

Research Article

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Between rhetorical questions and information requests: A versatile interrogative clause in Estonian

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Abstract: This article investigates the pragmatic and functional aspects of an interrogative question pattern in Estonian: questions introduced by the adjective *huvitav* ('interesting'). Despite appearances, this question is usually not used to elicit an answer in an information request. Instead, its uses vary from self-addressed to rhetorical questions, also allowing the addition of a biased (critical, ironical) positioning to the interrogation. It can be related to subjective as well as intersubjective dimensions of language use. Examples primarily from two corpora are discussed: fiction texts and their translations (Estonian–French) from the Estonian–French bilingual corpus; excerpts from the debates of the Estonian Parliament; and to a lesser extent, examples from conversations are also included in the analysis. Like similar devices described in other languages (*vajon* in Hungarian, *oare* in Romanian), this pattern is impossible to use in situations where a clearly competent addressee is in a position to answer the question directly and the speaker is aware of it; instead, it is especially for cases where, for different reasons, the competence of the addressee is not questioned or challenged directly: asking tentative questions, using rhetorically designed questions to convey critics, or other biased meanings.

Keywords: interrogative complement clauses, rhetorical questions, subjectivity, intersubjectivity

1 Introduction

This article investigates a non-canonical interrogative sentence type in Estonian, composed of the adjective *huvitav* ('interesting') followed by an interrogative clause (polar or *wh*-question). These clauses seem to share properties with a number of interrogative clauses: classic rhetorical questions, self-addressed questions, non-intrusive questions (Farkas 2022), but also information requests. Estonian syntax describes them as indirect interrogatives functioning as complements, where a subject clause is subordinated to an elliptical main clause (Erelt 2017, 684–7).

(1)

Huvitav, kust see komme pärit on?

'Interesting, where does this tradition come from?'

(Erelt 2017, 687)

These clauses are said to come always as a reaction to previous information and are formed either as interrogative or assertive clauses (Erelt 2017, 687). Based on interactional data, Keevallik (2011, 62) has

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argued that instead of considering these constructions as typical subordinate clauses, they could be seen as independent clauses preceded by an epistemic device. In her data, these clauses are always treated as questions by the speakers.

From a formal and pragmatic point of view, they seem to constitute a clear pattern in written as well as in oral language use. In an interactional perspective, Keevallik (2011) has analyzed these items along with a series of other complement-taking-predicates or complement interrogatives, bringing into question the status of the so-called main clause. Complementation has been investigated in recent works about a variety of languages (about English, see Thompson 2002; about Estonian, see Keevallik 2008; about Finnish, see Laury 2006). In consequence, the traditional understanding of subordination has been challenged in many approaches, based on data from real-time interactions.

Building on the abovementioned works on subordination and epistemic question patterns, this construction is not analyzed here in the traditional syntactic framework, but instead, as a routinized question pattern where the “matrix clause” does not appear as an assertion containing an evaluative adjective, but functions instead as a marker of a certain clause type, taking an epistemic function that plays a primary role in the interpretation of the utterance (Heritage 2012).

Something else is indeed done by asking this question: it is not an acknowledging of a fact that something is interesting for the speaker; and it also entails something more than asking a question meaning “I would like to know”: while requesting information is not completely ruled out in the use of this question, there is always another effect or a secondary meaning that can be identified, besides asking for information. This interrogative also gives rise to questions about the subjectivity and intersubjectivity and their interrelation, as some of its occurrences seem mainly intended to convey the attitude or the assessment of the speaker, while most of them are clearly intersubjective by nature.

Our aim is thus to discover the various functions of *huvitav*-prefaced questions based on selected instances from three discourse types (fiction texts, plenary debates of the Estonian Parliament [EstParl], and spoken interaction) and to define, where possible, their general characteristics (common to all uses) and show how they are used to convey specific meanings or effects, depending on the discourse type or other parameters. Contrastive analysis of Estonian–French fiction texts and their translations is used to specify the functions of this clause in Estonian as they appear in written texts.

2 Method and data

The approach chosen here is a form-to-function approach: the aim of this analysis is to explore the variety of functions of these constructions as they appear in the language and not to part from pre-determined classes of functions that have already been described for different types of questions. Essential principles from conversation analysis are applied when analyzing the conversational data, particularly the data-driven approach and the assumption that human communication takes place as a sequentially organized interaction where a turn is built on the prior turn, interpreted in real time by the speaker who reveals his or her understanding in a subsequent turn.

The study is qualitative, although some quantitative data are presented, but the corpus is not sufficiently balanced to allow reliable comparisons between different registers or language uses. The corpus chosen for the study nevertheless reflects preconceived assumptions about the kind of data that were expected to be found and that were considered as having a specific interest for the matter at hand: first, considering that there is no unique counterpart in French for this resource, examples from an Estonian–French bilingual corpus (70 tokens) are analyzed to shed light on how this clause is translated into French or which French constructions are translated into Estonian by *huvitav*-prefaced clauses. The corpus search was done in the Estonian and French fiction texts of the parallel corpus of the Estonian–French Association of Lexicography (<http://corpus.estfra.ee>), which consists of 7.94 millions of words (abbreviated here as CoPEF), using the keyword *huvitav*; among the results (348 tokens), all the sentences containing the target construction were selected.

The idea of using written examples assumes that, due to the lack of other clues for interpretation such as intonation, gestures, and other aspects of speech that unfold in real time, recurrent translations should reflect stabilized functions of this device. The analysis can reveal possible stylistic, connotational, and other features of the resource that are less present or less prominent in everyday conversations and, inversely, the written text, by the impossibility of repairs and ulterior disambiguation, assumedly relays established uses.

The second corpus is composed of the transcripts of political speeches and discussions from the plenary sittings of the EstParl (70 tokens). This resource is available on the website of the EstParl (<https://steno-grammid.riigikogu.ee/>). Based on the amount of examples found in the first corpus, 70 examples were drawn from 2017 to 2022. This text collection was chosen for two reasons: first, it is originally spoken text with some specific restrictions: time, absence of direct recipient (this is not a rule, for example during the question and answer sessions with a minister [MIN]), a need to convey a political message rather than discuss the content of a specific matter; and second, a quick search in this corpus showed that the specific context of political speeches favors the use of biased questions such as the ones with reversed polarity or conveying criticism by different means, including by *huvitav* questions. All excerpts are also checked against the original video recording. The third, rather limited, corpus (12 tokens), composed of sample informal conversations drawn from the Corpus of Spoken Estonian of the University of Tartu (SpCorpus; 12 h of recordings), provides examples of how these questions are treated in interaction but considering that examples from oral language have also been investigated by Keevallik (2011), they received less attention in the present analysis than the examples from the other corpora. All examples that were found using the search words *huvitav* and *uvitav* (spoken variant) were included in this data set. One example comes from the web search engine.

When analyzing conversational data, it is common to observe the recipients' type of answer or reaction to determine whether the utterance in question is a question or not. In my examples of oral speech, this criterion could not be used for the examples of political speech. Whereas there are sequences of questions and answers predetermined by the nature of the sessions (e.g., questions to the government) during which the MIN is expected to answer the members, in many cases the construction investigated here does not necessarily occur during these sessions but in plenary speeches, and in general, the questions come rarely alone, but rather in groups or clusters. The addressee can therefore pick some of them to answer while setting others aside. It is nevertheless interesting to observe which questions are chosen and answered, because some of them are clearly rhetorical by nature and can be used by the speaker to design her answer in different ways, depending on how she decides to treat the question. For example, in political discourse, the assertion conveyed in the rhetorical question may be opposed in terms of truth value without directly answering the question, but the addressee also has the possibility to answer a rhetorically or ironically designed question by ignoring its biased nature and treat it as an information request.

3 Form and function

3.1 Relation between *huvitav* and the “main clause”: the role of intersubjectification

It is widely acknowledged that, besides the proposition meaning, language also expresses the speaker's attitude (subjectivity), and humans constantly use language to influence other people's beliefs and attitudes (Traugott 1982, 2010), which are to be found in the form of the utterance (Langacker 1990). Traugott (2003) defines subjectivity as the relationship between the speaker and the speaker's beliefs and attitudes, whereas intersubjectivity is defined as the relation with the addressee and the addressee's face. While this distinction has proven useful for analyzing the development of certain linguistic means through different stages in a diachronic perspective, as in Traugott's works about the intersubjectification, these dimensions are less easy to describe when analyzing synchronic data, such as in the present study, where one

pragmatically polysemous linguistic item is clearly assigned to do more than one task, but we rely on this approach, as it seems the most appropriate for our corpus (Section 3).

In Estonian syntax, a *huvitav* clause is described in this construction as an elliptical main clause (Erelt et al. 2017). The composition of the corresponding full main clause is not specified, but it can be assumed that authors refer to the predicative adjective construction *on huvitav* or *see on huvitav* ‘(it) is interesting’. As such, the sentence is an assertion and the distinction main clause/subordinated clause is justified here. The sentence is descriptive, the adjective maintains its propositional meaning, and the sentence does not elicit an answer (example 2).

(2)

See on huvitav, kuidas teised inimesed minu maale näevad.

‘it is interesting how other people see my paintings’

(Internet)

In terms of intersubjectivity, there are no specific means in this sentence that refer to the intersubjective dimension: a fact, qualified as ‘interesting,’ is described in the subordinated clause. In contrast, the elliptical form that we investigate here (created by the author for the sake of illustration) is more ambiguous:

(3)

Huvitav, kuidas teised inimesed minu maale näevad?

‘interesting how other people see my paintings?’

First, we can note that in standard written Estonian, the sentence can be formed as interrogative or assertive sentence using a period or a question mark (Erelt et al. 2017). Second, it can have different readings: in some contexts, the sentence can be either subject oriented where the speaker/narrator either asks himself the question (i.e. expresses his own attitudes) or instead conveys an intersubjective meaning where the question is addressed to an unidentified or specific addressee. Third, in this construction, the meaning of the adjective *huvitav* is no longer an objective assessment about something that the speaker considers “interesting” in the outside world, but can rather be paraphrased by “I would like to know” or “I wonder,” so that we can say that the interrogative element is more prominent. The primary function of the adjective (to characterize something) has moved to the background: its meaning has faded and the subjective meaning, centered on the speaker’s interrogation, is foregrounded.

A more extensive use of the short *huvitav* clause could also be influenced by another similarly functioning clause that contains elements that are semantically and pragmatically oriented toward asking for information, but contains the same lexical item: there exists indeed a productive full main clause pattern *huvitav oleks teada* ‘(it) would be interesting to know’ + interrogative. Numerous examples can be found in web corpora or in larger language corpora (but in the corpora investigated here full clauses [*huvitav oleks teada*] were exceptional, as for example, in the bilingual corpus, there is only one occurrence, and no examples were found in the conversational data; however, in political speech this clause seems to be used quite frequently, but no analysis was carried out in the present study). Just as with the shorter clause, no explicit addressee is designated in this pattern: it contains a conditional impersonal form of the copular verb and the infinitive of the verb *teadma* ‘to know’, which means that the subject referent is not explicit; it can be self-addressed (more frequently in written texts where the construction is used for internal speech) or addressed to both the speaker and the co-participants (Erelt et al. 2017, 254).

Compared to the adjective alone, the full clause solicites the listener(s) more directly due to the presence of the verb *teadma* ‘to know,’ which also makes explicit the speaker’s lack of knowledge and in consequence is epistemically not quite the same as the less-engaging adjective.

As there are not enough examples of full clauses in our data, we cannot provide a reliable comparison based on both groups. It is nevertheless plausible to assume that the shorter pattern is preferred in many contexts as a less face-threatening and more contemplative device, perhaps also leaving co-participant(s) more freedom for answering/reacting (or not) and for the choice of means to do so.

In my corpus, the adjective *huvitav* occurs predominantly at the beginning of the utterance; this corresponds to the general pattern described by several authors who have argued that subjectified elements tend to be positioned at the periphery of a clause (Bybee 1985, Suzuki 1998), but also, more specifically, the elements that refer to the epistemic stance of non-knowing are often anteposed (Hennoste 2012, 688).

Moreover, *huvitav* introduces more or less loosely linked complement clauses that can be juxtaposed without any complementizer (*huvitav ma=ei=ole küll näinud* ‘interesting, I haven’t seen’ [SpCorpus]) or be linked to the main clause with the complementizer *et* (Erelt 2017, 674), which shows its productivity as a versatile linguistic device that be combined with different entities: it can indifferently enter in the composition of interrogative or assertive clauses such as *huvitav (et) + complement clause* and *huvitav + interrogative clause*, but assertive clauses are not investigated here.

3.2 Overview of questions asked in *huvitav*-prefaced clauses

Based on the question word used in the interrogative clauses, the examples can be divided into two larger groups: wh-questions and polar questions. Between these two groups, two major differences can be pointed out based on frequency: first, polar questions are less often used in public speech, compared to fiction texts, and, second, questions about reason and manner (in other words, demanding explanations or accounts) are the biggest group among questions and, probably due to the nature of political discussions, they are preponderant compared to the corresponding tokens in written language (28 vs 13). Table 1 illustrates the distribution of the question types in my corpora. Data from the conversations are given only for information purposes, as the number of examples is not comparable, but some examples that illustrate the functioning of the pattern in conversation are also discussed in the analysis.

Table 1: Question types in corpora

		Written text (CoPEF)		Public speech (EParl)		Conversation (SpCorpus)	
Polar questions		26	37%	18	26%	3	25%
Wh-questions	<i>miks</i> ‘why’, <i>mis põhjusel</i> ‘for what reason’	8	12%	14	20%	9	75%
	<i>kuidas</i> ‘how’, <i>mismoodi</i> ‘in what manner’, <i>kuidasmoodi</i> ‘how’	5	7%	14	20%		
	Others	31	44%	24	34%		
Total		70		70		12	

Besides the two larger groups of question words among wh-questions (why and how questions), a great variety of interrogatives are found: *kuhu* (‘where’), *mis* (‘what’), *milline* (‘which’), *millal* (‘when’), *kui kaua* (‘how long’), *kui palju* (‘how much’), *kes* (‘who’), *kumb* (‘which of the two’), and *mitu* (‘how many’).

4 *Huvitav* interrogatives as a subjective device

Some interrogative clauses introduced by *huvitav* do not expect an answer because the question is self-addressed or presented as a contemplative questioning in which the speaker does not address anyone in particular in the communication situation. Although some authors have argued that intersubjectivity can virtually never be ruled out in human communication, even in self-talk (Du Bois 2011), these examples are discussed here as subjective devices separately from those where the addressees have, in principle, the chance to answer or react.

Besides Traugott (2003), we follow here the accounts of Benveniste (1966) and Lyons (1982) about subjectivity and intersubjectivity, considering that the subjective dimension is involved in all cases when the speakers refer to their cognitive processes using linguistic means to make an assessment or to express an attitude. Subjectivity is thus defined by the absence of the expression of intersubjectivity, whereby the speaker or writer pays attention

to the “self” of the addressee/reader in both an epistemic sense (paying attention to their presumed attitudes to the content of what is said), and in a more social sense (paying attention to their “face” or “image needs” associated with social stance and identity). (Traugott 2003, 128)

In this framework, less attention is paid to the relation between (inter)subjectivity and mutual knowledge of the participants (Verhagen 2005, Nuyts 2001) or markers of mutual understanding as is the rule in conversation analysis. In order for the definitions of these concepts to work on the real data presented in this article, Traugott’s approach seemed the most appropriate; she has also established that the mere presence of the addressee/reader in the described situation does not mean that intersubjectivity is involved, but the addressee/reader has to be a participant in the speech event (Traugott 2003, 129), which means that it does not include, for example, cases in which only some second person reference is mentioned: there has to be a trace of the relationship between the participants. However, the concepts of subjectivity and intersubjectivity do not have clear boundaries and exact linguistic counterparts, but are rather gradient notion continuum where different linguistic expressions are involved (De Cock 2015, 5–6). Considering that, it also seems plausible to support the view that subjectivity is generally inherent in intersubjectivity and that these phenomena are often both present, but depending on the focus (addresser/addressee), it is possible to distinguish between the two.

My data reveal that many examples of subjective use can be found in written language, but *huvitav* clauses as self-talk occur in embedded clauses in written as well as in oral language, in all discourse types. In fiction texts, the interrogative introduced by *huvitav* occurs most often in the inner speech of the narrator. Most occurrences display narrators “talking” to themselves, but based on the specific design of these interrogatives and their general context of occurrence in a fiction text with the possibility of having insight into the ideas of the narrator, one can assume that they somehow still involve the reader in their quest for an answer or in the questioning set out in the utterance, thus inviting the reader to speculate.

The subjective dimension of this question pattern is revealed in examples from the bilingual corpus: the reflexive verb *se demander* ‘to ask oneself’ is the most frequent counterpart in French; the written register is certainly a factor that favors the subjective interpretation of the pattern in cases where it does not occur in a dialogue. In example (4), a fiction text translated from Estonian into French, the narrator asks a putative question, making a guess about how the readers would feel if he were to continue by inserting a monologue in his text. Undoubtedly, the general addressee of a book are its readers, but in a first-person narration, the question asked by the narrator is interpreted as being addressed to himself, although some ambiguity is maintained in this utterance.

(4)

Huvitav, kuidas suhtuvad austatud lugejad sellesse, kui ma enesele vahepeal ühe monoloogi luban?

‘**Huvitav** how would esteemed readers feel if I would allow myself a monologue?’

Je me demande ce que penseraient mes nobles lecteurs si je me permettais maintenant un petit monologue.

‘**I ask myself** what my esteemed readers would think if I would allow myself now a short monologue.’

(CoPEF)

To translate the *huvitav* question into French, the reflective construction *je me demande* ‘I ask myself, I wonder’ is used, and the subjective dimension is explicitly marked here in terms of grammar. The subordinated sentence in French is formed as an indirect question (an assertion). A distinction is to be made between a syntactically formed interrogative construction (formal property) and a question in terms of its illocutionary force, as a speech act (functional property) that can be also formulated as an assertion. *Je me demande* in French is an example of the latter (Therkelsen 2009, 115).

Huvitav clauses that undoubtedly are questions in terms of their illocutionary force (a speaker who lacks some knowledge asks a question of an addressee who may be able to provide an answer) bear a marking (the adjective *huvitav*) that rules out their interpretation as simple requests for information. It has been shown that, in Estonian conversation, they are always treated as questions and never as plain assessments (Keevallik 2011). Other examples from different corpora expand our understanding of this device, supported by cases in which the answer is not possible or expected for different reasons, but the act of questioning remains nevertheless present, whereas other meanings come in addition to the propositional content of the utterance.

This distinction has to do with the typology of questions suggested by Lyons (1977, 755), who draws a distinction between asking a question of someone and simply posing the question without any particular addressee. For the cases discussed here, this can cover examples in written texts where the addressee can be, on the one hand, a virtual person (the character) or a virtual group (the reader(s) and/or the character) and has in either case a very limited freedom of action, at the discretion of the author. On the other hand, in public speech, as we will see below, more factors come into play, and the versatility and ambiguity of this device allow its use with various secondary effects.

In the bilingual corpus, the usual counterpart of the *huvitav* question is indeed the verb *se demander* ‘to ask oneself’, which is used when the narrator refers to his/her thinking process, whereas in direct speech sequences the question appears often in French as a simple, un subordinating sentence (but this also happens in inner speech, as in next example (5), where the context indicates clearly who the person is who is asking the question). The next example, a translation from French into Estonian, is a good illustration of the potential of this construction in terms of subjectivity and shows its functioning beyond one sentence and thereby its involvement in the construction of larger segments.

(5)

Elle pensait à Philibert. Qu’était-il en train de faire à ce moment précis?

*Ta mõtles Philibert’ile. **Huvitav**, mida ta praegu teeb?*

‘She thought about Philibert. **Huvitav**, what was he doing at that moment?’

(CoPEF)

In this sequence, the main character of the story is described as thinking about Philibert (*Elle pensait à Philibert* ‘she thought about Philibert’). In French, this action is depicted using the verb in the imperfect; this tense refers to a lasting activity without a precise beginning or ending (Riegel et al. 1999, 305–6). There is no specific counterpart in Estonian to the expression of this aspect of action in the past tenses, and the first sentence does not give any clues about the duration or any other characterization of the activity. In the translation, however, the use of *huvitav* in the next sentence seems to convey the adequate aspectual nuance obtained by the combination of both sentences in French, as *huvitav* adds this contemplative nuance to the description, which makes it possible to characterize the action and its duration: it indeed involves the possibility for the character to imagine different things Philibert could be doing at that moment.

Here we can also see the constraint that affects the introduction of new information, as described by Lambrecht and known as the principle of separation of reference and role: in order to say something about a topic, it needs to be introduced previously in the discourse (Lambrecht 1994). The *huvitav* clause appears as a device used for topic continuity after the introduction of a topic, and several topic continuity markers can indeed be found in these utterances, such as demonstratives or pronouns echoing or referring to some immediately preceding element. This clause is thus used for discourse structuring purposes, and it contributes to the elaboration of an already introduced topic.

The question introduced by *huvitav* seems to have common properties with questions introduced by *vajon* in Hungarian (Gärtner and Gyuris 2007, 2009) or *oare* in Romanian (Farkas 2022), both corresponding approximately to ‘I wonder’, where the use of these markers in a question as a consequence suspends the request by the speaker for an answer from the addressee. As a result, these questions cannot be asked in cases where the addressee is clearly in a position to resolve the issue raised in the question and is asked to

do so directly, for example, when a patient goes to the doctor who, in order to make a diagnosis, first inquires about the symptoms the patient is experiencing (example 6):

(6)

***Huvitav**, mis sümptomid teil on?

'**Huvitav** what symptoms do you have?'

Returning to the translations, from Estonian into French in the following two instances, we notice that the epistemic dimension of this device is clearly present, with adverbs and clauses such as *il serait intéressant de savoir* 'it would be interesting to know' (example 7). This sentence was also translated using *peut-être* 'maybe', *était-ce parce que* 'was it because', and *on aimerait savoir* 'we would like to know', through which the speaker's position on the epistemic scale goes from uncertain knowing to not knowing something.

(7)

*Isa oli saanud tunaeile sealt doktor Frese käest üpris murettekitava kirja. (**Huvitav**, mismoodi Elsy seda tegi, et tohtrid selle kohta koguni kirjasid hakkasid kirjutama?)*

*Que son père avait reçu avant-veille une lettre tout à fait préoccupante du docteur Frese (**il serait intéressant de savoir** comment Elsy s'y est prise pour que les docteurs aillent jusqu'à écrire des lettres à son sujet?).*

'His father had received yesterday a rather preoccupying letter from doctor Frese (**it would be interesting** to know what Elsy had done to make the doctor to write letters about her?)'

[The day before yesterday, her father had received a very upsetting letter from a Doctor Frese. (It would be amusing to know what Elsy did to cause physicians to write letters about her! Ho-ho.)]¹

(CoPEF)

A mirative meaning or an attempt to find an explanation is present in constructions such as *c'est curieux* 'it is strange'. Here (example 8), the question refers to a situation that is contrary to the narrator's expectations.

(8)

*Robert ei osanud neid väheseid hetki otstarbekalt kasutada. Enamiku aja kulutas nohisemisele. **Huvitav**, kas nii jääb kogu eluks?*

*Robert n'avait pas su employer efficacement ses tout derniers instants. Il avait passé le plus clair de son temps à renifler. **C'est curieux**: en irait-il ainsi toute la vie?*

'Robert wasn't able to use efficiently his last moments. He had spent most of the time sniffing. This is strange: will it stay like this the whole life?'

(CoPEF)

Huvitav clauses also appear in different embedded constructions, combined with verbs of thinking or asking by which the process of thinking or wondering of the speaker/narrator is made explicit in a separate clause. In these cases, the questions do not expect an answer – they are used as part of the argumentation or the description of a train of thought.

In example (9), the prime minister, while answering questions from members of parliament (MPs), makes a comment about how he tried to guess the content of the question addressed to him, based on its subject, which was told to him in advance. He refers to the process of thinking *siis ma mõtlesin* 'then I thought', and the embedded *huvitav* question is linked to the preceding clause by the complementizer *et*. (Here and in all examples of political speech, the original transcription has been maintained.)

¹ Translation in English, Anselm Hollo *The Czar's Madman*, 2003, The Harvill Press, p. 268. It is worth noting that the translator has chosen to emphasize the subjective reaction of the narrator (the adjective *amusing* and *Ho-ho*).

(9)

Kui ma lugessin teie küsimuse teemat koalitsioonileping
 ‘When I read the subject of your question “coalition agreement”

siis ma mõtlesin et huvitav mida head te nüüd sealt olete leidnud.
 then I thought that **huvitav** what have you found there now.’
 (EstParl)

The topic promoted in the first part of the utterance, *koalitsioonileping* ‘coalition agreement’, is referred to in the indirect question with the demonstrative adverb *sealt* ‘from there’. The question is framed by a descriptive clause, *siis ma mõtlesin* ‘then I thought’. In the next utterance, the speaker indeed answers himself by reporting his conjectural conclusions, based on the immediately preceding discussion.

Most examples of subject-centered uses do introduce a true questioning of the speaker/narrator who does not know the answer; it makes it possible to ask or to wonder about the immediately preceding element, but also to introduce a parenthetical or a digression from the main narration (example 7). The common features of these questions are that the possible addressees are not able to answer or the utterance is designed such that they cannot do so.

5 Huvitav interrogatives as an intersubjective device

Besides the cases where the subjective (as opposed to the intersubjective) dimension is clearly discernable, *huvitav* clauses are mostly used as an intersubjective device – that is, obviously manifesting the relation to the recipient.

5.1 Information request

Some interrogatives in the corpus appear as simple requests for information without any secondary meaning. The preceding context or previous turns contain specific elements that serve to introduce the topic and usually also indicate the speaker’s uncertainty about the recipients’ ability to answer the question.

In the next example (10), an MP asks the vice-president (VP) a question about the election procedure for a committee member function. The speaker begins by formulating an introductory utterance by specifying the addressee of her question but uses a device that makes it vaguer, *peaaegu et* (‘almost’), as if she did not know if she should ask it of the bureau or someone else. The question word, *kui* (‘if, when’), in the first clause following *huvitav* adds a hypothetical framing condition to the polar question, which is in turn followed by another condition (the need to have a full set of members). The formulation of the question (first utterance and the following *huvitav* interrogation) illustrates the hesitation of the speaker concerning the possible addressee and, in consequence, the possibility that the addressee knows the answer.

(10)

MP: *Tegelikult on mul peaaegu et küsimus juhatusele.*
 ‘In fact I have almost a question for the bureau.

Huvitav, *kui mõni fraktsioon ei nimeta oma liiget,*
Huvitav if a political group does not appoint its member

kas siis juhatusele jääb vabadus ise nimetada selle fraktsiooni liige sinna komisjoni,
 does the bureau have the freedom itself to name a member of that group to this commission,

kuivõrd komisjon vajab veel ühte liiget?
 considering the commission needs one additional member?’

VP: *aitäh küsimuse eest. ei, sellist vabadust juhatusel ei ole*
 ‘Thank you for the question. no, the bureau does not have such freedom

see saab olla ainult fraktsiooni ettepanek.
 this can be only a proposition of the political group.’
 (EstParl)

The VP treats it clearly as a question and, as he knows the answer, provides it in the next utterance with a longer explanation.

Huvitav interrogatives can occur as information requests, and as such are followed by an answer, but preceding turn(s) contain specific elements that provide a context for the question, justifying its formulation by means of the adjective *huvitav* (the speaker’s attitude, hesitations about the addressee, etc.).

5.2 Pointing to a problem or a contradiction

Using examples from conversations, Keevallik has described this function for assertive complement clauses (Keevallik 2011, 60–1) following the adjective *huvitav*: these clauses point to something that is literally qualified as “interesting,” but in reality, the described circumstance is considered problematic or contradictory. Using this means makes it possible to avoid a more direct confrontation about the problematic question. The same happens also in questions following the adjective *huvitav*.

In example (11), the speaker, an MP, reporting as the president of a parliamentary commission, is asked a specific question about an amendment. He does not find the right page in his document and asks for the exact page number. After the VP of the session tells him that there is no rush, he reiterates the question. Someone in the room gives an (inaudible) answer.

(11)

MP: *Ma kohe vaatan, aga ma kohe ei leia, kuskohas see on.*
 ‘I will look right away, but I don’t find at once, where it is.

Mul on lihtsalt siin nii palju pabereid kaasas, et kui te viitate
 I have here so many papers with me, that if you say

mis leheküljel see asub, siis ma leian selle kiiremini üles.
 on what page it is, then I will find it more quickly.

VP: *Aega on.*
 There’s no rush.

MP: *Ei, ma saan aru, et teil on aega. Mul ka.*
 No I understand that you have time, me too

aga lihtsalt hoiame aega kokku.
 but we can simply save time

Mis leheküljel, millist muudatust te mõtlete? (Vastus saalist.)
 On what page, what amendment you are referring to? (Answer from the room).

Jah. **Huvitav**, kas mul ei ole siis seda materjali
 yes **huvitav** Q I.ADENEG be then DEM.PRT material.PRT
 Yes. **Huvitav**, don’t I have this material

mis teile on saali jagatud.
 what you.ALL is room.ILL distribute.IMP.PPT
 that was distributed to you in the room.

Kohe vaatan. Mul on siin komisjoni materjalid. Kohe vaatan.
 I will look right away. I have here the commission's materials. I will look right away.'
 (EstParl)

During the utterances before hearing the page number, the speaker looks up several times in the direction of the room where the person who asked the question was. Once he has heard the page number, he puts aside the first document and begins to search for other documents. During this process, he utters the *huvitav*-prefaced question but does not look up again, and only a very short pause occurs between this and the next utterance *ma kohe vaatan* ('I will look right away'), so that clearly, he does not address this question for the audience to answer. This question seems to serve several purposes: in a somewhat hostile environment (the question and the comment coming from political opponents), it could anticipate the situation where he cannot find the exact reference and is not able to answer the question. The semantics of the question also indirectly reduces his responsibility (the same documents have not been distributed to the audience and to him, so there might be an error imputable to someone else). The question seems to express his surprise or discontent about this abnormal situation rather than to ask a question and is consequently similar to *soliloquies* where no answer is expected. At the same time, asking this question, which no one will probably answer, makes it possible to reduce his own responsibility in case the page is not found.

In the next example (12), the speaker also raises a contradiction, but here it occurs regarding the state of affairs considered as "normal." A family is discussing the results of the academic year in some high schools, namely the number of medals awarded to the best students at the end of their education.

(12)

01 D: *meil pole päris palju: aastaid nii=palju medaleid olnud.*
 we.ADE NEG.be quite many year.PL.PRT so many medals. PL.PRT be.PPT
 'we haven't had for quite many years so many medals

(1.1)

02 M: *a=huvitav kuidas seal Annelinnas ni=palju on. seal=oli=vist kümme või üksteist tükki.*
 but *huvitav* how there Annelinn.INE so many is there was maybe ten or eleven piece.PRT
 but *huvitav* how come there were so many in Annelinn. There were ten or eleven of them.

(1.4)

03 M: *nagu kahtlane tundub,=hh*
 seems a bit suspicious

(1.3)

04 D: *mmm seal antakse nüüd = natuke lihtsamalt ka.*
 now they give them out also more easily

05 M: *mulle tundub jah kuidagi kahtlane. (.)*
 to me it seems a bit suspicious yes

06 D: *seal=on igal aastal (.) ästi palju neid.*
 there are every year so many of them

(4.5)

07 F: *õpivad ästi.*
 they work well'

(SpCorpus)

At first, the daughter (D) points out that in her school the number of medals awarded was unexpectedly high (the exact number is not mentioned, but from the general attitude, one could presume that the school in

Annelinn [referred to by Mother (M) in the *huvitav* clause in line 2] should not have got as many medals as they received). The mother begins by wondering how it is possible that this school has so many medals and also adds an estimate of their number – ten or eleven. After a pause, as no participant has reacted, she adds a comment making her idea more explicit (*nagu kahtlane tundub*, ‘seems a bit suspicious’). Again, no participant auto-selects immediately after her; only after another pause, does the daughter suggest an explanation that seems to be concordant with the doubts previously expressed by mother. She indeed approves it on line 5. Following her comment, the daughter adds another bit of information about the situation in that school, explaining that in fact this is not new, but happens every year. After a very long pause, the father ends this sequence with a positive assessment, *õpivad ästi* ‘they do well at school’, without taking the mother’s side.

5.3 Biased questions: from criticism and irony to rhetorical questions

The *huvitav* question is not always about someone not knowing something; it also conveys certain secondary meanings that share some similar features, but are not easy to group under a single category. We use the term ‘biased question’ for all these cases and provide a more detailed analysis below, based on the examples presented in this section. The common feature of these examples is that all of them have a rhetorical or stylistic effect whereby the speaker tries to influence the public/the addressee or convey her/his own position or evaluation in addition to asking a question, and the fact that the addressee might or might not know the answer seems in these cases to be overridden by considerations pertaining to persuasion and influencing the addressee. This set of examples forms a continuum that ends with pure rhetorical questions that do not assume a knowing addressee who can answer, but convey the idea that the answer is known to all and can still be answered by both, the speaker or the addressee (Caponigro and Sprouse 2007, 9). Therefore, unlike the example in Section 5.1, the following questions rarely receive a direct answer.

The next example (13) comes from a fiction text in which Karin, giving recommendations to a young author, inquiries about the interpretation of an excerpt in English and considers that the idea suggested by the writer (the narrator) is too simplistic and that he does not understand the allegory conveyed by the idea. To facilitate the reading of the example, the preceding context is given in Estonian, followed by its translation, and only after that the target construction is given with the translation into English and into French.

(13)

“*Mis sa arvad, mida Poe sellega öelda tahtis?*” küsis Karin.

“*Seda,*” vastasin mina, “*et mateeria muutus.*” “*Kuidas!*”

“*Mateeria muutus, ma sain niimoodi aru.*”

“What do you think Poe wanted to say by that?” asked Karin.

I answered: “That the substance changed.” “How!”

“The substance changed, that’s what I understood.”

“**Huvitav**, kas teile on tõesti tundmatu see sõna – allegooria?”

“**Huvitav**, is the word allegory really unknown to you?”

Est-ce que, par hasard, le mot allégorie vous serait totalement inconnu??

Q by chance the word allegory would be totally unknown to you?’

“*Ei, sugugi mitte.*”

“Non, bien sûr!?”

‘No, not at all.’

(CoPEF)

Karin is challenging the answer of the narrator (*Kuidas!* ‘How!’), which triggers a repetition of the same answer by the narrator, who adds a subjective justifying utterance (*ma sain niimoodi aru* ‘that’s what I understood’). Karin then asks a question that supposes a negative answer, as the question is used to criticize the narrator’s understanding as too narrow or simplistic. The questioning refers to the meaning of the word ‘allegory,’ which the narrator was supposed to bear in mind while interpreting the excerpt from Poe in question. The question is answered here by a firm negative (*ei, sugugi mitte* ‘no, not at all’). Karin uses this whole sequence to criticize the erroneous interpretation of the narrator, and the *huvitav* interrogation serves to convey the ironical and critical stance of the speaker. In French, the question is translated by a direct yes/no question (*est-ce que*), but the ironical and condescending attitude is found in the use of *par hasard* ‘by chance’ and the reinforcing adverb *totalement* (‘totally’). One can assume that the narrator does know the meaning of the word “allegory” and in consequence the question can be considered as rhetorical, as the answer is known by both participants.

In public speech, in particular, irony, criticism, and rhetorical questioning are often combined: speakers convey criticism in ironical utterances that can all be used rhetorically. Parting from the Gricean pragmatic principles, Giora (1995) defines irony as a mode of indirect negation. An ironic utterance is assumed to point to the difference between an actual state of affairs and a more desirable state of affairs. Usually an utterance can be ironic if it means the opposite of what it says, but this definition is not valid only for irony. Another feature is associated with pretension – that is, the speaker is pretending an attitude (Clark 1996). At first glance, most of the following examples – especially those that do not contain any discourse particles or other means used to convey a specific attitude of the speaker – could be seen as simple requests for information, but with the support of the contextual knowledge, we notice that the speaker can be pretending a naïve attitude, surprise, as if he/she is really lacking the knowledge in question.

The ironical effect can also emerge from the question that follows immediately the *huvitav* question. The next example (14) is about the protests during the period when restrictions were imposed due to the spread of the coronavirus. The question is followed by the answer of the MIN.

(14)

MP: *Austatud eesistuja! Lugupeetud minister! Nägin telerist, kuidas viidi ära ema väikese lapsega.*

‘Honorable president! Honorable minister! I saw on TV how a mother with a little child was taken away.

Huvitav, *mis oli selle põhjus? Kas neid peeti sellel üritusel ohtlikuks?*

Huvitav, what was the reason? Were they considered as dangerous at that event?’

MIN: *Aitäh küsimuse eest! Mulle endale isiklikult ei meenu, et oleks ära viidud ema väikese lapsega.*

Kindlasti oli selliseid olukordi, kus vesteldi inimestega, kellel olid kaasas lapsed. Aga ma tõesti vabandan, ma ei mäleta, et oleks olnud selline olukord, kus oleks väikese lapsega ema ära viidud.

‘Thank you for the question. I personally don’t remember that there has been a mother with a young child taken away. Certainly, there were situations where they [the police] talked with people who had children with them. But I quite apologize: I don’t remember such a situation where a mother with a young child was taken away.’

(EstParl)

The speaker refers to an episode he pretends to have seen on TV where a mother with a young child were forcibly taken away by the police. The first question resembles an information request, but the following question adds a secondary meaning by offering a possible explanation, formulated as a polar question. We can also see from the reaction of the recipient that answering the information request is not considered an option; instead of, for example, stating his ignorance (he does not know the reason for this act) or speculating about the possible reasons, the MIN casts doubt on the claim as a whole. The polar question is impossible to answer: a negative answer would acknowledge important shortcomings in his field of responsibility and a positive answer would mean that he accepts the absurd claim that a mother with a young child would be dangerous to the public order.

Huvitav-prefaced questions can also be used to project a longer excerpt in political argumentation. In example (15), an MIN is answering a critical question from an opposition MP about the planned budget revenues. He begins with the rhetorical statement *Huvitav kas me oleme eri saalides* ‘*huvitav* are we in different rooms’, which allows him to show the distance between both positions, before he begins to explain his own.

(15)

MP: [...] *Eelmisest vastusest jäi ikkagi täiesti õhku see küsimus et kui teie jutu järgi on see eelarveneutraalne, kuidas siis on seoses autode maksustamisega planeeritud seitsmemiljoniline laekumine eelarvesse.*

‘[...] From the previous response it was still left unanswered the question that if according to what you say this is budget-neutral then how do you establish a link with the planned budget revenue of seven millions from the taxation of the cars.

MIN: *Huvitav, kas me oleme eri saalides.*
Huvitav _Q we be.1PL different ROOM.PL.INE
 ‘*Huvitav*, are we in different rooms.’

Ma ei ole ühelgi hetkel öelnud, et see muudatus on neutraalne. [...] Ma pole ühelgi hetkel rääkinud neutraalsusest. Me oleksime tõesti justkui eri saalides. Aga ma olen valmis seda ikka ja jälle kordama ning veel kord rahulikult selgitama.

‘I have at no point said that this amendment is [budget] neutral. [...] It’s as if we were really in different rooms. But I am ready to repeat it again and again and explain it calmly one more time.’
 (EstParl)

The question consisted in criticizing the budget revenues, which are presented as miscalculated. The MIN, in his answer, explains the calculation that was made during the preparation of the proposal and points to the arguments that were falsely attributed to him. The turn ends with a paraphrase of the initial question in an assertive formulation *me oleksime tõesti justkui eri saalides* ‘it’s as if we were really in different rooms’, by which he underlines the fact that his colleague had not understood how the calculations were made. The rhetorical nature of the question at the beginning gives to it a reproachful tone that is also underlined by his description of the efforts already made (*ma rääkisin enne pika loo* ‘I told before a long story’) and the denial of the words attributed to him (*ma pole ühelgi hetkel rääkinud neutraalsusest* ‘I have at any point spoken about neutrality’).

In this section, we discussed examples of the so-called biased uses of the *huvitav* interrogation: all examples have in common a secondary effect besides the primary meaning of the question about some fact or event. This type of use can be characterized as combining different effects in a rhetorical type of question: in terms of the information requested, the common knowledge of the participants, and the answers or reactions received, these questions have the same features as rhetorical questions.

6 Discussion and conclusion

As part of the resource investigated here, the adjective *huvitav* does not appear in its usual function in discourse as an adjective: instead of conveying an assessment about some observable fact or phenomenon like a regular qualifying adjective, it is part of a conventionalized question pattern that contributes to the structuring of the discourse, and is thus a topic-continuing and a projective device. It does not state that the upcoming question is “of interest,” but rather forms a whole construction with specific subjective and intersubjective effects. As a question, it nevertheless always manifests the relation with an addressee that can be the speaker herself, an undetermined or generic recipient, or a determined addressee.

From a pragmatic and semantic point of view, we did not find in our examples any features that could speak in favor of considering them as cases of subordination: the questions were independent with respect

to the adjective (as main clause), the literal meaning of the so-called main clause is not easy to determine when analyzed together with the following question and, in consequence, the role of the adjective *huvitav* emerges only from a pragmatic analysis of the examples. The question initiated by *huvitav* considered in its previous context and with its secondary effects reveals that the adjective functions rather as an epistemic marker.

The same conclusion was reached by Keevallik (2011) based on examples of interaction.

The examples analyzed in this article were divided in two groups with regard to the prevalence of the subjective or the intersubjective dimension. The specific features and secondary effects described in Section 5 cannot be ruled out in subject-oriented uses, but this choice was made in order to demonstrate the versatility of this device in regard to the relation between the speaker and the addressee(s).

In different corpora, this interrogative pattern appears as part of a series of questions or arguments: they are linked to the ongoing topic that is a prerequisite for using this construction, as has been also pointed out in previous accounts (Keevallik 2011, Erelt 2017). Naturally, the question occurs after quotations or references to others' ideas or positions; especially in political speech, it is used to disagree with a previously expressed or described position, but the pattern is also regularly used in self-questioning, revealing its subject-oriented role, especially in fiction texts or in embedded clauses in which the speakers refer to their inner thoughts or report another's speech.

The use of *huvitav* at the beginning of an interrogative utterance (but not exclusively) generally signals two things: first, that the question is presented in a way that does not elicit a direct answer (self-questioning, invitation to speculate, a lesser certainty about the knowledge of the addressee) that favors a subjective use of the device, and, second, it has the potential to add a secondary meaning to the question by making it biased (conveying irony, criticism, or pointing out a problematic issue), which is preferred in intersubjective contexts. In these cases, the question goes beyond its literal meaning and is used more like a statement or a judgment, so the necessity to provide an answer is also diminished, but these questions can nevertheless be answered by the addressee (who, instead of answering the question as an information request, most often provides an explanation). This conclusion is in line with the results of Laanesoo about reversed polarity questions in Estonian (Laanesoo 2012, 514–5), so that we can affirm that *huvitav* questions can also have a rhetorical function in discourse. In addition, the data revealed that when this device was used to ask a question in order to elicit an answer, without any secondary meaning, the previous context contained elements related to the positioning of the speaker in regard to the knowledge state of the addressee. As this resource can also be part of a cluster of questions concerning an ongoing topic, we saw that considerably longer excerpts can be built on it, with secondary effects only emerging after the *huvitav* question, suggesting a more complex interplay between the target construction and its environment.

Transcription conventions and abbreviations

[]	overlapping talk
=	latching of turns
<u>underlining</u>	emphasis
:	extension of preceding sound
(0.5)	pause length
(.)	micropause
.	falling intonation
,	fall not to low
hh	audible outbreath
1	first person
ADE	addressee
D	daughter
DEM	demonstrative

EstParl	Estonian Parliament
F	father
IMP	impersonal voice
INE	inessive
M	mother
MIN	minister
MP	member of parliament
NEG	negation
PL	plural
PPT	past participle
PRT	partitive
Q	question particle
VP	vice president

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Data sources

CoPEF = Parallel corpus of the Estonian-French Association of Lexicography. <http://corpus.estfra.ee> (20.04.2023).

EstParl = Transcripts of political speeches and discussions from the plenary sittings of the Estonian parliament. <https://stenogrammid.riigikogu.ee/> (20.04.2023).

Internet = Example (3) from the web: <https://rahvaylikool.ee/abstraktne-kunst-kui-protsess-ja-enesevaljenduse-viis/> (21.04.2023).

SpCorpus = Corpus of Spoken Estonian of the University of Tartu. <https://www.cl.ut.ee/suuline/Korpus.php?lang=en> (20.04.2023).