

# Mundane reaction words in Swedish Estonian

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One of Raimo's favourite research topics has been Swedish Estonian (henceforth SweEst). He has worked on linguistic, historical and social aspects of the variety but, arguably, his most prominent contribution has been in the field of lexicon. In this connection, he has remarked the following.

“Swedish greetings and interjections, on the other hand, appear **extremely often** in spoken SweEst, even in the use of older Swedish Estonians. As a matter of fact, items like *hej* ‘hello, good bye’, *juu* ‘oh yes’, *ja`haa* ‘oh really’, *jas`soo* ‘indeed’, *hopsan* ‘whoops’ and others of the kind can out of hand be described as belonging to **the most frequent Swedish loans** occurring in spoken SweEst. Altogether, most younger Swedish Estonians seem to know remarkably few Estonian interjections, if any at all.” (Raag 1982:53, my emphasis – LK)

I will take this quote as a starting point to systematically explore some areas of the lexicon that are predominantly represented in everyday speech. Broadly speaking, the words under scrutiny belong to the category of particles (see e.g. Hakulinen et al. 2004). Particles are relatively short items that cannot be inflected. They do not carry core syntactic roles. Many pragmatic particles implement social actions on their own or in combination with other particles. The nature and function of pragmatic particles can only be revealed in sequences of interactional moves.

## **Introduction: particles in language contact**

In studies on multilingualism and language contact, pragmatic particles have been called utterance markers (Matras 1998) or discourse markers (Maschler 1994, Salmons 1990). This kind of items have, for example, been defined as everything but the propositional language (Fraser 1996), as the computative level of language use versus the representational level (Rouchota 1998) or as metalanguaging contra denotative language (Maschler 1994). Among the members of these word groups one can find classic discourse markers as well as conjunctions, routine words as well as modal or evaluative words, but also interjections, tags, and different kinds of particles. This study focuses on a subgroup of reaction words that are used after actions that they comment on or react to.

Similarly to Raimo's claim above, it has been reported in a number of studies that pragmatic particles have a special status in an intense language contact situation. They have been characterized as contact-vulnerable (Matras 1998: 293). Matras has shown how the speakers of a smaller and less prestigious language (Romani) organize the meta-level of their conversation in a pragmatically dominant language, so that the latter becomes as if a commenting code to the content-level language. When it comes to SweEst, Oksaar (1961: 52) has also observed that the most easily adopted items include interjections, greetings, thanks, swearing and other affective means. As to code-switching in general, it has been shown that code-switches occur most often in one-word units and pragmatic particles. In a quantitative study on Spanish-Hebrew conversation (Berk-Seligson 1986), single nouns constituted 40 percent of all the cases of code-switching, and right on the second place were pragmatic particles with 23 percent (*ibid.* p. 325). At the same time, these extremely frequent items have usually been left aside in the studies of lexicon in contact situations, partly because many types of particles simply do not occur in traditional language interviews, but possibly also because they are non-propositional. They are per-

ceived as something peripheral, as involuntary and meaningless bodily expressions. Even the speakers, who are otherwise conscious about speaking one or the other language, may consider them not “real” language.

However, there is no question about the fact that pragmatic particles, including interjections, are highly conventionalized and specific to every language community (Wierzbicka 1991: 285–339). Using a specific interjection may indicate the speaker’s background as clearly as any other lexical item. A speaker of SweEst can recognize a speaker of Estonian spoken in Estonia (henceforth EstEst) merely on the basis of her back-channel behavior, and vice versa. At the same time, pragmatic particles are crucial in spoken interaction and therefore frequent. They tend to occur more often than most lexical items and may therefore imprint the speech even more than other loanwords.

The reasons why multilingual speakers easily borrow pragmatic particles are many. To start with, multilingual speakers are likely to use them very frequently in the source language. The particles are quite automatic and closely tied to their particular interactional functions, such as expressing surprise or disgust, agreeing or indicating attentive listening. This automaticity may be a contributing reason for why it is harder to keep several codes apart in the case of pragmatic particles than it is in the case of lexical items. Furthermore, it has been argued that metalanguaging is iconic and thus structurally similar in all languages (Maschler 1994: 359). Producing it in one code instead of several ones on a daily basis relieves the multilingual speaker of some cognitive burden (Matras 1998: 320–326). This may result in the convergence of several codes within the domain of metalanguaging, as seems to have happened in some German-American dialects and the English variety spoken by the same speakers (Salmons 1990). Pragmatic particles contribute to fluent and coherent interaction in which each interactive step makes sense for the interlocutors. In a multilingual community, it may be rational and efficient to achieve this in a single code. Furthermore,

it may be cognitively easier to keep the content words apart in different codes due to their lesser degree of automaticity. As the above studies have shown, it is harder to be aware of conjunctions, fillers, and utterance particles than it is to be aware of content words. It seems to be even harder to keep intonational features apart on particles in a language contact situation (Tao and Thompson 1991). In the case of SweEst the reaction words are regularly used as a lexical-intonational package, and sometimes it is only the pitch movement that distinguishes between an EstEst and SweEst item. The current chapter gives a qualitative overview of the pragmatic particles that are characteristic of SweEst as compared to EstEst.

## **The data and coding**

The data was collected through different kinds of audio-recorded research interviews on life-stories, social trauma, language use, and community history carried out at different times by Aili Aarelaid, Rutt Hinrikus, Virve Raag, Raimo Raag, Edgar Saar and myself<sup>1</sup> (186 hours in all). I also video-recorded 36 hours of social events in different parts of Sweden, mainly Uppsala, Stockholm, Göteborg and Lund in 2004. The codes after the examples consist of the following:

### 1. Source type

- I      interview
- F      free conversation, audio or video recording
- R      radio program

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<sup>1</sup> I hereby express my sincere gratitude to all the interviewers for letting me use their data.

2. Generation<sup>2</sup>

- 1a born in Estonia in 1930 or earlier
- 1b born in Estonia between 1931–1944
- 2a born in Sweden 1944–1959
- 2b born in Sweden 1960–1975
- 3 born in Sweden 1976–1991

3. Gender

- f female
- m male

4. Year of the example

Thus the code *I2am04* means that the example has been recorded during an interview with a male representative of generation 2a in the year 2004.

## Interjections

Interjections are specific ritualized ways of reacting to unexpected events or circumstances (Hakulinen 2004: 816). In SweEst, one can hear specific phonological variants of them, such as *oj* in contrast to the EstEst *oi*. Instead of the vowel *i*, the approximant *j* is used. (The same can happen in *okej*, EstEst *okei*). *Oj* is a frequent surprise token and in SweEst it can also occur in the form *ojdo* (Swe *ojdå*). It also occurs in particle chains, such as *ojdo. Jahaa*. The item *nähä*, approx. ‘no!!’ may also be used in SweEst to mark surprise, probably at something that the speaker did not want to happen.

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<sup>2</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> generation is formed by adult bilinguals who learned Swedish either before or after the age of 15. Generation 2 is the first Swedish-born generation, and generation 3 is the second Swedish-born generation.

Negative aesthetic evaluation may be achieved with the Swedish *usch*. This cannot even always be transcribed properly in EstEst, as it is pronounced with the velar fricative [x] and thereby sounds really foreign (ex. 1). It can also be pronounced with the fricative š (ex. 2), supposedly depending on the dialectal background of the speaker in Sweden. The latter example is about a rock band that the speaker does not like and therefore the evaluation is clearly negative. All the particles in the examples have been transcribed according to Estonian orthography, the focused particle is bold-faced. Untranslatable particles are rendered in capital letters in the English translation.

- (1) küll e küll sellel naisel on k:ole kübar ja:: **uhh** ää  
'What an awful hat this lady has UHH.' (R2bm94)
- (2) ma ei tea mis sellest öelda. ma olen nii, **uš**  
'I don't know what to say, I'm like UŠ.' (R2bm93)

An emotional evaluation of the situation can be implemented by using the name of god. In example (3), the speaker does it in Swedish (after an already code-switched word *geggamoja*).

- (3) vaata milline geggamoja **herregüd**  
'Look what a mess, my lord!' (F1bf04)

Negative moral evaluation is expressed by the Swedish *ajabaja fy* in the following example (4). As this interjection is reported in a quote by a Swedish school teacher, this can also be a case of code-switching for dramatic purposes. The Swedish and Estonian high front labialized vowels, *y* and *ü* respectively, are acoustically very close to each other (Raag 1983: 32).

- (4) kui laps läks kooli ja oskas lugeda siis see oli ju **aiabaia fü** seda ei tohi teha  
'When a child went to school and could read then it was naughty naughty, you can't do that.' (I2af04)

In one of the recordings a dog-owner claims that she shouts *fü* (Swe. *fy*) to her dog, which is a prohibiting order. The Estonian counterpart would not be that different – *fuu* – which might be a contributing factor to the ease of borrowing (Keevallik 2006:123-124).

Finally, one of the very few swearings in the data is *fü faan*, the Swedish *fy fan* 'damned'. It has been suggested that cursing is especially prone to occur in a foreign language, as this apparently relieves some of its perceived strength (Oksaar 1961: 52, among others) but in the present data the cursing does not stick out as an area of extraordinary language interference. Emphatic elements are generally prone to quicker change, and interjection use in SweEst certainly corroborates this claim.

## Dialogue particles

Dialogue particles are particles that can occur as a turn on their own and thus carry out an action on their own. Their main functions include information management, responding and agreeing (Hakulinen 2004: 773–774). There are numerous representatives of this class in SweEst that diverge from the EstEst usage. The following table (1) shows the registered SweEst variants with their counterparts in EstEst. Note that the departing point has here been the idiosyncratic SweEst particles and therefore the table should not be seen as an exclusive list of all the occurring particles in the respective functions in both varieties. Since dialogue particles can easily occur in characteristic recurrent combinations, the frequent particle chains, such as *ja just de*, have been included. When there is no phonologically similar counterpart in EstEst with the same

function, the cell has been left empty. Accordingly, there might be a phonologically similar counterpart in another function in EstEst (e.g. *okei* as an agreement token).

Table 1. Dialogue particles in SweEst and their counterparts in EstEst

Function	SweEst	EstEst
Information receipt	jasso(o)	ah soo, asso
	jaha(a) ha	ahah, ahhaa aa ↓
	↑ aa jaa	
	okej	
(Dis)confirmation, (dis) agreement	jaa aa ↑	jaa
	juu	
	nei/näi nähä njaa	
	mm ↑	↓ mm, mhmh, mhmm
	↑ just de ja ↑ just ja ↑ just de ja ↑ just ja	↓ just (just) (just) ↓ jah/jaa ↓ just
	ja jamen javisst	
Responses to yes/no questions	aa	jaa
	juu	
	uu jaa aa oo jaa	oo jaa
	nei/näi nee/nää	ei

In the following, different categories represented in the table will be exemplified. First, some examples of divergent information receipts in SweEst:

- (5) T: kuule Aarne su koogid on kõik, tule korja ära nüüd oma asjad  
'Listen, Aarne your cakes are there, come and take your stuff.'  
A: **jassoo**. niet keegi ei tahtnud- ei maitsnud rahvale  
'Oh, so nobody wanted- people didn't like it.' (F1am04)
- (6) A: nendel oli see muusikaline väljaõpe  
'They had this musical training.'  
K: **aa jaa**.  
'Right.' (F1af04)
- (7) S: Arvo Pärt on seal õppinud minu aegu koos õppisime  
'Arvo Pärt has studied there when I was there, we studied together'  
T: **jahaa**.  
'Oh!' (I1am01)

Sometimes, the information receipt is a combination of EstEst and Swedish particles, as in *jahso* (F1af04), which is a combination of EstEst *ah soo* and Swe *jasså*. The English loanword *okei/okej* is probably of relatively late origin in both Swedish and Estonian. Unfortunately, these kinds of words have traditionally not been recorded in the dictionaries and their first occurrence is therefore hard to trace. In contemporary EstEst, it expresses agreement with proposals and is as such a recurrent component of phone-call closures. In Swedish, however, as well as in SweEst, *okej* can be used as an information receipt (Keevallik 2006: 126). In short, information receipts in EstEst and SweEst differ mainly in their phonetic/phonological detail and semantic/pragmatic extension. Besides, in SweEst the tokens can be used in repetitive patterns that lack in EstEst.

Confirmations and agreements can be carried out with *aa* instead of the EstEst *jaa*. Very typically, the intonation contours on these items are rising. Phonetically, the Swedish-influenced *aa*'s are always and *mm*'s nearly always produced with initial glottal stops. In EstEst, initial glottal stop occurs merely in strongly emphasized vowel-initial words but not in confirmations, because they do not start with a vowel. Thus, EstEst and SweEst differ in the phonetic structure of the confirmation items.

(8) R: *türgi keeles on ju õ ka*

'There is *õ* in Turkish.'

P: **aa?**

'Yeah.'

(F3m81)

(9) R: *aga võibolla sellepärast ka et tuleb uusi artiste peale ja muusika suunad ju muutuvad*

'But may be because new musicians appear and the trends change in music.'

L: **mm?** *ei mudugi*

'Yeah, of course.'

(R2bm93)

Even the turn-final confirmation can be *aa* in SweEst instead of EstEst *jah*.

(10) H: *seda tehtakse. aa,*

'This is done, yeah.'

(I2af01)

Sometimes the specificity lies in the repetition patterns. A characteristic feature of SweEst is that intonation on every repeated confirmation item can be rising, while in EstEst there is typically only a single falling intonation contour that covers two to three items.

(11) R: mhmh, noh see oli siis kahekümnendal augustil see  
'Well that was on the twentieth of august.'

A: **jaa? jaa?**

'Yeah, yeah.'

(I2am05)

There are a number of formats for expressing agreement that are specific in SweEst. The particle chain *aa oo jaa* does not occur in EstEst, as is the case with several combinations involving *just*, especially with cliticized *ja*, as illustrated in (12)

(12) R: nimetavas käändes,

'In the nominative.'

H: **ja just ja**, täpselt ja.

'Yeah, right, exactly.'

(F2af81)

The Swedish confirmation *javisst*, which also originally consists of two words *ja* and *visst*, has been borrowed into SweEst. It is used in cases when the speaker actually has access to the information but marks just-remembering in her response. Again, the combinatory parts have counterparts in EstEst, even though the EstEst *vist* 'maybe' is not equivalent with the Swedish *visst* 'sure'. An entirely new confirmation and agreement item in SweEst is *juu* which marks disagreement with negatively formulated questions (Keevallik 2006: 128-129). There is no counterpart to it in EstEst. Another divergent particle in SweEst is *njaa*, a combination of the negation particle and the confirmation particle that is used for agreeing with reservation.

The last group of dialogue particles involves positive and negative answers, which may constitute a turn on their own. One of the most striking differences between EstEst and SweEst confirmations is the frequent lack of the initial glide in *aa*, which in EstEst would be *jaa*. In fact, in conventional written Swedish it would also be *ja*, while in spoken usage the two formats vary.

(13) R: kas sa ise käisid ka täienduskoolis.

‘Did you yourself attend the complementary school?’

V: **aa?** Käisin küll.

‘Yeah. I did.’

(I1bm04)

The response particle *nei/näi* or *nee* ‘no’ is borrowed from Swedish but also happens to be phonologically close to the Estonian negative particle *ei*.

(14) A: ei tehta nii[moo]di jah.=

‘It’s not done like that, right?’

H: [nee,]

‘No.’

(I2af01)

In terms of repetition, in SweEst response patterns such as *jaa jaa aa aa*, *jaa aa mm mm* or *mm mm mm* are not unusual. Furthermore, every item on this tier is typically produced with its own intonation contour. This kind of extensive repeating does not occur in EstEst. In the spoken language corpora<sup>3</sup> the most extreme cases are *jaa jaa jaa* and *mbmh mbmh mbmh mbmh* (a different token altogether), and none of the longer repetitions involve separate contours on every item.

Another variety-specific feature in SweEst is the enhanced positive answer *oo/uu jaa* (Swe *o ja* with the high back labialized vowel). While *oo jaa* (with the mid-high back vowel) occurs in EstEst, it carries much more emphasis and is often used for sarcasm. Another emphatic positive answer in the SweEst data is *jajamen* (Swe. *ja jamän*), which does not occur in EstEst. It is used to underline the truthfulness of the answer.

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<sup>3</sup> The EstEst corpora used are my own telephone corpus of about 120 000 words and the constantly growing publicly available Tartu corpus available at

(15) A: aa niet tal on üks vanamees ka kuskil (XX)

‘Oh, so she has an old husband somewhere.’

P: vanamees on ja, **jajamen.**

‘She does have an old husband, absolutely.’ (F1bf04)

In short, a range of (dis)confirming and (dis)agreeing formats have been borrowed into SweEst from Swedish. They display Swedish prosody, repetition, and combinatory patterns. Furthermore, a grammatical contrast in answering positively and negatively formulated questions has been introduced according to the Swedish model.

## Conclusion

This paper gave an overview of reaction particles characteristic of SweEst. It underlined the importance of studying speaker actions in order to reveal linguistic, pragmatic, or cultural interference. In a multilingual community the dominant language is likely to interfere with minority languages even on the pragmatic level, and that involves the use of particles, many of which are produced relatively automatically. Furthermore, the speakers never comment on their usage of pragmatic particles in the interviews or during the course of a conversation. In contrast, when it comes to content words, they may say things like “as the Swedes say” to flag that they are using loans (Keevallik 2012).

A high degree of interference, such as described above, presumes very good command of the dominant language. It is cognitively difficult to keep several systems working at once. An attempt to reduce this processing load may be the reason why metalanguaging is reduced to one code (Matras 1998: 291). Furthermore, when producing many of the above particles, the main aim of the speakers is to carry out certain actions, such as expressing surprise or agree. Since the speakers are bilingual, they have probably been carrying

out the same actions daily in Swedish, and finally the dominant language particles may have got tightly linked to those particular activities. To the extent that the original ones have been pushed into oblivion.

Naturally, the participants can draw conclusions on the speaker's linguistic and social background on the basis of her choice of particles. In fact, there are various sociolinguistic reasons for borrowing pragmatic particles. They may be borrowed from prestigious majority languages in order to give one's talk a prestigious flavor. This has been suggested in the case of Central American Indian languages that have borrowed discourse markers from Spanish (Stolz and Stolz 1996). One may want to display a certain group identity, play around with the language, or demonstrate proficiency in a prestigious code. Since pragmatic particles guarantee fluent interaction, they certainly have a strong social potential. Even in the process of second language acquisition, the speakers tend to treat pragmatic particles differently. At a certain point second language learners overuse the particles, such as *you know* and *I mean* in English, in order to create the impression of a fluent speaker. Therefore, frequency, automaticity in relation to actions, syntactic independence, air of fluency, sociolinguistic prestige, and reduction of cognitive load are probably all relevant factors in the borrowing of pragmatic particles.

A quantitative study on frequencies in different generations and social groups remains to be done but it should be underlined that many of the above loans have infiltrated the language of the oldest generation as well. These are the speakers who may otherwise speak Estonian that is virtually indistinct from EstEst. However, items such as *jahaa*, *jassoo* and *ojdo* occur in their talk and make the speakers stick out among the rest of the speakers of Estonian. When giving talks about these particles to my SweEst informants, I often receive questions about what Estonian Estonians would say instead of *ojdo*, for example. This is supporting evidence that the SweEst community has adopted the Swedish item to the extent

that it is now perceived as the only way of expressing surprise. For sure, as Raimo has shown (1982), Swedish Estonians have accepted other loans that they do not perceive as foreign any more, but the special status of particles lies in their quick adoption and extremely frequent use.

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