

## MULTIPLE MOTIVATIONS FOR MEANING OF AN ELATIVE *WH*-CONSTRUCTION IN ESTONIAN

Renate Pajusalu

*University of Tartu*

**Abstract.** The article discusses an elative *wh*-construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>elative</sub> V?] in the Estonian language. Formally the construction is a question, but pragmatically it can be regarded as prohibition or negation of the sense of the proposition. It is a mixed construction, which consists of lexical, morphological, and pragmatic elements. The aim is to analyse what motivates the formation of the meaning of the construction.

**Keywords:** constructions, *wh*-construction, local cases, questions, semantics, pragmatics

### 1. Introduction

The focus of construction grammar has typically been on productive, simple sentence patterns (e.g. the resultative construction, Goldberg 1995) or rare and idiomatic constructions “in the sense that a large construction may specify a semantics (and/or pragmatics) that is distinct from what may be calculated from the associated semantics of the set of smaller constructions that could be used to build the same morphosyntactic object” (Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor 2003:243). A classic example of the latter is the *let alone*-construction in the English language where constructions may specify not only syntactic, but also lexical, semantic, and pragmatic information (ibid. 243). Such constructions of elements of various level and regularity have also been called mixed constructions, which “have some components based on a more regular rule-like patterns and some components based on more idiosyncratic conventions including particular words and/or morphemes” (Tomasello 2003:102). Recently it has been emphasized that a dialogue context longer than a sentence should often be regarded as the constituent of a construction as well (Linell 2005).

Goldberg (1995:4) defines a construction as follows: “C is a CONSTRUCTION iff<sub>def</sub> C is a form-meaning pair <F<sub>i</sub>, S<sub>i</sub>> such that some aspect of F<sub>i</sub> or some aspect of S<sub>i</sub> is not strictly predictable from C’s component parts or from other previously established constructions” (for a slightly different definition or description of a construction see Fillmore, Kay O’Connor 2003:501, Croft, Cruse 2001:247).

The present article analyses an Estonian construction that is rather rare in corpora, but has interesting meanings, and the conclusions are significant from the viewpoint of traditional Estonian syntax. The elative *wh*-construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>elative</sub> V?] starting with the interrogative pronoun *mis* pragmatically expresses the prohibition to carry out the activity expressed by the verb or a claim that the activity is nonsense; see examples (1) and (2). We have here an example that clearly is a construction meaning, because none of the smaller units of the construction carry a negative meaning of a whole which depending on the context can be, for example, ‘do not do X’ or ‘there is no sense in doing X’; X is the activity denoted by the verb.

(1)  
 Mis sa se-st kirjuta-d?  
 what 2SG DEM-ELAT write-2SG  
 ‘Don’t write it!’ or ‘There is no sense in writing it’

(2)  
 Mis sa ta-st kiusa-d?  
 what 2SG 3SG-ELAT bully-2SG  
 ‘Don’t bully him!’ or ‘There is no sense in bullying him’

The construction under discussion is a mixed construction. The elative *wh*-construction is an interrogative sentence that is defined by two components. One of the components is a lexical unit – the interrogative word *mis* ‘what’ – a common interrogative word in many Estonian questions. The other component is the NP in the elative (affix *-st*) denoting a semantic object, but in its form it is an adverbial in the separative case. It is a peculiar construction because there are a number of verbs that can take an elative object only in this construction. It is interesting from the viewpoint of Estonian grammar why a regular object case is not used in the construction and why it is the elative case that replaces it. From the general perspective, it is important to deal with those aspects that influence the formation of the meaning of the construction.

First, the material will be presented, and then the article will discuss the possibilities for interpreting the components of the elative *wh*-construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>elative</sub> V?] and their importance in the formation of the holistic meaning. The meaning of the construction is motivated by the cumulative effect of many factors, none of which is more significant than the other factors. One can find the types of questions starting with *mis* in the Appendix, which includes many rhetorical questions.

## 2. Material

The study is based on standard Estonian<sup>1</sup>, and the sources include the basic corpus of the Tartu University Corpus of Standard Literary Estonian and the

<sup>1</sup> The Estonian language belongs to the Finnic group of the Finno-Ugric language family.

corpus of spoken language. The node word was the interrogative pronoun *mis*. The word *mis* is both a relative pronoun and an interrogative pronoun in Estonian; thus, all the sentences where *mis* started a relative clause were manually filtered from the material. The material was used to establish types of questions starting with *mis*, which are presented in the Appendix. The sentences containing the relative *wh*-construction were in turn separated from the above material. There were few sentences of this kind, and the material was enlarged with sentences containing a pronominal relative component obtained through the search engine Google.

### 3. Sentences starting with the interrogative pronoun *mis*

There are several types of interrogative sentences starting with the word *mis* (see Appendix, first and foremost types 4–6) where the meaning of the sentence does not univocally express a question, but it can be interpreted as a non-question. The structure of the interrogative sentence functions as a negation of the proposition in these cases, and it depends on the context which speech act will be used (rhetorical question in example 3; prohibition in example 4; autosuggestion in example 5). Naturally, one cannot claim that the types entirely lack the component of a question, but it is usually not their main pragmatic function.

(3)

Mis siin imelikku on?  
what here weird.PART be.3SG

‘There is nothing weird about it’ or ‘What’s weird about it?’

(4)

Mis sa pabista-d?  
what 2sg worry-2.sg

‘Stop worrying about it!’ or ‘Why are you worrying?’

(5)

Mis ma muretse-n!  
what 1SG worry-1SG

‘I have no reason to worry’ or ‘Why am I worrying!’

In sentences (3–5) there is no component in the relative case. Let us now turn to the genuine subject of the article – the relative *wh*-construction. In its pragmatic function the relative *wh*-construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>relative</sub> V?] is a rhetorical question, prohibition, or autosuggestion, depending on the person denoted by the nominative NP. If a third person is meant (6), then it is a statement which can also be a mediated command, depending whether the speaker wishes the information to reach the respective person. If the NP<sub>nominative</sub> refers to the interlocutor (7), one is dealing with a directive addressed to the partner, and the degree of the directive depends on the context. If the NP<sub>nominative</sub> refers to the speaker (8), it denotes coming to an understanding.

(6)

Mis ta se-st loe-b?  
 what 3SG DEM-ELAT read-3SG

‘There is no reason for him to read it’ or ‘Tell him not to read it’

(7)

Mis sa se-st loe-d?  
 what 2SG DEM-ELAT read-2SG

‘Don’t read it!’

(8)

Mis ma se-st loe-n?  
 what 1SG DEM-ELAT read-1SG

‘There is no reason for me to read it’

There is a crucial difference between sentences (3–5) and (6–8). The difference is expressed formally in the use of the elative NP, and semantically sentences (3–5) have the component of a question while sentences (6–8) are no longer questions. Thus, the elative component creates a different meaning.

#### 4. Elative component in questions starting with *mis*

##### 4.1. Elative in the Estonian language

The core sense of the elative (suffix *-st*) is usually regarded as the separative interior local case (Viitso 2003:33, Tauli 1983:79–80), which expresses motion outwards or away from the referred entity. From the viewpoint of a motion event it is the SOURCE of the motion. Etymologically the suffix of the elative originates from two components: the separative ending *-ta* was added to the lative ending *-s* (*\*-sta* > *-st*; Rätsep 1979:50). The separative ending *-ta* evolved into the ending *-t* of the partitive as well, which is the main object case in the Estonian language (Rätsep 1982:56–57). Thus, the elative has etymologically the same component as one of the genuine object cases of contemporary Estonian, the partitive.

In addition to the local case, the elative has several other uses that can more or less metaphorically be explained as motion away from the SOURCE. For example, the verbs *eemalduma* ‘to move away’ and *lahutama* ‘to separate’ take an elative adverbial, whereas their degree of motion depends on the context. On the other hand, the verb *hoiduma* ‘to refrain’ also takes an elative adverbial, although it usually does not denote motion. Metaphorically it can still be regarded as a separative meaning.

In addition to the separative meanings, the elative case has also many government uses where the referred entity is an object in its semantic function “a thing/being the action is directed to” (Tauli 1983:80), for example *hoolima Y-st* ‘to care about Y’, *mõtleva Y-st*, ‘to think about Y’, and *rääkima Y-st* ‘to speak about Y’. Other verbs denoting mental activities take first and foremost an elative adverbial as well (Erelt et al. 1993:68).

4.2. Elative in *wh*-construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>elative</sub> V?]

Below I will discuss the kind of elative component of the interrogative sentences starting with *mis*, which is not used in other types of sentences for expressing the relevant proposition. Therefore, sentence (9a) will not be discussed because the phrase in the elative case is also used in the declarative sentences (9b) to denote the proposition.

(9)

- a. Mis me selle-st ikka räägi-me?  
 what 1PL DEM-ELAT PRTCL speak-1PL  
 ‘Why talk about it?’
- b. Räägi-me selle-st.  
 speak-1PL DEM-ELAT  
 ‘Let’s talk about it.’

The following sentences with the elative component come from the Corpus of Standard Literary Estonian (10, 11):

(10)

- Räägi, mis su-l rääki-da on, aga jäta  
 speak.IMP.2SG what 2SG-ADE speak-INF be.3SG but leave.IMP.2SG
- mu käsi rahu-le - mis sa ta-st mudi-d.  
 my hand peace-ALL what 2SG 3SG-ELAT squeeze-2SG  
 ‘Say what you have to say but leave my hand alone, **why are you squeezing it.**

(11)

- Muidugi, mis ta-st enne klaasi-da, kui katus  
 naturally what 3SG-ELAT before glaze-INF if roof
- pole korra-s, ja siis on niikuinii vaja  
 be.NEG.3SG order-INE and then be-3SG anyway need
- uue-d akna-raami-d teha.  
 new-PL window-frame-PL make.INF
- ‘Sure, **why glaze it before** the roof has been fixed, and it is necessary to make new window frames anyway...’

The corpus also contained a sentence where a similar elative component occurs together with the interrogative pronoun *mida*. That could have an archaic stylistic nuance (12)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> The search engine Google found also some elative constructions starting with the word *mida*, but their proportion is small compared to similar constructions starting with *mis*. For example, the search phrase *mis sa tast* yielded 1,400 sentences while the phrase *mida sa tast* occurred only in 147 sentences; the proportion of the *mida*-variants was even smaller in the case of other pronouns. It should also be kept in mind that not all sentences obtained in such a way represent the elative construction, but there are many cases where the verb can take an elative dependent member in another context. The material, although imprecise, gathered in Google indicates that

(12)

“**Mi-da**            **häda-st**            **häbene-da,**“            vasta-s            Iba  
 what-PART        trouble-ELAT        be.ashame-INF        reply-IMP.3SG        Iba  
 “**Why be ashamed of trouble,**” Iba replied.’

The relative noun phrase in the construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>relative</sub> V?] raises two questions. First, why is the NP not in the object case, which can be nominative, genitive, or partitive in Estonian while semantically it is clearly an object? Second, if the NP is not in the object case, then why does the NP take the relative? The questions will be answered below.

#### 4.3. Why not an object case?

The grammatical object can be in the following three cases in contemporary Estonian: partitive, genitive, or nominative. The most recent Estonian grammars treat the parts of sentences semantically similar to the object that are not in these three cases as oblique objects or adverbials (Erelt 2003:98–100). Some authors have regarded them also as indirect objects, but the Academic Grammar does not approve of this term to describe Estonian syntax.

The analysis of the interrogative pronoun *mis* can provide at least one simple explanation why the NP functioning semantically as an object is not marked as a grammatical object in the construction under discussion. *Mis* is a highly polysemic word in Estonian, and its meanings include ‘which?’, ‘why?’, and ‘what?’. The first does not fit in the context, but the two last do.

Valter Tauli (Tauli 1983) and Helle Metslang (1981:81) have described this type of *mis*-questions as a type of interrogative sentences in the chapters about causal questions. Example (13a) comes from Metslang, and example (13b) presents an equivalent question for the interpretation of (13a). The interpretation is supported by the fact that asking the reasons for some activities is pragmatically often a reproach or an expression of discontent. Therefore, the example is relevant because if you ask the reasons for waiting, you say that there is no sense in waiting. On the other hand, the interrogative pronoun *miks* cannot take an relative component (13c), and thus there is some reason to believe that even in those cases where *mis* is semantically interpreted as a causal question, it is grammatically still an object and not an adverbial. It is supported by the fact that *mida* also takes an relative component (13d), that is, it behaves grammatically in a similar way to *mis*.

(13)

a.    Mis    sa        tema-st        oota-d?  
       what 2SG    3SG-ELAT    wait-2SG  
       ‘Don’t wait for him!’

---

the relative sentence type starting with *mida* does exist in contemporary language, but it is much less common than the type starting with *mis*.

<sup>3</sup> Neither Tauli nor Metslang use the term “relative *wh*-construction” – pool sõna kursiivis? in their descriptions.

- b. Miks sa te-da oota-d?  
 why 2.SG 3SG-PART wait-2SG  
 ‘Why are you waiting for him?’
- c. \* Miks sa tema-st oota-d?  
 \* why 2SG 3SG-ELAT wait-2SG  
 ‘Why are you waiting for him?’
- d. Mi-da sa tema-st oota-d?  
 what-PART 2SG 3SG-ELAT wait-2SG  
 ‘Don’t wait for him!’

Therefore, *mis* can be interpreted as a grammatical object similarly to *mida* in the object case but only in terms of grammar. In the case of the elative *wh*-construction nothing is actually asked about the object. If in some contexts it can be regarded as a question in the first place, then it is a causal question. We can say that grammatically *mis* is an object while semantically it is a question word that has no limits in respect to the answer, that is, the answer does not necessarily have to contain the object. In addition, *mis* is often a question word used in the case of a *yes/no*-question (see Appendix, example 6). *Mis* as a general interrogative pronoun seems to form many types of formulas of rhetoric questions (see Erelt et al. 1993:174), where the use of a semantically synonymous question word would yield the actual question. The questions (a–c) starting with *mis* in example (14) are pragmatically statements that negate the proposition while questions (d–f) are real questions.

(14)

- a. Mis mõtte-ga sa se-da tee-d?  
 what sense-COM 2SG DEM-PART do-2SG  
 Don’t do it! (lit. ‘Why do you do it’)
- b. Mis tähtsus-t selle-l on?  
 what importance-PART DEM-ADE be.3SG  
 It doesn’t matter (lit. ‘What does it matter?’)
- c. Mis see sinu asi on?  
 what DEM your thing be.3SG  
 ‘That’s none of your business!’ (lit. Why is it your business?)
- d. Millise mõtte-ga sa se-da tee-d?  
 what.kind.of sense-COM 2SG DEM-PART do-3SG  
 ‘Why do you do it?’
- e. Milline tähtsus selle-l on?  
 what.kind.of importance DEM-ADE be.3SG  
 ‘What does it matter?’
- f. Miks see sinu asi on?  
 why DEM your thing be.3SG  
 ‘Why is it your business?’

It is difficult to prove that the interrogative pronoun *mis* can be interpreted as a grammatical object because only the elative component supports the claim. Thus,

the definition is ambiguous: on the one hand, it claims that *mis* is interpreted as an object because the semantic object of the sentence is in the elative and, on the other hand, it claims that the interpretation of *mis* as an object triggers the use of the elative component. However, one has to consider the possibility that the reason for NP functioning as a semantic object taking the elative is because of the fact that the sentence already contains a grammatical object (*mis* or *mida*), and it cannot have two grammatical objects.

The principle of markedness offers another possibility for explaining why the semantic object is not in any object case in the construction under discussion. It is a clear construction, and thus the speaker needs to mark it with its own form marker, and the elative can be used for that purpose, because the elative expresses a semantic object in many other constructions, too. The approach does not include the grammatical interpretation of the interrogative pronoun *mis*, because it assumes that the elative is used in the construction to distinguish it from the question and reinforce the prohibition or the pragmatic aspect of the negative claim. The comparison of sentences (15a) and (15b) reveals that (a) is clearly a reproach and a command *Ära teda kiusa!* ‘Don’t bully him!’, whereas (15b) is a question about the reasons for bullying the respective person. Example (15c) is even more concerned with the reasons for bullying. Thus, the examples present a continuum that starts with a direct reproach (15a) and ends with a question (15c).

(15)

- |    |   |     |          |           |
|----|---|-----|----------|-----------|
| a. | Mis   | sa  | ta-st    | kiusa-d?  |
|    | what  | 2SG | 3SG-ELAT | bully-2SG |
|    | Don’t bully him! (lit. ‘Why are you bullying him?’)   |     |          |           |
| b. | Mis   | sa  | te-da    | kiusa-d?  |
|    | what  | 2SG | 3SG-PART | bully-2SG |
|    | ‘Why are you bullying him?’ (and/or Don’t bully him!) |     |          |           |
| c. | Miks  | sa  | te-da    | kiusa-d?  |
|    | why   | 2sg | 3sg.part | bully-2sg |
|    | ‘Why are you bullying him?’                           |     |          |           |

In conclusion, the semantic object takes the form of the grammatical adverbial in the construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>elative</sub> V?] because it cannot take two grammatical objects, or because of the pragmatic markedness, or it is even more likely that it can be explained by both reasons. Co-occurrence of the two principles creates a construction with unusual case marker while only a single principle would probably not create it.

#### 4.4. Why the elative?

The article previously analysed the reasons that could explain why the semantic object does not take the form of a grammatical object in the discussed construction. Another issue is why the elative case is used. The simplest answer would be



that the elative and the partitive in the Estonian language<sup>4</sup> originated from the suffix *-ta* that marked the separative, and the cases have partly retained similar functions. Thus, the partitive is a regular object case, and the elative can in some cases also mark the object.

There are also synchronic explanations. The choice of the case is supported by many verb constructions where semantical objects are expressed by the elative case (such as psychoverbs e.g. *rääkima* 'to talk', *jutustama* 'to tell' + *millest?* 'about what', see Erelt et al. 1993:68), and the elative marking of the SOURCE in those cases where the sentence also contains a grammatical object, such as in examples (16 a and c) (Tauli 1983:79–80, Erelt et al. 1993:48). Sentences (a and c) of example 16 have different types of sources because the elative NP *lihast* 'from meat' in (a) is a MATERIAL SOURCE while the elative NP *maast* 'from the earth' in (c) is a truly SPATIAL SOURCE. Sentences 16 b and d present the same part of the sentence in the form of the object.

(16)

- |     |   |                 |                |              |
|-----|---|-----------------|----------------|--------------|
| (a) | Kokk  | keeti-s         | <b>liha-st</b> | suppi.       |
|     | chef  | cook-IMPERF.3SG | meat-ELAT      | soup.PART    |
|     | 'The chef cooked a soup from meat.'             |                 |                |              |
| (b) | Kokk  | keeti-s         | <b>liha.</b>   |              |
|     | chef  | cook-IMPERF.3SG | meat.PART      |              |
|     | 'The chef cooked meat.'                         |                 |                |              |
| (c) | Mees  | kaeva-s         | <b>maa-st</b>  | varandus-t.  |
|     | man   | dig-IMPERF.3SG  | earth-ELAT     | fortune-PART |
|     | 'The man was digging a fortune from the earth.' |                 |                |              |
| (d) | Mees  | kaeva-s         | <b>maa-d.</b>  |              |
|     | man   | dig-IMPERF.3SG  | earth-PART     |              |
|     | 'The man was digging the earth.'                |                 |                |              |

There are a number of questions in the form of [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>elative</sub> V?] that also have a meaning that fits in the construction under discussion, but they differ from the elative *wh*-construction because the NP of the declarative sentence is also in the elative because of the verb (17 c–d). Those questions seem to need some additional component which would mark the meaning *pole mõtet X* 'no sense in X'; the additional components in examples (17 a–b) are the particles *ikka* 'still' (see also 9a) and *enam* 'anymore', and without them the question is either a true question (17e) or almost impossible (17f). It indicates the pragmatic markedness discussed above: if the elative is a regular government-dependent member in the case of the verb, then the negative component (a prohibition or nonsense, depending on the context) is no longer clearly in the foreground of the sentence. In these cases the pragmatic principle would need to be reinforced by particles as in sentences (17a) and (17b).

<sup>4</sup> To be more exact, in the Finno-Ugric and the Volgaic language group.

(17)

- a. Mis selle-st enam rääki-da?  
 what DEM-ELAT anymore(PRTCL) speak-INF  
 ‘Why keep on talking about it?’
- b. Mis selle-st ikka aru saa-da?  
 what DEM-ELAT still(PRTCL) mind get-INF  
 ‘Why still understand it?’
- c. Selle-st on palju rääki-da.  
 DEM-ELAT be.3SG lot speak-INF  
 ‘There is a lot to talk about it.’
- d. Selle-st on võimalik aru saa-da.  
 DEM-ELAT be.3SG possible mind get-INF  
 ‘It is possible to understand it.’
- e. Mis selle-st rääki-da?  
 what DEM-ELAT speak-INF  
 ‘Why talk about it?’
- f. ?Mis selle-st aru saa-da?  
 ?what DEM-ELAT mind get-INF  
 ‘Why understand it?’

The frequent phrases *mis sellest?* and *mis sest?* ‘I don’t care, lit. what about it?’ also support relative marking, but their relative component is not exactly the same as in the relative *wh*-construction, because *sest/sellest* ‘DEM-ELAT’ also occurs in the relative in the negative declarative sentence (18a), but grammatically the relative cannot be used in the respective affirmative sentence (18 b and c).

(18)

- a. Selle-st ei ole mi-da-gi.  
 DEM-ELAT NEG be what-PART-PRTCL  
 ‘That’s not a problem. lit. That’s nothing’
- b. See on mi-da-gi.  
 DEM be.3SG what-PART-PRTCL  
 ‘That is something.’
- c. \*Selle-st on mi-da-gi.  
 DEM-ELAT be.3SG what-PART-PRTCL  
 ‘That is something.’

Another use of the relative includes many semantic cases where the object is negated, but the verb expresses negation not morphologically but semantically (see the list of verbs in Erelt et al. 1993:69). Sentences (19a) and (19b) contain the adverbial in the relative case that denotes the semantic object. The same word is expressed as the grammatical object in the case of the semantically respective affirmative verb.

(19)

- a. Jä-i-n                                **raha-st**                        ilma.  
 remain-IMPERF-1SG    money-ELAT    without  
 ‘I lost my money.’
- b. Hoidu-n                                **suhtle-ma-st.**  
 avoid-1SG            communicate-INF-ELAT  
 ‘I avoid communication.’
- c. Sa-i-n                                        raha.  
 get-IMPERF-1SG            money.PART  
 ‘I got some money.’
- d. Püüa-n                                        suhel-da.  
 try-1SG                        communicate-INF  
 ‘I try to communicate.’

Therefore, the relative NP of the relative *wh*-construction can be explained in two ways. On the one hand, the relative is a common (probably the most common) case form for indirect object in the Estonian language, and, in addition, it shows the tendency to carry a negative meaning, which is cognitively associated with separativity.

### 5. Use of the pronoun in questions starting with *mis*

Personal pronouns have a short and a long form in the Estonian language, for example the relative forms of the first person pronoun *mina* ‘I’ or *ma* ‘I’ are *minust* ‘from me’ and *must* ‘from me’, respectively (for an overview see Viitso 2003: 45–48). The difference between the short and the long form of a pronoun is different in different case forms (Pool 1999, Pajusalu 2005), but the general rule is that the long form is used to indicate a contrast (Kaiser, Hiietamm 2003). The relative case is exceptional because the use of the long form is common even when there is no need to express contrasts, at least in the case of the first and second person pronouns (Pool 1999).

The material and the present author’s linguistic instinct suggest that the short form of a personal pronoun often occurs as an relative component in the questions starting with *mis*, although the relative does not favour the short form in other contexts. The short form also occurs in examples (18–19). The situation seems to be slightly different in the case of the demonstrative pronoun *see*, which occurs in the material both in the short and long form. The short form is rare in the demonstrative paradigm, and thus the functional distinction between the short and the long form may have developed to a lesser extent in case of the demonstrative. The comparison of two context-free sentences (20 a and b) shows that sentence a, which is the variant with the short relative pronoun, expresses the meaning ‘don’t speak’ while the variant with the long form seems to be a true question, where the relative *sellest* ‘about it’ is equivalent to the pronoun *sellest* ‘about it’ in declarative sentence c. Naturally, this kind of comparison is possible only in the case of the

verbs that can contain an elative dependent member also in the declarative sentence.

(20)

- |    |  |     |                 |           |
|----|--|-----|-----------------|-----------|
| a. | Mis  | sa  | se-st           | räägi-d?  |
|    | what   | 2SG | DEM(SHORT)-ELAT | speak-2SG |
|    | 'Don't speak about it!'                                    |     |                 |           |
| b. | Mis  | sa  | selle-st        | räägi-d?  |
|    | what   | 2SG | DEM(LONG)-ELAT  | speak-2SG |
|    | 'Why are you speaking about it?' or 'Don't speak about it' |     |                 |           |
| c. | Räägi-n  |     | selle-st,       | et...     |
|    | speak-1SG  |     | DEM(LONG)-ELAT  | that      |
|    | 'I'm speaking about..'                                     |     |                 |           |

Thus, the tendency to use the short personal pronoun can be regarded as a characteristic of the elative *wh*-construction, which is not common in the case of the elative in other contexts and marks the whole construction in its turn.

## 6. Discussion

The elative *wh*-construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>elative</sub> V?] allows general discussion of the formation of the construction meanings. The analysed construction consists of the following four components:

- 1) the interrogative pronoun *mis*, which is ambiguous because of its polysemy;
- 2) the NP expressing the subject, which typically takes the form of a short personal pronoun (though it can also be a full NP);
- 3) the elative NP, which in the case of some verbs occurs in the elative case only in this construction;
- 4) and the verb.

The elative NP is interesting from the viewpoint of Estonian grammar while the formation of the construction meaning is of some interest from the general perspective. The discussed meaning can be classified as pragmatic because the elative *wh*-construction encodes certain speech acts. According to Searle (1969) we should define them as indirect speech acts because prohibition or statements are formed by means of a syntactic question. On the other hand, semantically the construction is not an indirect speech act because it does not require conclusive reasoning from a native speaker as the form of the construction unambiguously signals the correct pragmatic meaning.

For signalling certain meanings the language uses the existing means and combines them with each other. The interrogative pronoun *mis* is polysemous and can occur in various functions in different sentences (subject, object, or the adverbial). This functional indeterminacy gives more freedom to the rest of the construction. Thus, the non-object form of the elative NP need not be regarded as grammatical inevitability (which would be the case if *mis* were interpreted as an

object because the sentence cannot have another object), but it can be seen as a pragmatic marker.

As noted, (examples 19 a–d), the elative has several other contexts with a negative meaning in the Estonian language. One can formulate the metaphor LEAVING IS NEGATION to explain the negative meaning of the elative as a separative case. If the metaphor model in the style of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) seems too primitive, one might say that leaving and negation are cognitively similar processes that borrow grammatical means from each other. Similar processes of grammaticalization have been observed in the case of the verb ‘to leave’ (Heine and Kuteva 2002:192–193).

The non-canonical marking of the object has also been noticed in some languages in regard to unreal modality, which is also negative by nature. For example, the semantic object can be marked not by a regular object case but by the dative together with the verb ‘to search’, in cases where the object has not been found as yet (Onishi 2001:39). The case is similar to sentences (19a) and (19b) where the money or communication is absent.

The tendency to use a short personal pronoun in the elative NP also refers to the need for marking because in Estonian the long form of a personal pronoun is usually used in the elative. It is not an absolute rule but a pragmatic tendency, which by status is similar to the interpretation of a question as prohibition or statement.

Thus, the cumulative effect of the combination of lexical (the interrogative word *mis*), grammatical (the choice of the elative case), and pragmatic (the choice of the short form of the pronoun) aspects forms the construction. The elative *wh*-construction in Estonian, and probably also several other constructions, are motivated by several factors.

## 7. Conclusion

The article analysed the elative *wh*-construction [*mis* NP<sub>nominative</sub> NP<sub>elative</sub> V?], the typical representative of which could be the sentence *Mis sa tast kiusad?* ‘Why are you bullying him?’. The elative component of the construction semantically expresses the object of the activity, but grammatically it is marked as a government adverbial, or, to be more precise, an object adverbial or indirect object. The use of the elative can probably be explained by the cumulative effect of two principles. On the one hand, the interrogative pronoun *mis* can be interpreted as a grammatical object, which excludes another object, but, on the other hand, the grammatical marking helps to interpret the pragmatic function of the sentence. The elative is a suitable case for the marking because the semantic object often occurs in that case, *inter alia* if the object is semantically negated as is the case of the construction under discussion.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the Estonian Science Foundation whose grant no 5813 helped to write the current paper.

Address:

Renate Pajusalu  
 Department of Estonian and Finno-Ugric Studies  
 University of Tartu  
 Ülikooli 18, Tartu 50900  
 Tel.: +372 7375 941  
 Fax: +372 7375 224  
 E-mail: Renate.Pajusalu@ut.ee

### References

- Croft, William and D. Alan Cruse (2001) *Cognitive Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fillmore, Charles J., Paul Kay, and Mary Catherine O'Connor (2003) "Regularity and Idiomaticity in Grammatical Constructions: The Case of *Let Alone*". In *The new psychology of language. Cognitive and functional approaches to language structure*. Vol 2, 243–270. Michael Tomasello, ed. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Erelt, Mati (2003) Syntax. In *Estonian language*, 93–129. (Linguistica Uralica. Supplementary Series, 1.) Mati Erelt, ed. Tallinn: Estonian Academy Publishers.
- Kaiser, Elsi and Hiietam, Katrin (2003) "A comparison of the referential properties of the third person pronouns in Finnish and Estonian". *Nordlyd* 31, 4, 654–667.
- Erelt, Mati, Reet Kasik, Helle Metslang, Henno Rajandi, Kristiina Ross, Henn Saari, Kaja Tael, and Silvi Vare (1993) *Eesti keele grammatika II. Süntaks*. [Estonian Grammar II. Syntax.] Tallinn: Eesti TA Keele ja Kirjanduse Instituut.
- Goldberg, Adele E. (1995) *Constructions: a construction grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Heine, Bernd, Tania Kuteva 2001: *World lexicon of grammaticalization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Linell, Per (2005) "Grammatical constructions in dialogue". Paper presented at IPraA congress IX in Riva del Garda, July 14.
- Metslang, Helle (1981) *Küsilause eesti keeles*. [Interrogative sentence in Estonian.] Tallinn: Valgus.
- Onishi, Masayuki (2001) "Introduction. Non-canonically marked subjects and objects: Parameters and Properties". In *Non-canonical marking of subjects and objects*, 1–52. (Typological Studies in Language, 46.) Alexandra Aikhenvald, R. M. W. Dixon, and Masayuki Onishi, eds. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Pajusalu, Renate (2005) "Anaphoric pronouns in Spoken Estonian: crossing the paradigms". In *Minimal reference: the use of pronouns in Finnish and Estonian discourse*, 107–134. (Studia Fennica.) Ritva Laury, ed. Helsinki: SKS.
- Pool, Raili (1999) "About the use of different forms of the first and second person singular personal pronouns in Estonian cases". In *Estonian Typological Studies III*, 158–184. (Publications of the Department of Estonian of the University of Tartu, 11.) Mati Erelt, ed. Tartu.
- Rätsep, Huno (1979) *Eesti keele ajalooline morfoloogia II*. [Historical morphology of Estonian II.] Tartu.

- Rätsep, Huno (1982) *Eesti keele ajalooline morfoloogia I*. [Historical morphology of Estonian I.] Tartu.
- Searle, John (1969) *Speech acts*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tauli, Valter (1983) *Standard Estonian grammar*. Part II. Syntax. (Acta Universitatis Uppsaliensis.) Uppsala.
- Tomasello, Michael (2003) *Constructing a language. a usage-based theory of language acquisition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Viitso, Tiit-Rein (2003) "Phonology, morphology and word formation". In *Estonian language*, 9–92. (Linguistica Uralica. Supplementary Series, 1.) Mati Ereht, ed. Tallinn: Estonian Academy Publishers.

## Appendix

Types of *wh*-questions [*mis*] in Estonian

The author chose the questions starting with *mis* from the Tartu University Corpus of Standard Literary Estonian and the corpus of spoken language based on the following criteria, which are modelled on the distinction of the types of sentences presented in the Estonian Academic Grammar (Erelt et al. 1993:166–174, for a short overview see Erelt 2003:108–109):

- a) the sentence starts with the word *mis*;
- b) syntactically the sentence is a question, but it need not end with a question mark or the intonation specific to a question (in speech);
- c) it is not a relative clause, that is, the sentence is not an extension of a preceding or a succeeding word, but it is an independent syntactic whole.

The material indicated that the questions starting with *mis* can be divided into the following pragmatic groups:

**Type 1.** *Wh*-question, where *mis* can act as a separate part of the sentence or a part of an interrogative phrase. Formally *mis* is a nominative interrogative word, but it is used both as a subject (1) and an object (2) in the informal and standard language as well as in the causal questions (3), and as an attribute (4). There are also monosemic variants of the stem such as *mida* ‘what (partitive)’, *miks* ‘why’, and *missugune* ‘what kind of’ in the three latter cases.

- (1) Mis on laua-l?  
what be.3SG table-ADE  
‘What is there on the table?’
- (2) Mis/mi-da sa seal tee-d?  
what/what-PART 2SG there do-2SG  
‘What are you doing there?’
- (3) Mis/miks sa jookse-d?  
what/why 2SG run-2SG  
‘Why are you running?’
- (4) Mis/missugune asi see on?  
what/what.kind.of thing DEM be.3SG  
‘What/what kind of thing is it?’

*Wh* questions that are used to specify the previously expressed form are a separate frequent pragmatic type. In that case *mis* is an extension of quote (5).

- (5) Kuule, mis raamatu-st sa rääki-si-d?  
listen.IMP what book-ELAT 2SG speak-IMPERF-2SG  
‘Listen, what was the book that you were talking about?’

**Type 2.** Yes/no questions where *mis* is a synonym for the more common question word *kas* in Estonian (6).



- (6) Mis sa mõtle-si-d, et ta on-gi  
 what 2SG think-IMPERF-2SG that 3SG be.3SG-PRCL  
 nii odav?  
 so cheap  
 ‘Did you think that it is that cheap?’

**Type 3.** Hesitant parantheses where *mis* can start a multi-word unit that has become a particle, which is used, for example, when the speaker cannot remember a name (7). The type is first and foremost characteristic of oral speech.

- (7)  
 JN: noh se-da Sinimäge=nüd, (0.5) v=**mis** ta on  
 PRCL DEM-PART Sinimägi.PART=now or=what 3SG be.3SG  
 no=Sinimägi.  
 PRCL=Sinimägi  
 ‘well that Sinimägi, now, whatsit well, Sinimägi’  
 EP: mhmh (0.5) Riho. (0.5)  
 PRCL Riho  
 ‘uh-uh, Riho’

**Type 4.** Rhetorical questions that do not require an answer and the meaning of which is the negation of the proposition (8). The frequently occurring formula *mis siis?* ‘so what?’, which is used to claim that the uttered arguments are insignificant (9), were also classified into this type.

- (8) Mis siin imelikku on?  
 what here weird.PART be.3SG  
 ‘What’s weird about it?’ or ‘There’s nothing weird about it’  
 (9) Mis siis, et aeglane?  
 what then that slow  
 ‘It’s slow, so what?’ or ‘It doesn’t matter that it is slow’

**Type 5.** Utterances where the speaker wishes the partner to avoid carrying out the action expressed by the proposition (10). Such utterances can be interpreted as prohibitions ‘don’t do X’ or a piece of advice ‘there is no reason to do X’, depending on the context.

- (10) Mis sa pabista-d?  
 what 2SG jittery-2SG  
 ‘Why are you jittery?’ or ‘Don’t worry!’

**Type 6.** Claims that the speaker himself or herself suggests that there is no reason to carry out the action expressed by the proposition (11).

- (11) Mis ma muretse-n!  
 what 1SG worry-1SG  
 ‘Why am I worrying!’ or ‘There is no need for me to worry’