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## **The grammar-interaction interface of negative questions in Estonian**

### **Abstract**

Grammatically negative questions have been considered tricky because out of context it is basically impossible to predict whether they are conducive of a positive or negative answer (e.g. Sadock and Zwicky 1985). Furthermore, some of them convey reverse polarity affirmations rather than ask for information (Koshik 2002). The current study looks systematically at all negative polar questions found in Estonian spoken language corpora and shows that in actual usage, they are predominantly conducive of a confirming answer. However, a confirming answer may in some cases be either in a positive or negative form. Conduciveness of a negative question as well as its linguistic format depend on the action the question implements in a conversational sequence. The paper shows that each of the five negative question formats in Estonian regularly implements a different kind of social action ranging from challenging and topic initiation to requests for information and confirmation.

### **1. Introduction**

In theory, polar questions are used to inquire about the truth or falsity of the proposition they express (König & Siemund 2007: 291). In real life conversation, as can also be discovered in the corpus used for the current study, polar questions implement social actions such as asking for information or confirmation, challenging, proposing a conclusion, adding an additional spin on the topic, or eliciting a telling. This means that matters of truth value are intertwined with what the speaker aims to do in the particular context as well as how strong belief she displays that she knows what the answer will be. The grammatical devices of asking a question are adapted to both of these interactive needs.

Not all interrogatives are used as questions and not all questions are interrogatives. It has been argued that what an interrogative accomplishes

in interaction is strongly dependent on the sequential position and that they need not be functioning as questions at all (Metslang 1981: 102–112; Schegloff 1984, Heritage & Roth 1995, Heritage 2002, Koshik 2002, Heinemann 2005). The current study is about utterances that function as polar questions and therefore takes into account interrogatives as well as declaratives. Polar questions are understood to be utterances that make relevant a (dis)confirming<sup>1</sup> polar answer, a *yes* or a *no*. The study argues that even though the utterances dealt with are all functionally questions, the sequential position is crucial in terms of what they achieve in interaction and how they are treated by co-participants. They function doubly, as questions, and as vehicles or formats for other social actions (Schegloff 2007: 73–78). It depends on the prior context what kind of social action polar questions accomplish, what the level of epistemic certainty is, and what kind of answer they are conducive of.

Conduciveness has been understood as a questioner's predisposition to a particular kind of response, either positive or negative (Bolinger 1957: 99, Quirk et al. 1985: 808). In the case of negative questions, one of the main puzzles in linguistic pragmatics has been when and how they elicit a positive answer. For example, the question *Isn't it raining?* can convey that the speaker believes it is raining and that a positive response is assumed (e.g. Sadock and Zwicky 1985). In the present study conduciveness is not understood as an abstract grammatical possibility in an invented context but is discovered from the actual answers that the questions receive. This kind of understanding of conduciveness is based on the participants' analysis. When formatting their answers, the speakers regularly indicate whether they assume that they are giving an answer that was expected or whether it goes against these expectations. This analytic procedure originates in conversation analysis (e.g. Heritage 1984: 233–292, Goodwin & Heritage 1990, Heritage 1995, Schegloff 2007). The current study attempts to look at conduciveness in context and as established by participants' subsequent actions. An essential part of the context in conversation is the prior sequence. Working out the patterns of action is therefore crucial in understanding what the question is doing.

Much of research into interrogatives and questions in Germanic languages that is often cited in typological literature is very hard to apply to a Finno-Ugric language such as Estonian, particularly when it comes to

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<sup>1</sup> Utterances that made relevant agreement, such as first assessments, were thereby excluded.

negative questions. For example, there is no reverse polarity tag system in Estonian, which has been specifically targeted in studies on conduciveness (König & Siemund 2007: 296–297). Also, negative interrogatives are not regularly used for requests and offers (e.g. Heinemann 2005, 2006 on Danish). A polite request, for example, can only be expressed by the negative interrogative in the conditional form (Sang 1983: 135–139). Furthermore, there seem to be a number of grammatical possibilities of asking a negative question in Estonian, which makes it a typologically interesting subject of pragmatic research into negative questions. As it will be shown, the various grammatical formats cannot be used interchangeably just anywhere in conversation. Each of them is sensitive to the contextual pressures in its own way.

In order to outline the phenomenon under scrutiny, let us start by taking a look at some different question formats in actual conversations. In each of the first three examples a speaker asks in a grammatically negative form if a call has been made, but the formats of the questions vary. In example (1) initial question particle *kas* is used. In example (2) the speaker formats her first question with the particle *ega*, while the follow-up question involves the turn-final question particle *väi*. Finally, a declarative sentence is used to achieve the question in example (3).

Transcription and glossing conventions can be found at the end of the article. The English translations are the pragmatically closest options but they do not make justice to the original formats, so the reader is urged to rely on the glossing in the second line of the transcript.

- (1) 1 E:       *ee tähendab on nagu] vaja publikut natuke.*  
           means is like needed audience:PRT little  
           ‘Um, I mean, (we) need some audience.’
- 2 M:       *EI TAHA:;*  
           NEG want  
           ‘I don’t want (to come).’
- 3 E:       *ah nii.*  
           ‘Oh.’
- 4 M: →     *.h äää, kas: eile mulle ei elistand Kadri näiteks.*  
           QUES yesterday I:ALL NEG call:PPT NAME example:TRA  
           ‘Um, didn’t Kadri call me yesterday, for instance?’

- 5 E: *ei; keegi pole elistanud.* =  
no nobody NEG:be call:PPT  
'No, nobody has called.'
- (2) 1 K: *jaa.*  
'Yeah/Hello.'
- 2 P: *tšau;*  
'Hi.'
- 3 K: *tšau,*  
'Hi.'
- 4 P: → *kule ega mulle ei ole* <Q elistatud. = Q>  
listen:IMP:2SG EGA I:ALL NEG be call:IMS:PPT  
'Listen, nobody has called me, right?'
- 5 K: =*m::inu teada mitte,* =  
I:GEN know:INF not  
'No, as far as I know.'
- 6 P: → =<Q *eile ka mitte vä. Q*>  
yesterday too not QUES  
'Not even yesterday?'
- 7 K: *ä oota. (.) ega Pillele ei ole elistatud. ((to the side))*  
wait:IMP:2SG EGA NAME:ALL NEG be call:IMS:PPT  
'Wait! (.) Nobody has called Pille, right?'
- 8 (0.4)
- 9 K: *ei ole. ((back to the phone))*  
NEG be  
'No.'
- (3) 1 V: *oled sa oled sa m öö temale helistand ka vä.*  
have:2SG you have:2SG you s/he:ALL call:PPT too QUES  
'Have you, have you called him/her too?'
- 2 (0.5)
- 3 M: *nüüt iljuti küll mitte.*  
now recently KÜLL not  
'Not recently, no.'

- 4 V: *ei ole vä.*  
NEG have QUES  
'You haven't?'
- 5 M: *mqm*  
'No.'
- 6 V: *<@ ma ka ei o(h)le. @>*  
I too NEG have  
'Me neither.'
- 7 M: *ei ole ka vä.*  
NEG have too QUES  
'You haven't either?'
- 8 V: *<@ mul on nii kiire olnud et mul pole*  
I:ADS be so hurry be:PPT that I:ADS NEG:be  
'I have been in such a hurry that I haven't had'
- 9 *ültse aega olnud. @>*  
at.all time:PRT be:PPT  
'time at all.'
- 10 M: → *ta sulle elistand ei ole.*  
s/he you:ALL call:PPT NEG have  
'He/she hasn't called you?'
- 11 V: *ei ole.*  
NEG have  
'No.'
- 12 M: *paras.*  
'That's what you deserve.'

Even though the content of the questions is very similar and the polarity is always negative, the format is different in every case, as is their position in the sequence of conversational actions. This appears not to be a mere collocation but a crucial feature of Estonian grammar: the different question formats are usable in different sequential contexts. The *kas*-initiated question in example (1) is used as a new topic initiation after the daughter M has vigorously turned down her mother's invitation to be among the audience in a TV show. The question constitutes a definite break from the conversation so far. The *ega*-initiated question provides the reason

for the call that occurs right after the greeting exchange and is thus also a topic initiation. In contrast, the *vä*-final question builds heavily on the prior turn and asks for an additional detail. Finally, the declaratively formulated question is implemented as a continuation of the already established topic. Based on what has happened in the conversational sequence thus far and the particular linguistic format, every question achieves a specific social action.

There are five ways of asking a negative polar question in Estonian, four of which have already been illustrated. A summary with tentative translations follows:

- 1) *kas*-initial utterances (Eng. inversion question)
- 2) *ega*-initial utterances (*ega* ‘indeed, right?’)
- 3) simple declaratives<sup>2</sup>
- 4) *jah*-final utterances (*jah*, historically ‘yeah’)
- 5) *vä*-final utterances (Eng. inversion question; *vä*, historically ‘or’)

All the formats apart from (2) are also usable in positive questions. The particle *ega* can only be used in negative questions (Metslang 1981: 27). It was historically a combination of the negation word *ei* and the conjunction *ka* ‘too’ but is now regularly analyzed as a negative question particle in grammars (e.g. Ereht et al. 1995). At the same time, *ega*-questions always include other negative marking, *ega* is not sufficient on its own to achieve the negative polarity. None of the other particles display anything about polarity.

Crucially, the word order of statements and questions can be identical in Estonian. Note also that the term ‘declarative’ is strictly reserved for the grammatical format in the current study. Thus, a declarative is a clause that does not include any interrogative particles or imperatives.

The present overview systematically accounts for all the grammatically negative questions registered in two contemporary spoken language corpora. The first corpus consists of naturally occurring telemarketing calls as well as everyday calls between family members, relatives, friends, and colleagues. There are about 103,000 words in the corpus. The other corpus is the publicly available Tartu corpus: <http://www.cl.ut.ee/suuline/Korpus.php>. It is constantly growing, but the

<sup>2</sup> The declaratives are occasionally terminated with particles *eksju* or *onju* that weakly elicit alignment and do not always make relevant a polar answer. The two particles are therefore not analyzed as question particles.

version used for the current study consisted of about 400,000 words. The data come from a variety of settings, including face-to-face conversations. In these two corpora 411 negatively formulated polar questions<sup>3</sup> were found. All the negative utterances that made relevant a (dis)confirming polar answer have been included in the analyses, which means that all the instances with question particles *kas*, *jah*, and *vä* are included. As we will see below, a confirming response can under some circumstances be represented by either a positive or negative answer. It is therefore especially important to keep apart the function of the answers (confirming or disconfirming the content of the question) from their grammatical polarity (positive or negative). In Estonian, both positive and negative polar answers may be achieved with particles or by repeating the verb of the question, or the combination of the two.

The paper looks at negative polar questions in terms of their sequential placement, action import, and subsequent treatment by the recipients. It takes as a starting point the linguistic formats and arrives at an account of what types of social action they carry out and how this relates to the epistemic certainty expressed by the current speaker, which is a crucial component of conduciveness. The paper discusses the five grammatical formats, one after the other in the order of the above list, starting with the *kas*-question.

## 2. *Kas*-initiation as a challenge

The question particle *kas* has always been treated as building the prototypical form of polar interrogatives in Estonian (e.g. Ereht et al. 1995: 168, Metslang 1981: 13, 26). There were 36 cases in the current data where a negative question was formulated with *kas*, some of which involved an additional turn-final particle *vä* or *jah*. *Kas* is thus not the most frequent device for formulating negative questions in spoken discourse, but it displays a very coherent functional profile. In fact, the above example (1) demonstrates a rare socially neutral topic-initiating case in the data. In most instances, the negative *kas*-question constitutes a challenge built on prior discourse.

In example (4) P has called her friend to talk about some relationship crisis. It is 7.30 p.m. and in line 3 R questions whether the talk necessarily

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<sup>3</sup> Only 7 of the negative questions found were *wh*-questions.

has to take place on the very same night, displaying some resistance to the idea. P's answer in line 4 is strongly suggestive that she would indeed like to talk at once, as she is "burning". The negative *kas*-question in line 5 is thus used after P's urgent need to talk has been firmly established. It constitutes a challenge by hinting at the possibility that P could wait till tomorrow.

- (4) 1 P:        *mul on vaja ärakuulajat. hh*  
                  I:ADS be need listener:PRT  
                  'I need a listener.'
- 2                (0.9)
- 3 R:        *täna kindlasti vä.*  
                  today sure        QUES  
                  '(Does it have to be) today?'
- 4 P:        *mai tea, m:a põlen noh,*  
                  I:NEG know I        burn:1SG NOH  
                  'I don't know. I'm burning, you see.'
- 5 R: →        *kas homseni ei anna oodata.*  
                  QUES tomorrow:TER NEG let wait:INF  
                  'Can't it wait till tomorrow?'
- 6 P:        <@ *ma ei tea, (0.4) saad aru see on kreisi.* @>  
                  I NEG know you know this is crazy  
                  'I don't know, (0.4) you know, this is crazy.'

By suggesting that a positive answer is altogether possible, negative *kas*-questions regularly challenge something that has just been established. At the same time, they display the expectation that the grammatically negative answer (i.e. a confirming answer) is more likely, given the prior context. Hence the negative question format that on the record is conducive of a negative answer. Crucially, utterance-initial *kas* seems to mark a disalignment with whatever came before, either changing the topic as in example (1) or challenging what was said in the prior turn, as in (4). In the contexts where *kas*-questions occur they constitute insinuations or even downright critique toward what another participant has reported or stated. As such, a *kas*-question is rather a "reversed polarity question" (Koshik 2002), which conveys that the opposite polarity to that of the grammatical form of the question is or should be true.



In the following example (5), a newspaper subscriber has complained about the high fee for invoice payment. In line 3, the telemarketer asks whether nobody in his family has a bank account (leading up to a suggestion to pay via a bank transfer). The *kas*-question implies that they should have one. It is a reaction to the information that the client paid in cash and is hearable as a challenge to that choice.

- (5) 1 M:        *aha. kas te maksite sularahas.*  
                  oh QUES you:PL pay:IMF:2PL cash:INS  
                  ‘Oh. Did you pay in cash?’
- 2 K:        *jaa ikka.=*  
                  ‘Yeah, of course.’
- 3 M: →        =*ahaa. .h kas teil peres pangaarvet*  
                  oh QUES you:PL:ADS family:INS bank.account:PRT  
                  ‘Oh. Don’t you have a bank account in your?’
- 4            *ei ole.*  
                  NEG be  
                  ‘family?’
- 5            (0.9)
- 6 K:        [*noo*] @@  
                  ‘Well’

The client declines to answer, possibly because of the insinuating nature of the question. Indeed, *kas*-interrogatives may not even be designed for a polar answer. It is the social activity, the challenge, that determines whether and what type of response is provided to the negative interrogative (Heritage 2002, Heinemann 2005). Although in many cases the incredulous or insinuating negative questions are treated as questions, in some cases they are not (Koshik 2002). Estonian grammar classifies this type of questions as rhetorical (Erelt et al. 1995: 174), where the negation contributes an emotional enhancement (Sang 1983: 139).

Challenges may indeed be unanswerable (Heinemann 2008). Example (6) is a case in point. The telemarketer is calling to a client at about 8 p.m. His request to talk to the subscriber is received with a challenge formulated as a negative interrogative. M’s apology and an explanation in the following turn demonstrate that he treats the *kas*-interrogative as an

accusation, a challenge to his behavior rather than a real polar question deserving a “yes” or a “no” answer.

- (6) 1 M:        *mts e Mari Lepikus paluks.*  
                   NAME NAME    beg:COND  
                   ‘Mari Lepikus please’
- 2                (0.8)
- 3 K: →        @ (.) *kuulge kas te: -*  
                   listen:IMP:2PL QUES you:PL  
                   ‘Listen, aren’t you’
- 4                (1.6)
- 5 K: →        *kas te natukene: iljaks pole jäänd*  
                   QUES you:PL little    late:TRA NEG:be be:PPT  
                   ‘Aren’t you a little late’
- 6        →        *tema otsimisega.*  
                   she:GEN searching:KOM  
                   ‘looking for her?’
- 7 M:            *mmmm, no andke andeks palun. ma elistan Liivi*  
                   NO forgive:IMP:2PL please I    call:1SG NAME  
                   ‘Uhm, please forgive me, I’m calling from Liivi’
- 8                *Linnalehest tema nimel oli siin tellitud*  
                   NAME:ELT she:GEN name:ADS was here subscribe:IMS:PPT  
                   ‘Linnaleht. There is a subscription in her name’
- 9                *e Linnalehe tutvumistellimus.*  
                   NAME:GEN preliminary.subscription  
                   ‘to Linnaleht’s special offer.’

25 of the 36 *kas*-interrogatives in the current database are nevertheless treated as questions that require a confirming or disconfirming answer. The great majority of them (20 cases) receive a negative answer, which is what could be expected given their apposite nature. They are used as parts of arguments. The negative answers may therefore also be considerably reinforced, as exemplified in (7). P has tried to retrieve her tapes from T in several consecutive phone calls over a longer period of time. T has previously claimed that he has them at school. This time, however, he

builds up a ground for the argument that P has in fact received the tapes. The *kas*-question directly challenges P's claim that she has not yet received them. P's negative answer is emphatically lengthened and sounds annoyed, as if addressed to a disobedient child.

- (7) 1 T:        *mhmh*, (0.2) *ei koolist        mai        leidnudki üles*,  
                   uhuh                    no school:ELT I:NEG find:PPT:KI  
                   'Uhuh. (0.2) No, I didn't find (them) at school'
- 2                *aga s        mul        tuli meelde                    et ma        vahepeal*  
                   but then I:ADS remember:IMF:3SG that I        in the meanwhile  
                   'but then I remembered that a while ago'
- 3                *tõin                    sulle        mingi posu kassette        et*,  
                   bring:IMF:1SG you:ALL some bunch tapes:PRT that  
                   'I brought you a bunch of tapes.'
- 4 →            *kas        nende        ulgas ei        ond.*  
                   QUES they:GEN among NEG be:PPT  
                   'Weren't (these ones) among them?'
- 5 P:            *e::i:?*  
                   'N::o:.'

Although the negative *kas*-questions should in principle allow a positive answer, they rarely receive one, as in the confrontative sequences where they occur, the respondents generally re-instantiate their prior standpoint. An instance of positive answer is presented in (8). Mother E shows concern for the temperature in her daughter's apartment. When the daughter reports that it is cold there E asks a negatively formulated *kas*-question, which suggests that the positive answer – heating up the place – should be an obvious option and consequently, that the daughter should have tried it. It is thus a mild challenge of the daughter's report, implying that the daughter is herself to blame for the situation.

- (8) 1 E:        *ilm        on kihvt        jah. .hh (.) kuidas sul        on        seal:*  
                   weather is        awesome yeah        how        you:ADS be        there  
                   'Yeah, the weather is awesome. (.) How is it?'
- 2                *Kalakas.        külm või soe.*  
                   NAME        cold or warm  
                   'at Kalakas, cold or warm?'

- 3 L:       *külm.*  
 ‘Cold.’
- 4           (0.8)
- 5 E: → *kas kiitta ei anna.*  
 QUES heat:INF NEG can  
 ‘Can’t it be heated up?’
- 6 L:       *annab. aga: mul ei ole elektrit ka.*  
 can:3SG but I:ADS NEG be electricity:PRT either  
 ‘It can but I don’t have electricity either.’

The daughter answers the polar question and then orients to the challenge by accounting for an additional matter why living in that place is impossible and the heating therefore irrelevant. The positive answer is thus merely pro forma. In general, the *kas*-question turns out to be one of the most likely negative question formats to receive a positive answer, as we will see in the coming comparisons. Their tilt towards a positive polarity answer makes them usable for challenging the prior speaker and expressing incredulity while officially being conducive of a confirming negative answer. In sum, a *kas*-interrogative constitutes a more or less severe disalignment with what has been going on so far, most often raising an issue that challenges something that has already been established in the discourse. This is why it cannot easily replace other question formats, such as exemplified in the next section. We will now look at what kinds of questions are formulated with the other utterance-initial particle *ega*.

### 3. *Ega*-initiation as an epistemic enhancement<sup>4</sup>

The particle *ega* has been characterized as a negative question particle in Estonian grammars (Metslang 1981: 27, Sang 1983: 142, Erelt et al. 1995: 168, 112). In contrast with the scarce *kas*, it occurred 98 times in the database and one of its most typical uses was as a request for another speaker on the phone. There were 15 cases like the following:

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<sup>4</sup> *Ega* can in principle also occur turn-finally but there was not a single case in the conversational data.

- (9) 1 M: → *tere Ketter, ega Kadrit ei ole kodus.*  
 hi NAME EGA NAME:PRT NEG be home:INS  
 ‘Hi, Ketter, I suppose Kadri is not at home?’
- 2 L: *ei,*  
 ‘No’
- 3 M: *[aahah.]*  
 ‘Oh.’

Another typical usage is as part of an information request to an institution. Particularly the format *ega te ei tea/oska öelda* ‘EGA you can’t say’ is a formulaic means of asking questions from an institutional representative. It occurs 16 times in the database. The *ega*-initiated clause is formally a main clause that takes a positive *kas*-question as its complement (Erelt et al. 1995: 173). However, the profile of the complement clause interactionally overrides that of the main clause by being responded to (Thompson 2002) and thus the *ega*-initiated clause should rather be seen as a question preface. Still, it makes it possible for the recipient to answer confirmingly to the preface, if she is indeed unable to answer. An example from a call to an information line follows (10).

- (10) 1 H: → *tere, (0.5) ega te ei tea öelda kas*  
 hi EGA you:PL NEG know say:INF QUES  
 ‘Hi, (0.5) I suppose you can’t tell whether’
- 2 *soloogia muuseum on lahti.*  
 zoology:GEN museum is open  
 ‘the museum of zoology is open.’
- 3 V: *kohe vaatan, üks hetk,*  
 at once look:1SG one moment  
 ‘I’ll take a look, one moment.’

*Ega*-initiated utterances like this are treated as information requests, especially in the institutional setting. In the above case, the client ends up with a phone number to the museum and the *ega*-clause does not receive a polar answer. As can be inferred from the first two examples, *ega*-questions regularly initiate action sequences. In contrast with *kas*-questions they do not necessarily orient to what has been going on, but similarly to *kas*-questions, they are never used as repeat questions for repair initiation, which we will see below with other formats.

Even though many *ega*-initiated utterances regularly make relevant a confirmation or disconfirmation, it is not clear that *ega* is in fact a question particle. Rather, it is an epistemic particle that has become routinely used in the above actions. It strengthens the negation of a declarative utterance, marks a high lever of speaker certainty, and elicits a response from another participant. (Note that it has not been translated as a question particle in English but rather as ‘I suppose’, or ‘I assume’.) There are a number of reasons for considering *ega*-initiated units declaratives rather than interrogatives. First of all, *ega* occurs with other epistemic particles that cannot be used in questions, such as the certainty marker *vist* ‘probably, I assume’, *ju* that indicates shared knowledge, and *ometi* ‘still’. The first of those is illustrated in example (11), where the epistemically qualified utterance is treated as a polar question.

- (11) 1 V: → *ega sul ei köeta vist.*  
 EGA you:ADS NEG heat probably  
 ‘I assume that your place is not heated.’
- 2 (0.5)
- 3 H: *köetakse: paar päeva on köetud.*  
 heat:IMS couple day:PRT is heat:IMS:PPT  
 ‘It is. It has been heated for a couple of days.’

Second, *ega* can only be used with negative clauses (Metslang 1981: 27), suggesting that it is simply an enhancement of the negative form, reflecting its older meaning ‘not even/either’. In fact, *ega*-utterances are not always treated as questions, as is shown in example (12). The speakers have been discussing the necessity of going to the theater, K being sceptical. K’s turn in line 1 is a reaction to E’s conclusion that K is “a business and science person”.

- (12) 1 K: *ega ma lugeda ei viitsi küll eriti midagi.*  
 EGA I read:INF NEG have.patience KÜLL ERITI nothing  
 ‘Indeed, I don’t have the patience to read anything.’
- 2 E: *aa, (.) mul on vastupidi just.*  
 oh I:ADS is opposite exactly  
 ‘Oh, I’m exactly the opposite.’

The question value of example (11) originates from the fact that it contains information that primarily belongs to the other speaker (cf. Labov and Fanshell 1977), it is the recipient's place that the heating concerns. Therefore, a confirmation is due. In contrast, in the latter case (12) the speaker provides information about himself, which is why the recipient merely receives the turn with an information receipt *aa*. The *ega*-utterance here does not make relevant a confirmation. The relevance of a confirmation rises from the information territory of the speakers rather than *ega* being a question marker. All the above *ega*-questions can equally well be analyzed as statements about something that belongs to the recipient's territory of knowledge. The utterances make relevant a confirmation or disconfirmation of the content by the concerned participant, and the sequence is therefore identical with other question-answer sequences. This regularity was first described by Labov and Fanshel (1977: 100) who talk about A's statements about B-events that make relevant a (dis)confirmation, where A is the speaker and B her interlocutor. However, since there is no regular word order difference between interrogative and declarative clauses in Estonian, it is virtually impossible to distinguish the interrogative and declarative *ega*-clauses from each other. It can merely be stated that by answering them as questions, the speakers treat some *ega*-utterances (as well as other declaratives) as questions.

One of the general functions of *ega* is to enhance the certainty of the negative claim, be it treated as a question or not. Therefore, *ega*-questions should be strongly conducive of negative answers<sup>5</sup>. Often accomplishing requests (e.g. (9) and (10)), the enhanced negative format is in the service of diminishing the expectation of the request being granted and thus making it easier for the recipient to turn it down. Turning down a request is a highly sensitive social action that people work to avoid (Heritage 1984: 265–273, Schegloff 2007: 81–96). *Ega*-question can be considered a format of conventionalized pessimism (Brown & Levinson 1987: 173–176). *Ega* marks certainty that the state of affairs is valid, thereby underlining the pessimism about getting to talk to the requested person or obtaining the relevant information. This is in sharp contrast with the challenging nature of negative *kas*-questions.

Demonstrating its conduciveness to a negative answer, *ega*-initiation renders the question answerable with a simple negation word, as shown in

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<sup>5</sup> Positive bias can be achieved in *ega*-questions by adding adverbs, such as *mitte*, *ometi* (Metslang 1981: 40).

(13), while the positive answer to it has to be a full verb repeat, which is furthermore often reinforced with the particle *küll* that counterbalances the all too pessimistic question (example (14), Keevallik 2009: 43–45). The positive answer cannot be a simple particle, which shows that the question was not conducive of a positive answer. Something more has to be done to disconfirm.

(13) 1 P: → *ää kule ega sa mulle neid kassette*  
listen:IMP:2SG EGA you I:ALL these:PRT tapes:PRT  
'Listen, you haven't left me the tapes.'

2 *ei ole jätnud.*  
NEG be leave:PPT  
'I suppose.'

3 T: *prrrr (.) ei, h*  
'No.'

4 P: *a[hah,]*  
'Oh'

(14) 1 E: → *.hh ega sa ei tea Veiko ja Ermeli: (.)*  
EGA you NEG know NAME:GEN and NAME:GEN  
'I suppose you don't know Veiko's and'

2 *telefoni või midagi.=*  
phone:PRT or something:PRT  
'Ermel's phone number or something.'

3 V: *=tean küll oota üks moment. h*  
know:1SG KÜLL wait:IMP:2SG one moment  
'Sure I do. Wait a moment.'

The *ega*-question is conducive of a negative answer because it is an epistemically strong negative statement that seeks confirmation (i.e. a negative response), and this is reflected in the simple negative response format. However, since the *ega*-format is frequently deployed merely for the purpose of easing a possible declining answer, as in (10) and (14), the answer can also occur in positive grammatical format. The latter indeed constitutes a disconfirming answer to the question but at the same time grants the request. Frequent application of the pessimistic pattern where the



expectations for a positive answer (examples (11, 13)) or granting the request (examples (10, 14)) are conventionally kept low may have resulted in the participants' reanalysis of *ega* as a question marker. In contrast with *kas*-questions that were conducive of negative answers mainly because of prior context, the conduciveness in *ega*-questions is coded in the question itself. Sequentially, *ega*-questions regularly initiate new or first topics, not building on prior ones. This makes them different from other questions with declarative format, which we will look at next.

#### 4. Declaratives as continuations

What is treated as a question in interaction depends on the format of the turn as well as the evolving sequence. Very many questions are asked in the declarative form (143 cases in the database).<sup>6</sup> They are all hearable as questions based on their content and action import. As was discussed in the above section, statements about matters belonging to the interlocutor's territory of knowledge elicit a confirmation or disconfirmation by the interlocutor, and thus function as questions. In Estonian, where neither word order nor a simple intonation feature such as terminal pitch rise regularly distinguish between statements and questions (c.f. English questions with declarative format, Heritage & Roth 2002), the content of the turn and its sequential placement are primary clues for the participants to hear a declarative as a question.

First of all, declaratives can function as repair initiations and conclusions, as shown in examples (15) and (16) respectively. The first one is heard as a question mainly because of its sequential position, as it is a repeat of part of the prior turn, and the second one because it is formulated as a conclusion about something that explicitly concerns the recipient and thus makes relevant an answer.

- (15) 1 P:        [ei] *ole üldse nii ull, ei ole ei ole.*  
                   NEG be at.all so awful NEG be NEG be  
                   'It's not at all awful, no no.'

<sup>6</sup> In American and British English, declarative questions as defined in the current study also constituted about half of the interview questions studied by Heritage and Roth (1995). The phenomenon seems to be quite general.

- 2 M: → *ei ole ull.*  
NEG be awful  
'It's not awful?'
- 3 P: *[ei ole.]*  
NEG be  
'No'
- (16) 1 M: *.h no ma ei lähe kuhugi. sest ma e:i jõua: (.)*  
NO I NEG go anywhere:ILL because I NEG manage  
'I'm not going anywhere because I will not manage'
- 2 *seda kooli asja ära teha. ja ära viia.*  
this:PRT school:GEN thing:PRT finish:INF and submit:INF  
'to finish and submit this school thingy.'
- 3 T: → *(ah)haa. (0.4) sa ei käindki koolis.*  
oh you NEG go:PPT:KI school:INS  
'Oh (0.4) You didn't go to school?'
- 4 M: *ei, ma ei jõudnud sinna. /---/*  
no I NEG make.it:PPT there:ILL  
'No, I didn't make it there.'

This type of turns are rarely contested as they build significantly on prior context and on information that is already conveyed. Therefore, repeat questions and conclusions are conducive of confirming answers and there are very few disconfirmations after them (4 cases). In clear contrast with *kas-* and *ega-*questions, a positive particle can also confirm what was expressed in the negative declarative, as shown in example (17).

- (17) 1 K: *eee oi: nii palju lugeda on et ei jõua*  
OI so much read:INF is that NEG have.time  
'Uh, oh dear, there's so much to read that (I) don't'
- 2 *lugeda.=*  
read:INF  
'have time to read it.'
- 3 M: → *=ei jõua lugeda[gi].*  
NEG have.time read:INF:GI  
'(You) don't have time to read it?'

4 K: [j@a@]h  
'Yeah'

This demonstrates that questions that repeat part of a prior turn and are epistemically firmly grounded in prior context make relevant only a minimal amount of confirmation. None of the other negative questions can receive a mere positive particle as a response, the grammatically positive answers have to be reinforced, if only to reverse the polarity of the question (Keevallik 2009: 41). The repeat questions, however, make relevant a confirmation, not an answer in a certain polarity. The action carried out is basically a request for confirmation that the repeated talk is correct. Responding to action, a positive answer is adequate.

Questions with declarative format are generally designed as continuations of what has been going on, even in cases when they do not repeat. Some of them are explicitly tied to a prior turn with conjunctions. An example with the turn-initial coordinating conjunction *ja* 'and' is shown in (18). Even though the question here concerns a third person, it is clear that O is the participant (a colleague to Kaire) who potentially has the relevant information. The negative declarative puts forward one of the possible conclusions drawn on the information that was presented in the prior turn.

- (18) 1 O: *välismajaspoliitika, tere,*  
'Foreign economy policy, hi'
- 2 P: *ee, tere ma paluksin Kairet.*  
hi I ask:COND:1SG NAME:PRT  
'Um, hi, can I talk to Kaire, please?'
- 3 O: *Kaire täna koolitab ennast kahjuks.*  
NAME today educates herself:PRT unfortunately  
'Kaire is at a course today, unfortunately.'
- 4 P: → *aa, ja ta üldse ei: tu:le.*  
oh and she at.all NEG come  
'Oh, and she won't be in at all?'
- 5 O: *ei tea::: kahjuks e kas ta tuleb,*  
NEG know unfortunately QUES she comes  
'Unfortunately I don't know whether she will be in.'

Other less frequent options to formulate a question as a syntactic continuation include conditional clauses (example (19)). K promises to call E and retrospectively adds a conditional clause initiated by *kui*, prompted by the not entirely enthusiastic response by E. The negative conditional clause makes relevant a polar (dis)confirming response, which is why it is treated as a question in the current study. It elicits and receives a negative confirmation.

(19) 1 K: *siis ma elistan sulle ku ma tööle jõuan.*  
 then I call:1SG you:ALL when I office:ALL get:1SG  
 ‘So I’ll call you when I get to the office.’

2 E: *no kui sa viitsid.*  
 NO if you bother:2SG  
 ‘If you can be bothered.’

3 (1.5)

4 K: → <@ *n:oh, ku ma sind ei sega:.* @>  
 NOH if I you:PRT NEG disturb  
 ‘Well, if I won’t be disturbing you.’

5 E: <@ *ei ei.* @>  
 ‘No no’

Many questions with declarative format are explicitly formulated as conclusions by involving concluding particles which tie them to prior discourse. Conclusions are the predominant type of sequential action carried out with declaratives. They need not be merely based on discourse but may also rely on contextual evidence. This is shown in (20). Upon hearing the voice sample at the beginning of a phone call the caller draws the conclusion that he is not talking to the person he was expecting.

(20) 1 M: *tere,*  
 ‘Hi’

2 T: → *ee (.) ei ole Eevi see.*  
 NEG be NAME it  
 ‘This isn’t Eevi?’

- 3 M: Eevi. (0.2) *te eksite numbriga*  
 NAME you:PL make.mistake:2PL number:KOM  
 ‘Eevi. (0.2) you have the wrong number.’
- 4 *härira Teesalu.*  
 ‘mister Teesalu.’

A less frequent action type of negative declarative questions is to implement a non-first question in a sequence (as was the case in example (3) in the introduction<sup>7</sup>). Even in these cases the declarative questions build on the prior discourse, albeit sometimes only formally. In example (21), the mother is posing several questions to her daughter and the negative question is marked as not being the first one in a series by the word order as well as the adverb *ka* ‘too, also’. Questions formatted like this cannot be used outside the construction of a question series.

- (21) 1 E: *no kuidas sa elad.*  
 NO how you live:2G  
 ‘How are you?’
- 2 P: *eeee, norMAALselt. h*  
 normally  
 ‘Okay.’
- 3 E: → *meid ei tule ka vaatama.*  
 we:PRT NEG come too see:SUP  
 ‘And you’re not coming to see us?’
- 4 P: *e m::ai tea. tähendab, h*  
 I:NEG know means  
 ‘I don’t know, I mean.’

Negative declarative questions are closely tied to prior discourse by repeating, concluding, continuing a syntactic unit or a series of questions. They constitute continuations of what is already going on but do not challenge in the way *kas*-questions do. Considering that declaratives constitute about one third of all the negative questions in the database, it is surprising that the Estonian comprehensive grammar states that formulating questions in the declarative is not characteristic of the Estonian language

<sup>7</sup> This would also be my analysis of the two very similar declarative questions in Hennoste et al. (2001: 102–103, 106).

but reflects a Russian influence and the questions should be reformulated into *kas*-questions or inversion questions (Erelt et al. 1995: 173). Maybe this does not hold for negative questions, or maybe the repair-initiating and concluding questions cannot be abstracted from their sequential context in which they appear to be inherently characteristic of the Estonian language. Furthermore, declaratives are regularly used to check whether the conclusion based on a prior turn is correct in Finnish (Hakulinen et al. 2004: 1152–1154). As we saw above, the declarative format allows specific social actions, building turns as continuations and conclusions. Declaratives constitute epistemically strong utterances that are conducive of confirmation. This remains to be true even when particle *jah* is added to the turn. In the next section, the patterns with *jah*-final negative questions will be scrutinized.

### 5. Final *jah* as a request for a (re)confirmation

The originally confirming particle *jah* ‘yeah’ can be used turn-finally in Estonian with both positive and negative utterances. Since it makes an answer relevant in this position, it could be considered an utterance-final question particle. The sequential context of negative *jah*-final questions is limited to two options. The *jah*-format may occur as a question that repeats part of the prior turn or as a conclusion proposal, precisely as was described with the declaratives above. A *jah*-question is even more closely tied to the prior discourse than the declarative and it cannot be used to draw conclusions from anything else than what has just been talked about. By being closely tied to what has already been said, the *jah*-question conveys a high degree of epistemic certainty and is conducive of a confirmation.

In the case of questions that repeat part of the prior turn, and even when a slight modification is made, the confirmation may appear either in the negative or the positive form. Examples (22) and (23) illustrate this claim. In the first one K has asked for free theater tickets and E claims not to have any, the second one comes from a telemarketing call. With the *jah*-final turns the speakers ask for a confirmation of what they just heard. The telemarketer adds an adverb that makes the turning down of his offer less definite. This kind of slight content modulations are common in *jah*-questions. In example (22) the *jah*-question receives a negative answer and in (23) a positive one. Both are confirming.

- (22) 1 E: *ei, mina ei saa kuskilt.* @=  
 no I NEG get anywhere:ABL  
 ‘No, I can’t get (them) anywhere.’
- 2 K: → *=ei saa jah.*  
 NEG get QUES  
 ‘You can’t?’
- 3 E: *ei,*=  
 ‘No.’
- (23) 1 K: *Linnalehest elistatakse. (0.2) kas me ei taha, (.)*  
 NAME:ELT call:IMS QUES we NEG want  
 ‘They are calling from Linnaleht. (0.2) Do we?’
- 2 *kaks kuud kuuskend viis krooni.*  
 two month:PRT sixty five kroon:PRT  
 ‘want two months for sixty five kroons.’ ((to the side))
- 3 (4.5)
- 4 K: *ei soovi (vist).=*  
 NEG want probably  
 ‘(We) don’t want (it).’
- 5 M: → *=ei soovi hetkel jah.*  
 NEG want moment:ADS QUES  
 ‘(You) don’t want (it) at the moment?’
- 6 K: *jah,*=  
 ‘Yeah’

If merely *jah*-questions, and none of the other negative question formats, could receive a positive answer as a confirmation, it could be argued that *jah* is a reverse polarity tag that is conducive of a positive answer. But we have seen above (example (17)) that the option of positive confirmation is contingent on what kind of action is implemented, namely a repair initiation, and the fact that the question is a (modified) repeat of the prior turn. Positive confirmations also occurred with declaratives without final *jah*.

Furthermore, conclusions cannot receive a confirming answer in a positive form, neither with negative declaratives nor with *jah*-questions. This is additional proof that *jah* is not a conduciveness-reversing tag. The

usage of a *jah*-final negative question as a conclusion is shown in example (24), where P has taken a pumpkin from E's place and E now urges her to take more of them. P's conclusion is that nobody else at E's place wants to eat the pumpkins and she puts it forward for confirmation by E. The confirmation is carried out in the negative form.

- (24) 1 E:        *[võta            nii] palju kui tahad.* =  
                  take:IMP:2SG so many as    want:2SG  
                  'Take as many as you want.'
- 2 P: →        =*ahah, te        ei    söö neid jah,* =  
                  okay you:PL NEG eat them QUES  
                  'Okay, so you don't eat them?'
- 3 E:        *ei,* =  
                  'No'

The patterns of *jah*-question usage are thus virtual copies of declarative question patterns but they are sequentially more restricted. They potentially convey an even higher degree of epistemic certainty as they explicitly suggest confirmation via the particle *jah*, but this does not seem to have any sequential consequences. The participants do not treat this as a significant difference by answering differently. Declaratives, *jah*-questions and *vä*-questions (described below) are all treated the same way when they repeat part of the prior turn or are used as conclusions. However, positive confirming answers are more frequent with *jah*-questions than the declaratives, which may be explained by the additional actions that declaratives implement. The sequential positioning of negative *jah*-questions together with their treatment by recipients show that they are used for seeking confirmation on matters that the speaker can be confident about. A *jah*-question is not usable as a new initiation in conversation, it builds heavily on prior talk, either by repeating it, slightly modifying it, or concluding from it.

The last pattern to be discussed is the *vä*-final question.



## 6. Final *vä* as an all-round option

The turn-final question particle *vä* has developed from the disjunction *või* ‘or’<sup>8</sup>(L. Lindström 2001) and is not part of the standardized language. In colloquial usage, however, it is very frequent, occurring more than double as often as *kas* even in the current database (86 cases). Furthermore, its usage domain is considerably larger than what is described for any single format above. A negative *vä*-question can be used when part of the prior turn is repeated, as a conclusion based on any discursive or contextual matter, as a next question in a series, topic initiator, and even as a mild challenge. It is different from *ega*-questions, declaratives, and *jah*-questions mainly by not displaying the same amount of epistemic certainty. However, in the case of repeat questions and conclusions, the certainty may arise from the context, which renders the sequence development identical to the cases described above for declarative and *jah*-questions. A single example (25) can serve as an illustration.

- (25) 1 P:            *[mi]llal sa mind näha tahad. mina Pärnusse ei lähe.*  
                          when you me see:INF want:3SG I    NAME:ILL NEG go  
                          ‘When do you want to see me? I’m not going to Pärnu.’
- 2 T: →            *ei lähe vä.*  
                          NEG go    QUES  
                          ‘You aren’t going?’
- 3 P:                *ei lähe.*  
                          NEG go  
                          ‘No.’

In contrast with confirmation-eliciting *jah*-questions, *vä*-questions are asked in cases when the conclusion is less well grounded. *Vä*-format leaves the option of a positive answer more open, which may reflect the original disjunctive meaning of *või* ‘or’, and it indeed receives disconfirming answers more often than both *jah*-questions and declarative questions. Example (26) shows a case in which a *vä*-question initiates the first topic of the call and contains a conclusion drawn on some circumstances that are beyond the current conversation. It receives a disconfirming answer.

<sup>8</sup> Note that even though this is formally the same device as used for the Swedish ‘eller’-questions (A. Lindström 1999), their pragmatic function is not the same. For example, the ‘eller’-questions cannot be used in the functions discussed in this paper.

- (26) 1 M:     *jaa.*  
              ‘Yeah/hello’
- 2 L:     *tere,*  
              ‘Hi’
- 3 M:     *tere Liina.*  
              ‘Hi Liina’
- 4 L: →   *noo m, kooli        *ei*    jõudnud    vä.*  
              NOO   school:ILL NEG make.it:PPT QUES  
              ‘You didn’t make it to school?’
- 5 M:     *kule jõudsin.                   aga ma ei saand sealt*  
              KULE make.it:IMF:1SG but I NEG get:PPT there:ABL  
              ‘You know, I did but I din’t get any’
- 6        *mingit        tulemust.*  
              any:PRT   result:PRT  
              ‘results from there.’

*Vä*-questions are thus not necessarily dependent on prior talk as *jah*-questions and many *kas*-questions are (examples (4)–(6)). But they may equally well build on prior talk, as we saw in example (2) in the introduction (‘Not even yesterday?’). This follow-up *vä*-question pursues the issue further rather than drawing a conclusion, thereby constituting an epistemically more independent and less certain contribution. Typically a negative *vä*-question ventures into a somewhat new aspect of what is being talked about. In example (27) speaker P has been telling that the cigarettes she bought were fake and tasted awful. In line 1 she is evaluating the state of affairs as being good for her health. In line 4, in response to the story, T asks whether the cigarettes make you high instead, thereby introducing a new aspect altogether. P’s surprise at the question is also displayed in her repair initiation. Instead of answering, she asks for a confirmation that she has grasped the crucial word *pilve* ‘into clouds’, a metaphor for being high.

- (27) 1 P:     /---/ *et noh väga: kasulik muidugi.v- väga hea onju.*  
              ET NOH very healthy of.course very good ONJU  
              ‘it’s very healthy, of course, very good, you know,’
- 2 T:     ((coughs))

- 3 P:       *.hh aga: no iseenest on see täitsa jabur ä.*  
           but NO in.fact is it totally absurd  
           ‘but in fact it’s totally absurd.’
- 4 T: →     *mts a p:ilve ei jää vä.*  
           but cloud:ILL NEG become QUES  
           ‘But don’t (you) become high?’
- 5 P:       *pilve.*  
           cloud:ILL  
           ‘High?’

In addition, *vä*-questions can be quite challenging. In example (28) E explains to R that he will get an invoice. When R initiates a repair in line 3, E apparently hears it as adumbrating a disalignment, since she responds with an account. When R still does not acknowledge the information, E adds a challenging *vä*-question, which finally receives an answer. The *vä*-question opens up for a possibility that what E has said in line 4 is not true, thereby challenging the state of affairs that she has just reported, and by implication also the interlocutor’s earlier claim that he in fact wanted to make a bank transfer.

- (28) 1 E:     *AR:VE:, (.) [kirju]tati sulle. jah.*  
           invoice write:IMS:IMF you:ALL yeah  
           ‘(They) wrote an invoice for you.’
- 2 R:                     *[arve.]*  
                           ‘Invoice?’
- 3 R:       *arve.*  
           ‘Invoice?’
- 4 E:       *no sa tahtsid ju et grant kannab üle panka.*  
           NO you want:IMF:2SG JU that grant transfers bank:ILL  
           ‘You wanted the grant to make a transfer to the bank?’
- 5           (1.0)
- 6 E: →     *ei ole nii vä.*  
           NEG be so QUES  
           ‘Isn’t that (right)?’

- 7 R:        *on küll jah,*  
               is KÜLL yeah  
               ‘It is, indeed.’

It is only in this challenging context that a negative *vä*-question is conducive of a positive answer, which it also receives. This is a case of reversed polarity question, which suggests that the reverse polarity assertion is true (Koshik 2002). Based on what E has said earlier, it is highly probable that the answer will be positive. The negative question merely hints at the opportunity that what E has just stated is not valid, which functions as an extortion of a response.

The findings suggest that final *vä* is the least sequentially restricted question format in spoken Estonian and can be used in diverse environments. Its conduciveness is dependent on the context, as it may be epistemically quite certain as a repeat question, while it can also venture into new areas in relation to prior talk. In these cases the speaker certainty is not grounded in the prior sequence. Since the *vä*-question does not itself make an epistemic claim (as an *ega*-question does), the answer can as well be disconfirming. *Vä*-question seems to be the least conducive negative question format.

## 7. Discussion

In the above we looked at the sequential and interactional regularities of the occurrence of five different negative question formats in spoken Estonian. It turned out that they were regularly used in different sequential positions in conversation and that they implemented different social actions. For example, *kas*-questions are generally challenging, declaratives and *jah*-questions constitute repeat questions and proposals for conclusions to be confirmed, while *ega*-questions initiate requests, also as reasons-for-the-call. Initial question particles *kas* and *ega* can break up from what went on before, while declaratives and questions with final particles tend to continue what is being talked about. Only the colloquial *vä*-question is usable in most sequential environments and actions. In addition to this, it displays a special pattern of bringing in a new aspect of the topic handled thus far. Also, the majority of utterances that were treated as questions were not formulated as interrogatives. Pure declaratives and *ega*-questions together constitute more than half of the instances in the database.

In terms of conduciveness, the sequential position and the action carried out are crucial. A repair-initiating repeat question is strongly conducive of a confirming answer (positive or negative), a challenge is conducive of a disconfirming, i.e. positive answer, and questions opening up new aspects are least conducive. Each and every instance of a question is unique in terms of prior context and action nuances. Nevertheless, a summary of the overall frequency of the answer types can disclose some general tendencies in the data. Table (1) presents the frequency of explicitly confirming or disconfirming answers in relation to different question formats. The (dis)confirmation could be carried out either with a particle, a verb repeat, or both. The rest of the answers did something else, such as telling a story, providing related information, or claiming no knowledge. Some questions, especially repeat questions, remained unanswered, implying confirmation.

**Table 1.** Confirming and disconfirming answers to negative questions.

Question format	Main function	Confirming answer		Disconfirming answer	Total
		negative	positive		
<i>kas</i> -initial	challenge	20 (55%)	0	5 (20%)	36
<i>ega</i> -initial	(information) request	55 (56%)	0	16 (22%)	98
declarative	repair, conclusion	106 (74%)	17 (13%)	4 (3%)	143
<i>jah</i> -final	repair, conclusion	27 (56%)	15 (35%)	1 (2%)	48
<i>vä</i> -final	Any	53 (61%)	3 (5%)	8 (13%)	86
Total		296 (72%)		34 (8%)	411

One of the clearest results of the overview is that negative questions overwhelmingly receive confirming answers. Disconfirming ones are rare. There thus seems to be an inherent tilt in the negative questions, they are not neutral (see also Sang 1983: 136–137). At least in conversational interaction, the proposition and its negation are not equally possible in negative polar questions (c.f. Metslang 1981: 26–27). A disconfirming answer is more or less a theoretical option, with the exception of *kas*-questions and *ega*-questions, where the social action carried out is quite

special, challenging or requesting. By formulating a negative question, the speakers overwhelmingly assume that it will be conducive of a negative answer. Positive answers display extra effort in the form of more explicit or enhanced answers. By regularly choosing the negative answer, the speakers display their understanding of the question as “preferring” a negative answer. This is a social regularity already noticed by Sacks (1987 [1973]: 57): the answerers tend to pick the answer that the question exhibits a preference for.

Another clear tendency is that the confirming answer is overwhelmingly a negative one. Positive answers can be used for confirmation only in case of repeat or modified repeat questions (see examples (17) and (23)). Therefore, they are unthinkable with *ega*-questions that do not carry out repair initiations in the form of repeats. A positive answer as a confirmation in case of negatively formulated questions can always be replaced with a negative. This phenomenon is grounded in the degree of epistemic certainty and the type of action. In case the certainty is very high, responses with either polarity may achieve a confirmation. The action being a request for whether the repeated talk is indeed what the prior speaker said, a positive answer confirms it.

Disconfirming answers are most likely with *kas* and *ega*-questions because they constitute challenges designed as reverse polarity assertions and conventionally pessimistic requests. Disconfirmations are least likely with *jah*-questions and declaratives. This can be explained by the epistemic certainty that they convey in the specific contexts. *Vä*-questions that receive a fair amount of disconfirmations often introduce some new aspect to the discourse, for which the epistemic basis in the context is low. In contrast, *jah*-questions always build epistemically on the prior discourse and declaratives do that frequently.

In addition to the interactional and frequency patterns, it is important to establish that the regularities are not academically imposed constructs but also a concern for the participants in real life. The evidence for participant orientation is that they sometimes reformulate their questions half-way through in regard to the grammatical format. In example (29) the speaker first starts out by formulating a *kas*-question, which can be quite challenging. He then opts for an *ega*-initiation which expresses enhanced certainty that the state of affairs is valid but is less challenging. In the end, he adds *võ* (a variant of *vä*), which implies that a positive answer is indeed possible.

- (29) 1 H: → *.hh kas: ega Üllar ei ole kutsund sulle arsti*  
 QUES EGA NAME NEG have call:PPT you:ALL doctor:PRT  
 ‘Hasn’t Üllar called you a doctor?’
- 2 **võ.**  
 QUES
- 3 (1.2)
- 4 V: *ei.*  
 ‘No’

Since the interlocutor is an elderly person, the blame that falls on Üllar in case he has failed to summon a doctor may be considerable. Apparently, the speaker therefore reformulates the question step-by-step to make it least challenging, less insinuating, and less conducive of a negative answer.

Participants in conversation orient to question formats as relevant and potentially consequential features of language. Sequential constraints and social aims shape the grammar of questions and answers, undoubtedly also in case of other types of questions besides the negative ones. In addition to studying positive, alternative, and *wh*-question formats along similar lines, intonation of the questions should be studied in its own right in a non-experimental setting in the future. The current study showed that the reason why conduciveness has been so hard to define for negative questions is that it cannot be dealt with outside the specific context. Conduciveness is accomplished interactionally and the sequentially based expectation of a confirming answer may furthermore cancel the relevance of what the polarity of the answer is. Grammatical devices that may look quite similar out of context, such as negative polar questions, may systematically serve markedly different interactional aims in a variety of sequential positions. Accounting for these helps us to disentangle the conduciveness issue as well as disclose the inherently social nature of grammar.

#### **Glossing conventions** (adapted from G. Jefferson and J. Du Bois)

- underlining – stress or emphasis
- bold** – the item in focus

LOUD	– louder stretch
-	– truncation
[ ]	– overlaps
=	– latching
(0.5)	– pause length in tenths of a second
(.)	– micropause
colo:n	– lengthening of a sound
@	– a laughter syllable
(h)	– laughter within a word
<Q quality Q>	– special quality of talk
<@ smiling @>	– smiling voice
.hh	– inbreath
hh	– outbreath
mts	– lip smack
.	– pitch fall at the end of an intonation unit
?	– pitch rise at the end of an intonation unit
,	– level pitch at the end of an intonation unit
-	– unfinished intonation unit
((snort))	– transcriber's comments
/---/	– part of the turn is left out
(added)	– this part added in idiomatic English
1,2,3	– person
ABL	– ablative
ADS	– adessive
ALL	– allative
COND	– conditional
ELT	– elative
GEN	– genitive
GI	– emphatic suffix
ILL	– illative



IMF	– imperfect
IMP	– imperative
IMS	– impersonal
INF	– infinitive
INS	– inessive
KI	– emphatic suffix
KOM	– komitative
NEG	– negation particle
PRT	– partitive
PL	– plural
PPT	– past participle
QUES	– question particle
SG	– singular
SUP	– supinum
TER	– terminative
TRA	– translative
other capital letters	– untranslatable particles

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