painful for the poor animal.'
*CHI4: ta suri ära vä?
<u>'Did it die?'</u>
*OBS5: muidugi.
'Of course.'
*OBS6: lihtsalt kambas tehakse igasuguseid sa ei tea iial kui sa ei tunne inimesi mis seltskonda sa sattud ja seal võib igasuguseid asju juhtuda ja siis on pärast märk küljes.
'Just in a gang all kinds of things are done and you never know what will happen if you don't know the people and all kinds of things happen and then you get a label.'
*CHI5: <u>mis need tüdrukud mängisid kaasa?</u>
<u>'What, the girls went along with all this?'</u>
*OBS7: ma ei mis mõttes <u>mängisid kaasa</u>?
'I don't … what do you mean, <u>went along</u>?'
*CHI6: no ses suhtes <u>naersid vä</u>?
<u>'Like, did they laugh?'</u>
*OBS8: NO JA SEAL OLI KAKS TÜDRUKUT VIST KELLEL KES OLID SELLEGA KÕIGE ROHKEM SEOTUD JAH NEIL OLI LÕBUS.
'SO YES THERE WERE MAYBE TWO GIRLS WHO HAD… WHO WERE MOST INVOLVED WITH THIS AND YES THEY HAD FUN.'
*OBS9: tead lapsi on igasuguseid tõesti igasugustest erinevatest kodudest .
'You know children really come from very different homes.'

It is thus clear that evidentials are different in terms of their optionality. All narratives in the past have past marking in Turkish (e.g., OBS 2, 4 and 8). Even questions in the past have evidential marking in Turkish (CHI 4,5,6, OBS 7). Since the caregiver is reporting, an evidential could be used in Estonian; however, it is not used.

7. *Discussion*

The topic of optionality pervades most writings on grammar structures of languages and their variants, especially, that of dialects and registers such as child-directed speech. However, as a separate topic, optionality has not been addressed much. It is a phenomenon that is understood differently

across linguistic frameworks. In mainstream linguistic theories, optionality is reduced to a minimum. In frameworks with movement, movement can be optional and the phenomenon is regulated by economy. In descriptive works, optionality is ubiquitous. Optionality is confusing for typologists, because a language that is classified into type A according to its marking may have the marking optionally; otherwise, it would be classified into a type B. Functional approaches to language have a problem with optional marking, since the fixed nature of a form-function pair defines a functional category, and the obligatory nature of a marker is crucial for this.

The optionality of the negative auxiliary is induced by the shift in finiteness marking, and one could explain the optionality of evidentials along similar lines. Evidentials are optional in some languages but not in others, as negative auxiliaries are optional in some Estonian dialects and not in others. Since evidentials occur in large areal groups, it is plausible that not linguistic but cultural factors determine their optionality as well. Some factors that influence the optionality of an evidential are largely motivated by the origin of the evidential. Evidentials that have evolved from verbs of perception frequently appear in systems with several evidentials and their use is obligatory. If an evidential has evolved from a tense marker, a sentence must encode evidentiality, since tense is an obligatory category. On the contrary, evidentials that are optional employ evidentials as evidential adverbs, such as *allegedly*, *reportedly* in English. If there is another adverb in the sentence that conveys *allegedly* or *reportedly*, the evidential marker is optional. Evidential adverbs are always optional in encoding evidentiality, and they do not trigger evidential marking. On the contrary, temporal adverbs, which are also optional, can trigger at least some tense marking (cf., *#yesterday I go to school*).

The evidential is used in social situations where the decreased evidence for the content of an utterance is a fact that needs to be communicated; still, usually, the speaker does not mark the sentence containing her utterance with dubious content with the partitive evidential. The hearer is left to derive or not to derive the interpretation of lack of evidence on the basis of other devices at his disposal, such as epistemic vigilance. The evidential is avoided as a caregiver's device to raise suggestibility in telling the child not to wander off, avoiding letting the child become vigilant about what is being said (Mascaro and Sperber 2009).

Optionality and low frequency do not necessarily obstruct the successful spread of an evidential. On the contrary, the Estonian partitive evidential has established itself comfortably in the Estonian standard language during the past century, and optionality is part of its function.

8. *Conclusion*

The article explores the possibility of employing social cognitive explanations for optionality. Estonian dialects and registers display a rich variety of

phenomena and developments for a study of structural variation in optionality. Negation and evidentiality have provided two opposite examples. The examples of optionality in negation could be explained by linguistic factors, but the examples of evidentiality required a partly social cognitive approach. Since optionality has not been studied extensively as a separate topic, therefore, this article also opens the agenda of mapping the views of various theoretical frameworks on optionality. A more systematic look has allowed me to ask new questions and offer some answers. For instance, the optional nature of a grammatical marker does not necessarily prevent its spread to another language, since the optional South Estonian partitive evidential has entered Standard Estonian simply together with its optionality.

Notes

[1] Klaus (2009) discusses negation in 1960s and 1970s Estonian dialect speech on the basis of the Corpus of Estonian Dialects (Insular dialect: Kihelkonna subdialect, Western: Mihkli, Mid: Juuru, Eastern: Kodavere, Coastal: Jõelähtme, Alutaguse: Jõhvi subdialect, Mulgi: Karksi, Tartu: Otepää, Võru: Hargla, and Setu: Northern Setu). Please consult the online sources for a detailed location of the place names, for instance Google maps at <http://www.nationsonline. org/oneworld/map/google_map_estonia.htm> (10/2012).

[2] ACC accusative, CHI child, CNG connegative, DEF definiteness, GEN genitive, NEG negation, NOM nominative, OBS observer, PART_EVID partitive evidential, PST past tense, PX possessive suffix, S singular.

[3] I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who pointed out a reference that the use of the *vat*-marked form in literary Estonian grew gradually (Kask 1984, 244-255). The reviewer notes that Sepper (2005) does not find that the morpheme is frequently used. In a certain sense I believe there should be a good standard of comparison: which expectations are there to consider a form as widely used? Consider diplomacy or a prison camp. In these communicational areas, it is highly important to cooperate (to get Florence University an Estonian lector, or to escape from a high-security camp). The evidential is used often, in order to communicate information that comes from others, without putting anyone in danger by naming the source. A mother, communicating to her baby, would not need an evidential. Next there is a competition between different forms, for instance, *olla* versus *ole-vat*. If I am informed about something concerning myself and the speaker needs to signal that the information comes from someone else, covering the source of the information, then the chances are that the attitude of the original source was more positive if the speaker mediates it to me with *olevat* and more negative if she uses a form with *olla*. This bifurcation could potentially lead to the rise of the categories reputative and antireputative.

[4] The South Estonian evidential has evolved from a case form of a participle and it shares semantic properties with the case semantics (see the details in Metslang and Pajusalu 2002, Tamm 2009, 2011, 2012).

[5] An anonymous reviewer discovers more optionality about the Hungarian phenomenon, namely, that the two forms in the Hungarian examples in (3a,b) are not interchangeable in all contexts. The forms without the accusative marker are very often stylistically "marked" and sometimes ungrammatical or at least odd (e.g. *?Szeretem a lányom, lányom* 'I love my daughter', *??Írom a könyvem könyvem* 'I am writing my book'). It would be interesting to have a closer look at the conditions under which the choice between the two forms is optional.

[6] Tamm (in press) discusses Uralic possession, evidentiality, and genericity in terms of Theory of Mind, Epistemic Vigilance, and Natural Pedagogy.

[7] Key: small caps: NARRATIVE (expected evidential marking in Estonian), underline: <u>evidential in Turkish</u> (data provided by Leylâ Caglar p.c., normal) letter type: other type.

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