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# Estonian reduplication in action sequences

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## 1. Introduction

Regardless of many studies on Estonian reduplication the numerous reduplicative possibilities of everyday conversational language have not been of interest for linguists. This study is a first attempt to fill in this gap by outlining the types of reduplicated tokens in conversation and by describing the sequential occurrence regularities of one of these types. It is thus a study dealing with the interface between grammatical structure, prosody, and action sequences in human encounters.

## 2. The data

The data comes from 323 naturally occurring phone conversations of two types: telemarketing calls by three telemarketers selling one of the largest daily newspapers in Estonia during one night each (109 conversations), and everyday calls between family members, relatives, friends, and colleagues, recorded at informants' homes. All in all the data consists of more than 10 hours of conversational language. The great majority of the informants seem to speak Common Estonian, which is the oral variety closest to the Written Standard. The corpus includes representatives of both sexes and all ages but there is somewhat more data from younger females who were my primary informants.

Altogether, the corpus comprised of more than 700 cases of reduplication. This exposition will concentrate on the core of one problematic type only, which involves about 70 cases. The exclusions consist of reduplicated back-channels (*mhmh mhmh*, *ahah ahah* etc., 85 cases), response and other discourse particles (*jaa jaa* 'yes' with its numerous variants, *ot ot* 'wait' etc., 231 cases), emotive response tokens (e.g. *aiaiaa*, *oioi*, *jess jess*, *kurat kurat kurat* 'devil', cases not counted), and conjunctions (*ja ja* 'and', *et et* 'that', *või või* 'or', *aga aga* 'but', 255 cases).

All of these types seem to have somewhat specific occurrence patterns but since there is no previous research in Estonian conversational reduplication, only vague outlines may be drawn. Reduplicated back-channels have a tendency to occur after single back-channels produced by the same speaker, thus being somewhat "stronger". Reduplicated particles may turn out to play a different role from their unreduplicated

counterparts, e.g. *jaa* and *jaaja/jajaa/jaajah* etc. are not completely interchangeable. Reduplicated conjunctions may have their origin in hesitation phenomena but the four mentioned above (*ja*, *et*, *või*, and *aga*) may have developed into independent boundary items. Increased intensity is certainly the most general feature that can be expressed via reduplication, which is clearly evident in the reduplicated emotive response tokens. Intensity is also the feature often mentioned in earlier linguistic research on reduplication.

### 3. Earlier research

Most studies on reduplication, unfortunately, do not seem to give any context whatsoever for the tokens, or, which is most common, the context that is invented. The work is often based on dictionaries and/or word archives, or on purely intuitive data. Since reality is often much more complicated than we can conjure up, working with actual spoken data is likely to reveal different facets of the phenomena.

Earlier studies on reduplication in Estonian and related languages are mostly accumulative (see e.g. Alvre 1972; 1976; 1983; 1984; Mäger 1966; Sepp 1985 on Estonian dialects, Erelt 1997 on Standard (written) Estonian, Erelt & Punttila 1992; 1993; 1999 on Finno-Ugric languages, and Tauli 1966 on Uralic languages). The authors of these studies are mainly concerned either with the internal structure of the reduplicated tokens, the analysis of the elements, their classification, or their historical descent. The context is exposed in some studies, e.g. Sepp (1985) quotes examples from transcribed dialect texts but these traditional dialect interviews are very monologic. The present data, on the other hand, could be characterized as extremely dialogic, which enabled me to work on a particular type of reduplication which will be called *dialogic reduplication* below for ease of reference.

Dialogic reduplication has occurred problematic for those who have wanted to create an all-encompassing classification of reduplicative phenomena in Estonian. An example can be found in Erelt 1997. He tries to get rid of it by claiming that these cases are repetitions of a sentence rather than cases of real reduplication. He admits, though, that the distinction is cumbersome to maintain.

"It is not always easy to distinguish reduplication as stem repetition from sentence and text repetition because a sentence, too, may consist of a single word. Many one-word sentences, however, can be easily extended into multi-word ones without any shift in the function of the repetition – and thus their sentencehood can be established, e.g. *Kas sa tuled juba? – Tulen, tulen – Küll ma tulen, küll ma tulen* 'Are you coming already? – I'm coming, I'm coming – Don't worry, don't worry.'" (Erelt 1997: 10.)

Erelt thus states that it is necessary to carry out a kind of replacement test in order to know whether we are dealing with reduplication or not. Unfortunately, the English translation of the example is very confusing. The replacement carried out is *tulen* -> *küüll ma tulen*, 'come:1SG' -> KÜLL I come:1SG<sup>1</sup>. What is not clear, though, is why *tulen*, *tulen* should be more replaceable with a sentence than for example another case of reduplication that Erelt presents, namely *räägib, räägib, räägib* 'talk:3SG, talk:3SG, talk:3SG' (1997: 25). I suppose we could say *ja ta räägib ja ta räägib ja ta räägib* 'and he/she talk:3SG and he/she talk:3SG and he/she talk:3SG'.

More importantly, though, it should be noticed that the author cannot talk about dialogic reduplication without inventing a rudimentary conversational context for it. Looking closely at action sequences might thus help us to account for Estonian reduplication in a more coherent way.

As for studies of reduplication in other languages and in general linguistics, I have not succeeded in finding any that would discuss context in a satisfying way. Their semantic analysis, however, ties nicely with my study. Moravcsik who talks about universal features of reduplicative tokens points out that reduplication recurrently expresses increased quantity and amount of emphasis (1978: 317); Botha who looks at Afrikaans reduplication from a generative viewpoint makes a distinction between emphasis and intensity (1988: 97, 115–117), and arrives at a unit of semantic content called [increased]; Abbi (1980) who discusses Hindi reduplication from a generative semantic point of view talks about intensification among other things. It is thus clear that reduplication often has something to do with increased intensity, emphasis, or quantity.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980) and Haiman (1980) therefore maintain the iconic nature of reduplication which Kiyomi (1995) argues partly against because of the frequent expression of diminution with the help of reduplication.

In the case of Estonian it seems quite plausible that reduplication is iconic, i.e. that two is more intense and/or emphatic than one. As Lakoff and Johnson put it: more of form stands for more of content (1980: 128). I have not come across any cases of for example diminution expressed with reduplication in Estonian apart from in stems already expressing smallness where reduplication intensifies this feature. In the following, I will try to show how this iconicity is made use of in Estonian conversations.

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<sup>1</sup> See the appendix, Transcription conventions, for clarification of the symbols.

#### 4. Classification

After narrowing down the scope of the study by leaving out reduplicated back-channels, discourse particles, emotive response tokens, and conjunctions, we are still left with quite variable data. One way to take care of it would be to look for helpful classifications. According Erelt & Punttila (1999: 4) there are four main types of reduplication (the examples are from my corpus, frequency of occurrence in the corpus is given in parentheses):

- \* Intensifying (a property): e.g. *oopis oopis teine* 'completely completely different' (2 cases)
- \* Aspectual: *seebitasin ja seebitasin* 'I soaped and soaped' (6 cases)
- \* Quantifying: *kümneid ja kümneid aastaid* 'tens and tens of years' (2 cases)
- \* Indefinite: *see ja see* 'this and this' (1 case)

Although at a first glance this classification does not seem to suit to conversational data at all (it covers 11 cases out of more than 700), if we widen the first category intensifying beyond the realm of properties, many more cases from the present corpus would probably fit in there. But more importantly, these 11 cases differ from all the others by not being sequentially restricted, i.e. they can occur anywhere in more monologic texts or inside a turn, which is why they have been much more available for students of written language. After leaving out even those cases we are left with 76 examples of dialogic reduplication.

#### 5. Sequential analysis of dialogic reduplication

Analysis of action sequences has been a common praxis in conversation analytic work. It has demonstrated that ordinary conversation is very finely ordered and that every turn is designed in detail as a response to the previous one(s) (for a classic, see Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974). There is nothing that happens by chance, or it will be reacted to by the participants.

Since a lot of activities are carried out verbally - in phone conversations all activities are carried out verbally - language should be in some way adapted to this task. As has been shown already, several linguistic phenomena can be fully described only by accounting for the action sequences where they occur (e.g. Goodwin 1979; 1980; 1981; Ford 1993; Fox & Thompson 1990; Keevallik 1999; 2000; Lerner 1991; Lindström 1999; Ochs, Schegloff & Thompson 1996).

Reduplication in Estonian seems to be used in a specific way in conversations. It cannot occur anywhere (apart from the Written Standard cases), its occurrence is restricted to certain sequential positions. In other words, only specific actions seem to be carried out by reduplicated items.

According to my database one could identify three dominating patterns in the usage of reduplication. Note, however, that these patterns are not meant to exclude each other but rather to overlap, since in real usage different characteristics often coincide in a single case. The numbers given under the description of each pattern are thus only meant to underline the frequency of each characteristic per se and their sum will not be equal to the overall number of the cases under scrutiny.

### 5.1. Second pair parts of ritualized exchanges

Conventionally recognizable pairs of actions have been called adjacency pairs in conversation analytic literature (defined in Schegloff & Sacks 1973: 295–296), and ritualized exchanges like greetings and farewells are the simplest examples of these action pairs. The initiating action is called the first pair part, and the responsive one the second pair part.

In Estonian conversation the second pair part of a ritualized exchange may be reduplicated. A typical case is presented in Example 1, where the speaker O, who is the caller, says *tere* 'hi' and her friend answers *tere tere* 'hi hi'.

#### Example 1. Greeting

- 1 O: tere  
hi  
Hi
- 2 T: no **tere tere**  
NO hi hi  
Hi
- M1A7

In the same way, the second pair parts of farewells can be reduplicated. Furthermore, reduplication occurs in second pair parts of other ritualized exchanges, e.g. in the pairs *thanks – you're welcome*, and *good luck – thanks*. Thus the reduplicated second pair part does not have to involve a repeated word from the first pair part, see Example 2.

#### Example 2. Thanks

- 1 K: ma väga tänan [te]id  
I much thank:1SG you:PL:PRT  
Thanks a lot

- 2 M: [pa-]  
 3 M: **palun palun**  
 you're welcome you're welcome  
 You're welcome  
 S1 B2

This pattern of reduplicated second pair parts of ritualized exchanges is very common. The present corpus includes 35 such cases.

## 5.2. Confirmation/disconfirmation and agreement/disagreement

Even confirmative/disconfirmative and agreeing/disagreeing actions are often carried out as second pair parts since they presuppose something to confirm or to agree with to be expressed in the first pair part. These exchanges are less ritualized and fossilized than those described above. – In Example 3, M's supposition that Kadri is not at home is confirmed by V in line 2.

### Example 3. Confirmation of a supposition

- 1 M: @ ega Kadrit vist ei ole  
 EGA Kadri:PRT probably NEG be  
 Kadri isn't there, I guess  
 2 V: **ei ole ei [ole]**  
 NEG be NEG be  
 No, she isn't  
 M1B4

In Example 4 E agrees with T's assessment that the recording is exciting.

### Example 4. Agreeing with an assessment

- 1 T: **põnev eks ole**  
 exciting EKS be  
 Exciting, isn't it  
 2 E: **põnev põnev**  
 exciting exciting  
 It is  
 P4B7

This pattern is represented by 27 examples in the present corpus but since the reduplicated particles *ei ei* 'no' and *jaa jaa* 'yes' with variants often seem to be used in the same way, the actual number of confirmations/disconfirmations and agreements/disagreements carried out by reduplicative means is certainly much higher.

### 5.3. Repeated action

A consecutive instance of an action may also be carried out with the help of a reduplicated item. For example, an unanswered question may be repeated in this way. In Example 5, a young man K wants to know how his conversation partner has changed during the years they have not met.

#### Example 5. Repeating an extortion

- 1 K: *missugune sa oled siis*  
what kind of you:SG be:2SG then  
What are you like then?
- 2 E: *mai tea (.) [akkasin]*  
I:NEG know start:IMF:1SG  
I don't know, I started to
- 3 K: *[teistmoodi] ah*  
different AH  
Different. What?
- 4 E: *ma õpin ju seal ee m Peda seda m koreograafiat*  
I study:1SG JU there Peda:INS this:PRT choreography:PRT  
Well, I study choreography at Peda.
- 5 K: *no:h*  
NOH  
Okay?
- 6 E: *no:h (0.3) siis mõtle ise peaga*  
NOH then think:IMP self head:COM  
Well, think yourself then!
- 7 K: *@@@ .hh @@@ .hh mis m@is mõttes r@äägi räägi@*  
what what sense:INS speak:SG:IMP speak:SG:IMP  
In what sense? Speak up!
- K3A7

In line 1 K asks E what she now looks like. (They have been talking about looks and whether they would recognize each other in the street. E has just told K that her looks have changed.) E answers in line 4 that she studies choreography. K does not understand this hint and urges E to continue her explanation by producing a continuer (*no:h*). In line 6 E refuses to be more explicit and K then continues his pursuit with two further extortions in what sense and speak up. The latter (*räägi räägi*) is reduplicated.

There are 27 examples in the present corpus that could be characterized by the action repetition pattern but it can even be observed with back-channels (which are typically not used sequence initially either). When a speaker, for example, is listening to a narrative, some of the consecutive back-channels are more likely to be reduplicated, i.e. *mhmh mhmh* or *ahah ahah*.

We can thus see that reduplication occurs in specific conversational sequences in non-sequence initial positions. This is not to say that reduplication necessarily has to occur in these positions. These are merely the types of sequential slots where the use of a reduplicative item is one possibility of carrying out the relevant action.

It is intuitively quite plausible that reduplication intensifies some of these items, which would also be coherent with the results of earlier linguistic research, but without psycholinguistic experiments it is of course impossible to prove that. At the same time, it is not completely obvious that it should be merely increased intensity that would explain the usage of e.g. reduplicated greetings and agreements (see Examples 1 and 4). It might rather be a combination of sequential regularity and the intensity.

## 6. The syntax-morphology interface and prosody

Examples 3 and 5 above involve a repetition of not only one but two words (*ei ole* 'isn't' and *ei old* 'wasn't') and it is still considered a case of reduplication in the present study. This is of course problematic for a linguistic analysis where division lines between stem repetition and sentence repetition (e.g. Erelt 1997: 10) or inflectional reduplication and complete reduplication in compounding or in syntax (e.g. Matthews 1991: 143) have been maintained. But if we listen to native speakers of Estonian, it is first and foremost prosody that persuades us not to draw a line between e.g. *on on* 'is' and *ei ole ei ole* 'isn't'.

The prosodic pattern of these items is namely extremely similar, while it regularly differs from the prosody of clear instances of sentence repetition by coherent pitch contour, no internal sound-lengthenings, only one prominent stress, and lack of internal pauses as well as pitch reset. Furthermore, all these prosodic characteristics pertain even to tokens of Written Standard reduplication in the present corpus (e.g. *kümneid ja kümneid* 'tens and tens', *see ja see* 'this and this' etc.). Prosody could thus be an argument for considering e.g. *ei taha ei taha* 'don't want' sometimes a case of sentence repetition and sometimes a case of reduplication (as is the case in this corpus): if pronounced with two separate pitch contours, two prominent stresses, and a pause in the middle, it could be analysed as a repetition of a sentence.

Naturally, the longer the unit, the harder it is to pronounce it with the reduplication prosody. In the present corpus the relevant reduplicative cases involve only personal pronouns and the negation particle *ei* – there are never more than two words at a time. A case transcribed as *ma ei tea* (0.3) *ma ei tea* 'I don't know I don't know' involves a pause in the middle, two prominent stresses and is produced with two separate pitch contours. Therefore, this is no longer considered a case of reduplication.

## 7. Conclusion

In this study the domain of Estonian reduplication has been extended to include repeated tokens in everyday conversation. It seems to be difficult to find either formal, functional or prosodic features that would keep dialogic reduplication apart from other cases of reduplication.

In order to see the nice regularity in the usage of reduplicated items we had to look at conversational sequences and found three distinguishable actions that typically involved reduplication: second pair parts of ritualized exchanges, confirmation/disconfirmation and agreement/disagreement as well as repeated action. One of the most interesting outcomes of this study is probably the fact that verbs as well as adjectives, nouns, pronouns, particles – almost anything – can be reduplicated if in these sequential positions. It seems to be the type of social action (e.g. confirmation, ritual reply) that is connected to the linguistic means of reduplication in Estonian.

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## Appendix

### Transcription Conventions

underlining	stress or emphasis
bold	the focussed example
-	truncation
[ ]	overlaps
=	latching or continuation of the same speaker across intervening lines
(0.5)	pause length in tenths of a second
colo:n	lengthening of a sound
@	a laughter syllable
.hh	breathing in, the estimated relative length corresponds to the number of h-s
1SG	person+number
ADS	adessive
IMF	imperfect
IMP	imperative
INS	inessive
COM	comitative
KÜLL	untranslatable particles
M1A7	code of the recording
NEG	negation particle
PRT	partitive
PL	plural

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