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Resisting an action in conversation by pointing out epistemic incongruence: *Mä tiedän* 'I know' responses in Finnish[☆]

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Abstract

This paper investigates the Finnish *mä tiedän*, 'I know' utterance in responsive position. The data, gathered from naturally occurring interactions, indicate that these responses occur in sequences with epistemic incongruence: the first pair part is an informing type turn, which presupposes an unknowing (or a less knowing) recipient. With the *mä tiedän* response, the response-speaker resists this implication and points out the epistemic incongruence there is at that moment. The *mä tiedän* speaker thus resists the unknowing status attributed to her/him and claims to be knowledgeable, and at the same time resists the social action being accomplished in the informing turn. The uniformity of the expression, its sequential context and interactional function suggest that this expression is rather formulaic. The verb *tietää*, 'to know' is typically described as a complement taking predicate, but the *mä tiedän* responses include no object argument whatsoever; the object of knowing is to be inferred from the previous turn. The form of the expression is fitted to its sequential position. The turn may also contain response particles (e.g., *nii* or *joo*) which specify its contextual interpretation. The data suggest that the use of these Finnish utterances is different from how *I know* responses are used in English conversations, where the responses may signal not only knowledge but also affiliation.

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1. Introduction, method, and the data

A default assumption in interaction, while not explicitly expressed, is that we know what we talk about. As Pomerantz (1984a:609) observes, when speakers plainly assert something, "they are proposing to represent actual states of affairs and are accountable for being right." On the other hand, not knowing something is often explicitly expressed by people asking information-seeking questions, displaying uncertainty concerning some matter, and so forth. Many types of epistemic phrases (Thompson, 2002) also occur that modify and particularize the interpretation of the utterance they are attached to, such as *I think* (Kärkkäinen, 2003) and *I thought* (Kärkkäinen, 2012; Smith, 2013). But when is knowing something expressed overtly? When do participants say that they know something that is being talked about; what are the interactional contingencies for producing this type of turn?

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This paper examines the use of the Finnish *mä tiedän*, 'I know' utterances that occur in responsive positions in naturally occurring interaction. I will analyze the interactional environments and the sequence types where the utterance occurs, and investigate the social actions the utterance accomplishes. As the key element in the utterance is the verb *tietää*, 'to know', the current analysis adds to the body of literature investigating how epistemicity and, more specifically, participants' relative knowledge positions are managed in social interaction. As will be demonstrated, the Finnish *mä tiedän* utterances occur in sequences where the first-position turn presupposes an unknowing recipient. With *mä tiedän*, the responding speaker resists this assumption, pointing out the emerged epistemic incongruence, and indicates that the previous turn's action of informing was not appropriate (see Section 2 for an initial illustration of the phenomenon).

In addition to the analysis of the interactional characteristics of the sequences with *mä tiedän* responses, another objective of the paper is to shed some further light on the role of formulaicity in spontaneous interactional talk and the flexibility of grammar as an interactional resource. This will be done by investigating the fixedness of the *mä tiedän* expression and by discussing the grammar of the verb *tietää*, 'to know' in light of the *mä tiedän* utterances. It will be shown that the *mä tiedän* expression is fixed to a relatively high degree. In other words, the analysis demonstrates that there is a great amount of consistency in both the composition and the position of the responsive *mä tiedän* tokens across the corpora used.

All the *mä tiedän* utterances analyzed in this study are in the first person, affirmative, and present tense. Only responsive sequential positions were included, which means that 'I know' tokens in tellings and other first-position utterances were excluded. Furthermore, all responses to utterances that included the verb 'to know' were excluded (the corpus contained three of these responses). The utterances included in the collection contained the speaker referring to his/her own knowledge of the issue being discussed, and the object of knowing is what was uttered in the previous turn.

The data corpus consists of 28 h of naturally occurring interactions and these were collected primarily from everyday situations. The data were selected from the conversational data archives in the Universities of Helsinki and Turku and have been transcribed according to the Jeffersonian system (see Appendix for the symbols). The collection comprises 22 instances of *mä tiedän*.¹ This phenomenon is therefore relatively rare, occurring in the current database less than once an hour (once in 1 h 15 min on average). The negative utterance *minä en tiedä*, 'I don't know' is far more frequent, according to Helasvuo (2014, pc.): in her seven-hour corpus, the negative utterance makes up 82% (N 177) of the "first person + 'to know'" utterances, which means that 'I don't know' occurred approximately once every 3 min.²

The target utterance *mä tiedän* occurs in various forms in the data, depending on regional and other factors. First, the personal pronoun, *mä* (or *minä*, *mää*, or *mie*), is not always expressed. However, the person is by default marked in the verb: the final *-n* in *tiedän* denotes the first person singular (but in certain varieties of Finnish, this is sometimes not pronounced³). Second, the verb form of the expression is attested in several forms in the data: *tiedän*, *tiän*, *tiä*, *tiärä*, *tiädä*, *tiädän*, etc. – many of the differences in pronunciation are due to regional factors. As the (standard) form *tiedän* is the most common of these variants in the data, and since the personal pronoun most often occurs in the *mä* form, the 'I know' expression will be referred to here as *mä tiedän* when the collection is discussed as a whole. When analyzing particular extracts, I will cite the form that occurs in the case in question.

The methods of study adopted here are conversation analysis (for example, see Sidnell and Stivers, 2013) and interactional linguistics (see, for instance, Selting and Couper-Kuhlen, 2001). This entails a detailed, data-driven, moment-by-moment sequential analysis of the excerpts.

2. Background on epistemics and an initial illustration of the phenomenon

Research on epistemics provides an essential background for the analysis of expressions dealing with knowledge. The following case is an initial illustration of how epistemics (and not, e.g., affiliation) has turned out to be a crucial factor in analyzing the collection. This excerpt is from a situation where Mom (Ä) and her 7-year-old daughter (I) are in the kitchen. The target lines in all extracts (here line 8) are glossed morpheme-to-morpheme (see Appendix for the symbols).

¹ I would like to extend my gratitude to Päivi Hakamäki and Marja-Liisa Helasvuo for their help in compiling the collection.

² In Helasvuo's corpus, 'I know' occurs approximately once every 15 min, but contrary to the present study, her calculation includes all possible 'I know' cases.

³ However, all instances contain at least one or the other, either the personal pronoun or the verbal suffix *-n*; most of the cases have both.

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