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## A Few Notes on Conversational Patterns in Estonia

### Abstract

Informants of a semi-expert interview on communicative strategies (SICS) have shown that Estonians use a communicative style that could be termed “fact style”. This is shown in the addressing behavior, where the informal address pronoun is used only after a lengthy period of time (except with relatives). It can also be observed that Estonians do not practice small talk with strangers very much and rather prefer silence, even in business situations. There is no general agreement on accepted and unaccepted small talk topics. In argumentative contexts, Estonians typically firstly say their opinion and secondly give reasons related to the issue. If someone offers help or makes an invitation, this is sincere and not just a politeness formula. To turn down an invitation or offer Estonians predominantly use a vague excuse or a concrete brief and true excuse. To show disagreement the pattern “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...” is very frequent. The quite direct phrase “I have to go now, I have something else to do” is the salient phrase to initiate the end of a conversation. In sum, Estonians pursue the maxim “Don’t talk too much, but if you have or want to talk, say it truthfully and directly.” In Grice’s terminology: the maxims of manner and of quality are highly respected; in Brown and Levinson’s terminology: Estonians would rather favor bald on-record strategies over other strategies.

### Sommaire

Grâce à des informants d’un “semi-expert interview on communicative strategies” (SICS) on peut montrer que les Estoniens se servent d’un style de communication que l’on pourrait dénoter “style de faits” ou “style factitif”. Ceci s’exprime dans la manière de s’adresser à autrui en utilisant le pronom formel “vous”; le pronom d’adresse informel n’est utilisé qu’après une assez longue période (exception faite des conversations avec des parents). On peut également observer que les Estoniens ne font pas beaucoup de “small talk” avec les personnes étrangères, même lors des situations professionnelles. Il n’y a pas de conventions en ce qui concerne l’acceptabilité ou l’inacceptabilité des sujets de “small talk”. Dans les contextes argumentatifs, les Estoniens ont tendance à d’abord présenter leur opinion et ensuite les arguments relatifs au sujet. Si quelqu’un vous offre de l’aide ou vous invite chez soi, ceci est sincère et non pas seulement une formule de politesse. Si un Estonien ne veut pas accepter une invitation ou une offre, il donne, généralement, soit une vague excuse, soit une concrète excuse brève et vraie. Pour exprimer que l’on est d’un autre avis, le type “Oui, je comprends ce que tu me dis mais je pense que...” est très prominent. La phrase “Il faut que je parte maintenant, j’ai autre chose à faire”, phrase assez directe, est la phrase saillante quand on veut initier la fin de la conversation. En somme, les Estoniens respectent la maxime “Ne parle pas trop, mais si tu dois ou si tu veux parler, dis-le de manière sincère et directe.” Utilisant les termes de Grice: ce sont les maximes de manière et celle de la qualité que les Estoniens respectent le plus; avec Brown/Levinson: les Estoniens préfèrent des stratégies “bald on-record” à d’autres stratégies.

### Zusammenfassung

Mittels “semi-expert interviews on communicative strategies” (SICS) kann dargestellt werden, dass Esten sich eines Gesprächsstils bedienen, der als “Tatsachen-Stil” bezeichnet werden könnte. Dies zeigt sich im Anredeverhalten, da man zum informellen Anredepronomen außerhalb des Familien- und Verwandtenkreises erst nach langer Zeit übergeht. Es lässt sich auch beobachten, dass Esten mit Fremden kaum Small Talk betreiben, sondern Stille bevorzugen, selbst in Geschäftssituationen. Es gibt keine allgemein gültigen erlaubten oder unerlaubten Small-Talk-Themen. In argumentativen Kontexten sagen Esten typischerweise zunächst ihre Meinung und liefern dann themenbezogene Gründe. Wenn jemand Hilfe anbietet oder eine Einladung ausspricht, ist dies ernst gemeint und nicht nur eine Höflichkeitsfloskel. Um eine Einladung oder ein Angebot abzulehnen, verwenden Esten hauptsächlich eine vage Entschuldigung oder eine konkrete knappe und wahrheitsgemäße Entschuldigung. Um eine andere Meinung auszudrücken, ist die Formel “Ja, ich verstehe, was du meinst, aber ich denke, dass...” sehr prominent. Die recht direkte Formel “Ich muss jetzt gehen, ich habe etwas anderes zu tun” ist die bevorzugte Phrase, um das Ende eines Gesprächs einzuleiten. Das Gesprächsverhalten von Esten lässt sich fassen in der Maxime “Rede nicht zu viel, aber wenn Du reden musst oder willst, sage etwas wahrheitsgemäß und direkt.” Mit Grice gesprochen: es werden die Maxime der Art und Weise und die Maxime der Qualität geschätzt. In der Terminologie von Brown/Levinson: Esten ziehen “bald on-record”-Strategien anderen Strategien vor.

## 1. Background

Based on existing literature of various kind, a first attempt of an encompassing contrast of communicative strategies, or speech-act realization patterns, was set up by Grzega (2006: 193-254). It also included some remarks on the communicative behavior in Estonia. Since 2008 is the European Year of Intercultural Dialog, since broad cross-cultural contrasts on a common data-eliciting basis are absent<sup>1</sup>, and since empirical studies on Estonian speech acts are still not that frequent<sup>2</sup>, this is the perfect opportunity to continue to fill this gap. This study forms part of a larger project that aims at writing a European “language guide”, with respect to a number of communicative situations that would allow readers to see contrasts and similarities between Europeans. The communicative tasks or speech acts that we will shed light on are addressing, answering the phone, small talk, giving arguments, making and turning down an offer, and ending a conversation.

As an alternative to the two methods that have become common in collecting empirical data for speech-act analysis, the *discourse completion task* (DCT) and the *metapragmatic judgement task* (MPJT) (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989 and Hinkel 1997), a new method is used. In a DCT informants, after being presented with the description of a dialogic situation, have to complete a dialog. However, this way the researcher only gets the most typical answer that comes to an individual’s mind. Therefore, the metapragmatic judgment test (MPJT) has been invented as a supplementary method. In a MPJT all answers gathered in a preceding DCT are listed, and informants are asked to rank the adequateness of the answers. Both methods also require a large amount of informants. Since the *JELiX* editors’ aim is a more general and more abstract one, they have designed an alternative data-eliciting method that also requires fewer informants than in a DCT and MPJT: the semi-expert interview on communicative strategies (SICS). Such an interview, in form of a questionnaire, asks informants not for their own personal communicative behavior and judgement, but for the typical linguistic behavior in their nation, as told from the perspective of someone who has to describe it to a foreigner. Informants are regarded as semi-experts due to their experience within, and observation of, the community. This will especially be true of people who have to do with language professionally (such as students of language, linguists, journalists); they should therefore be preferred as informants. While a DCT presents a situation and asks for one’s typical behavior, the SICS presents typical situations and asks for possible and impossible behavior. The informant can both select from a list of communicative patterns and convey additional patterns. This way a SICS resembles more a MPJT, but it requires from the informants reflection on a more abstracting and generalizing level.

## 2. Data Collection

A sample of the SICS questionnaire can be found in the introductory article to this special issue of *JELiX* (Grzega/Schöner 2008). The questionnaire was translated into Estonian and distributed to philology students in Estonia by Mari Mets and Kristiina Praakli. We got back 8

<sup>1</sup> The Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) included “only” 6 languages (cf. Blum-Kulka et al. 1989).

<sup>2</sup> But see, e.g., on terms of address the contribution by Keevallik 1999, on family and peer conversations the contributions by Tulviste, De Geer and their partners [Junefelt/Tulviste 1997, De Geer/Tulviste 2002, Tulviste et al. 2002, De Geer et al. 2002, Tulviste/Mizera/De Geer 2004, De Geer/Tulviste 2005], on student-teacher interaction the contribution by Strandson 2007, on internet communication the contribution by Kuldnook 2002, on sales encounters the contribution by Vellerind 2000, on phone conversations the contributions by Rääbis 2000 & 2001 & 2004 & 2007, Keevallik 2005, Eskor 2007, as well as on a more general level Kivik 1998.

questionnaires, which were not all filled out completely, though. This is definitely not a large number. However, due to the fact that the questionnaire does not ask for people's personal behavior, but for what they as linguistically trained people can observe as normal, or normative, in their speech community, we can already try to draw a first sketch of Estonian speech-act realizations—especially since the informants come from different regions of the country. Seven of the informants were female, one was male; their ages varied from 22 to 30.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Section A: Starting a Conversation

As a general rule, Estonians avoid addressing someone by his or her name (cf. Keevallik 2005: 206ff.). The choice of pronoun is therefore the most important indicator of the relationship between the two interlocutors. Like most other Europeans, Estonians have an informal and a formal address pronoun (a T-form and a V-form in Brown and Gilman's 1960 terminology), and like many other Europeans, Estonians take the pronoun of the second person plural as their formal pronoun. Thus, they make a distinction between *sina* (T-form) and *teie* (V-form). What about the distribution of these pronouns?

- (1) All informants agreed that children would use the T-form to address their parents.
- (2) It is also quite usual that children address older relatives by T, but two informants also noted that sometimes V is used.
- (3) When addressing administration officials, people use V.
- (4) Depending on personal agreements, the reciprocal/symmetrical use of T and V can be observed for the other situations asked for in the questionnaire, i.e.
  - colleagues at work among each other
  - employees to employer
  - employer to employees
  - pupils to teacher
  - teacher to pupils
  - business partners among each other
  - clerks to customers in a store
  - customers to clerks in a store
  - people to strangers in the street

However, people might take a comparatively long period of time before they agree to switch to T-forms (cf. also Keevallik [1999, 2005: 205ff.]). But there are also indications that universal T has started to spread (cf. also Laanem 1999, Keevallik 2005: 206).

In addition to this, there were some fixed 3rd person address forms such as *proua* 'Mrs.', *preili* 'Miss' and *härä* 'Mr.', mostly used in service encounters. These could be seen as a post-Soviet feature consciously used to mark a definite break with the 'comrade' but it has almost disappeared by now.

As to telephone openings<sup>3</sup> in private situations, *Jaa* 'Yeah!' and *Halloo!* are common. Using the name is unusual (cf., e.g., also Rääbis 2000, Keevallik 2005: 207) and so is the use of the phone number<sup>4</sup>. Sometimes, the pattern "first name + 'listens'" is used. Telephone calls in business situations are normally answered with the name of the company. Depending on the position and function of the person called, the first name and/or last name may be added. When the function of the person called is rather one of "customer service", then the pure first

<sup>3</sup> The classical studies on phone conversations that many other studies relate to are the ones by Schegloff (1979) and Hopper (1992).

<sup>4</sup> The use of names is generally infrequent; even among family members kinship terms are preferred (e.g. 'my child' (cf. Keevallik 2005: 208)).

name seems to be preferred after the name of the company.

We have also asked our Estonian informants how they answer the mobile phone. The most common phrase is *Jaa!* ‘Yeah!’. Sometimes *Hallo* is used. The loan phrase *Ciao* can be heard among the younger generations. Additional elements may be the first name plus “listens”. If you recognize the number, you may also immediately address the caller by his or her first name with a format greeting + name. If it is an unfamiliar number you use first plus last name.

### **3.2. Section B: Keeping Up a Conversation**

This section focussed on small talk behavior. By small talk we understand everything that is not the greeting, the closing and leave-taking phase and the proper motive for the conversation (cf. also Malinowski 1923, Laver 1975, Ventola 1979). In what situations is small talk common, or even required, in Estonia? There seem to be no very strict, unanimous rules. Half of the informants find small talk common “during a meal (when at the same table)”, three mentioned “on public transportation means (when the ride takes several hours)”. Other suggestions were made only once or twice. With the reverse question, in what situations it is not common to start small talk (but to remain silent), there was not any common answer either: four people claimed that it is not common in the elevator, three said that it is not common in public toilets (unless there is a long line). All other suggestions were made only once or twice. In general, though, it can be observed that, in contrast to many other Europeans, Estonians do not practice small talk with strangers very much and rather prefer silence. There is no general obligation to do small talk at all, not even in business situations (therefore also the answers as to the degree of small talk in private and business conversations varied). In communication, Estonians obviously focus more on content than on relationships (cf. also Keevallik 2005).

Regarding the things to talk about in small talk, we again find no generally accepted habits. The following topics were considered as adequate for small talk by the majority of the informants: the weather and politics/politicians. Other topics were only mentioned by a minority of the informants. Considering the informants additional comments, it can be said that Estonians rather prefer topics related to the situation, not so much topics related to their person (unless the topic connects both interlocutors).

As there are no norms for the selection of topics, there are also no norms for the avoidance of topics. Even the topics suggested in the SICS questionnaire—religion, politics, money, hobbies—were not unanimously mentioned as taboo topics. Money was mentioned by 5 and religion by 3 informants, but some hedged their answer with a “maybe, possibly”.

### **3.3. Section C: Being Nice in a Conversation**

According to the majority of the informants, Estonians typically present their opinion on a topic by firstly saying their opinion and secondly giving reasons related to the issue itself. 6 informants found this strategy present in Estonia, although one person termed it rare. In addition, each of the following strategies was thought present in Estonia by two of the informants:

- 1: you say your opinion – 2: you give reasons, citing other persons
- 1: you give background information, citing others – 2: you say your opinion
- 1: you give issue-related background information – 2: you say your opinion
- bit by bit: 1: you say your opinion on aspect A – 2: you give issue-related reasons for this – 3: you say your opinion on aspect B – 4: you give issue-related reasons for this

In a further question, the informants were asked whether invitations or offers made by an interlocutor can reasonably be assumed to be honest or to be just a politeness phrase. With this question, the SICS aims at finding out about the presence of ostensible invitations (cf. Isaacs/Clark 1990) and similar phenomena. All informants agreed that if someone offers you help, this offer is sincere; all but one informant also said that if someone invites a person, the addressee can interpret this as a true invitation.

### 3.4. Section D: Getting Around Very Uncomfortable Topics

Item #9 in the SICS read: “If people want to turn down an offer or an invitation, what kinds of linguistic means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?” Luckily, the informants commented their selection of strategies with the labels “usually” (or unmarked), “quite often”, “sometimes” and “rarely”. If we convert these labels into points from 4 to 1 and multiply them with the corresponding number of ticks, then we get the following picture (p. = points):

25 p.	a vague excuse like “No, I don’t have time.” or “No, I have something else to do.”
24 p.	a concrete brief and true excuse (if there is one)
15 p.	a phrase like “I will have to think about it”, though you won’t surely contact the person again
13 p.	a phrase like “(I don’t know yet) I’ll let you know”, though you will surely not contact the person again
9 p.	a concrete brief and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse)
9 p.	a concrete long and true excuse (if there is one)
6 p.	a direct phrase that means “No, I don’t feel like going there/doing X.”
4 p.	a concrete long and invented excuse (if there is no concrete true excuse)

So a vague excuse or a concrete brief and true excuse are clearly seen as the dominant, common, normal strategies to turn down an offer.

Item #10 showed the question “If people disagree with somebody else’s opinion, what kinds of linguistic (and non-linguistic) means are used to say “no” in a polite way in your nation?” If we convert the labels “usually” (or unmarked), “quite often”, “sometimes”, “rarely/not too often” into points from 4 to 1 again and multiply them with the respective number of ticks, then we get the following results:

32 p.	a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...”
22 p.	people just make a disapproving look
22 p.	a direct “No”
21 p.	people just shake their heads
21 p.	people just say nothing at all and remain silent
17 p.	a phrase like “(No), I disagree.”, “(No), I have a different opinion.”
14 p.	a phrase like “Yes, I see what you mean, but wouldn’t you also think that ...”
12 p.	people just smile
5 p.	never the word “No”
3 p.	a phrase like “I think you have to think about this again.”
2 p.	a phrase like “I think we have to think about this again.”

One informant also added the phrase “Are you sure that...?” as a strategy. However, viewing our informants’ answers, we can state that the pattern “Yes, I see what you mean, but I think that ...” is clearly seen as predominant in Estonia to voice disagreement. For the five strategies getting 22 or 21 points, we can say that they are used at least among some social groups in Estonia. As to the strategy of just smiling, there is an interesting disagreement, since 2 people considered this form as usual, 2 informants as rare, and 1 person even stated that this strategy is never used. This strategy must therefore be interpreted as very group-restricted.

### 3.5. Section E: Ending a Conversation

Since there are no specific useable cross-cultural studies on ending a conversation<sup>5</sup>, the SICS questionnaire had particularly included also this part of a conversation—if people do not know how to close a conversation, this could also be embarrassing for one of the interlocutors, or even both. Therefore the SICS raised the question “what do people say to show that they want to end a conversation?”. Here the only label beside the default label was the label “rarely”. If we interpret the unmarked answers as “usual” again and count this as 2 and if we count “rarely” as 1, then we get the following results:

16 p.	a phrase like “I have to go now, I have something else to do”
13 p.	say what they have to do now (if there really is something)
12 p.	a phrase like “I don’t want to bother you any longer”
11 p.	a simple “Ok, good-bye now”
8 p.	a phrase like “We’ve already talked for too long”
6 p.	invent a reason
6 p.	a phrase like “It’s already late now”
2 p.	a phrase like “I want to go now”

Transferred into words this means that all informants agreed that the quite direct phrase “I have to go now, I have something else to do” is the predominant phrase to initiate the closure of a conversation. One informant added that this is only said if it is actually true. All the patterns that got 13, 12 and 11 points seem frequently used. One informant remarked that a phrase expressing “I don’t want to bother you any longer” is used especially on the phone.

After this question the next logical item was to ask for the interlocutor’s reaction. Here the answers were very mixed—3 people said the other person lets you go immediately, 4 said the other person would first try to persuade you to stay. It should be noted, though, that four of the informants gave special comments, saying that the reaction depended on the interlocutor, the situation and the topic. So there seems to be no general form in this slot of the script.

## 4. Summary

Taken all observations into account the communicative “stage direction” that Estonians seem to cling to could be rendered like this: “Don’t talk too much, but if you have or want to talk, say it truthfully and directly.” These observations agree with what has already been illustrated also with other speech acts, e.g. the rare use of compliments (cf. Keevallik 2005: 209). In Grice’s terminology the maxims of manner and of quality are highly respected; in Brown and Levinson’s terminology Estonians would rather favor bald on-record strategies and negative politeness strategies over other strategies. Estonians use a communicative style that could also be termed “fact style”.

<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the study by Otterstedt (1993) is full of factual mistakes. The first study to analyze closing strategies is the one by Schegloff/Sacks (1973).

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