Uninquisitive questions

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Abstract

The sort of denotation a sentence is assigned is typically motivated by assumptions about the discourse function of sentences of that kind. For example, the notion that utterances which are *functionally* inquisitive (asking a question) suggest denotations which are *semantically* inquisitive (expressing the multiple licit responses to that question) is the cornerstone of interrogative meaning in frameworks like Alternative Semantics (Hamblin, 1973) and Inquisitive Semantics (Ciardelli et al., 2018).

This paper argues that at least some kinds of questions systematically do not involve utterances with inquisitive content, based on novel observations of the Estonian discourse particle *ega*. Though *ega* is often labeled a 'question particle', it is used in both assertions and questions with sharply divergent discourse effects. I suggest that the relevant difference between assertive and questioning uses of *ega* is not semantic or sentence type-related, but rather reflects an interaction between a unified semantics for declaratives *ega*-sentences and different contexts of use. I then show that if we assume that *ega* presupposes that some aspect of the discourse context implicates the negation of *ega*'s prejacent, and that it occurs only in declarative sentences, we can derive its interpretation across a range of contexts: with the right combination of ingredients, we can ask questions with semantically uninquisitive sentences.

1 Introduction

A fundamental question in Inquisitive Semantics (Ciardelli et al., 2018) is what sorts of linguistic items generate semantic inquisitivity, in the sense of raising multiple mutually non-entailing alternatives. Polar interrogative clauses, for example, are a paradigmatic example of an inquisitive object, characterized by an inquisitive operator INT which is responsible for contributing inquisitivity, reminiscent of influential analyses of questions as denoting sets of answers to those questions (e.g. Hamblin, 1973; Karttunen, 1977; Groenendijk and Stokhof, 1982).

How can we tell what linguistic objects are inquisitive? In the case of interrogatives, their characteristic inquisitivity correlates with the fact that they canonically raise issues with multiple possible resolutions. This can be formally cashed out in various ways. For example, Farkas and Roelofsen (2017) propose a general-purpose utterance function that applies equally to both declaratives and interrogatives; the 'questioning' effect of interrogatives comes from an interaction between their inquisitive denotation and this utterance function. The difference between declaratives and interrogatives in this view comes from the assumption that declarative sentences denote a singleton set of propositions, and therefore raise issues with only a single maximal resolution.

But we cannot always straightforwardly link inquisitive denotations to inquisitive speech act functions. For instance, English rising declaratives (*You're in London?*) seem to ask questions, despite their declarative form. This pragmatic observation has motivated analyses of rising declaratives as having a (possibly compositionally determined) inquisitive denotation à la interrogatives (Roelofsen and Farkas, 2015; Farkas and Roelofsen, 2017; Jeong, 2018), but many others aim to derive their question-asking pragmatic function from the interaction between non-inquisitive declarative semantics *per se* and rising intonation (Truckenbrodt, 2006; Gunlogson, 2008; Krifka, 2015; Malamud and Stephenson, 2015; Westera, 2017, 2018; Rudin, 2022, to name but a few).

Whatever the right analysis of rising declaratives is, they raise the much larger issue of what path(s) languages make use of to get from denotations to pragmatic functions. To put a finer point on it: Do question-y pragmatics point to inquisitive

denotations, or can pragmatic 'inquisitivity' arise via other means? And if the latter is true, what are those means?

This paper aims to shed light on the sentential denotation-speech act mapping through the lens of the Estonian left-periphery discourse particle *ega*. *Ega* is an interesting case from this perspective because it occurs in both questions (1) and assertions (2), but makes sharply different interpretive contributions in each case.[1] Also strikingly, *ega* only occurs in sentences with sentential negation (with some rare exceptions, see §4).

(1)   *Context: Discussion diagnosing warning lights on a car dashboard*

Ega see pilt   punasest kollaseks   ei
EGA this picture red.ELA yellow.TRA NEG
vahetu?
change.NEG
'Does the icon not change from red to yellow?'   (etTenTen 2021)[2]

(2)   *Context: Speaker is sure that Russia would advance in the tournament, but they lost. They describe their reaction to this state of affairs:*

Ega ma eriti   kurb ei   olnud.
EGA I   especially sad NEG was.neg
'I wasn't especially sad.'   (etTenTen)

In questions, *ega* conveys a 'checking' function similar to tag questions, though it also is used in polite requests. By contrast, in assertions, *ega* offers a sense of 'epistemic reinforcement' that its prejacent is true, in contrast to some prior assumption. Despite this apparent duality of function, much more attention has been paid to the former use of *ega*, and it is often explicitly described in both formal and descriptive work as a 'negative question particle' (e.g. Metslang, 1981, 2017; Erelt et al., 1995).

The two guises of *ega* seem to be at odds with one another: *Ega*-assertions convey epistemic certainty, but *ega*-questions solicit addressee responses in a similar manner to interrogatives. We could reconcile these facts by assuming that there are two distinct versions of *ega* in the lexicon, one for declaratives, and one for interrogatives. This approach might well be sufficient for a description of *ega*'s discourse effects in various contexts, but it also leaves any similarities between the two com-

pletely accidental, such as their tendency to occur alongside sentential negation.

In this paper, I propose a different approach: we have the same *ega* in both questions and assertions, but its divergent behavior arises from interactions between this unified meaning and general pragmatic principles. I argue that *ega*-sentences are never inquisitive in the formal sense—they do not denote non-singleton sets of propositions—but they do come with a presupposition that generates a pragmatic clash with their prejacent in most discourse contexts, giving the sense that the addressee in fact has an issue to resolve. In this way, the apparent 'inquisitivity' of *ega*-questions is epiphenomenal, adding to a body of literature which teases apart semantic and pragmatic inquisitivity, and suggesting that questions can be derived pragmatically from the interaction between uninquisitive building blocks.

2   A profile of *ega*

I will first lay out the pragmatic profile of *ega* by describing its distribution. As mentioned, *ega* occurs almost exclusively in negative sentences, an observation I will revisit in §4. Here, 'negative' means marked by *sentential* negation, a combination of the negative particle *ei* and a special connegative form of the verb.[3] Thus, in this section, I will describe the three kinds of discourse functions *ega*-sentences of the form *ega not-p* may have.

2.1   *Ega* in questions

Canonically, *ega* occurs in two main types of questions. The first is polite requests, which can be naturally uttered in both informal and formal contexts, such as asking a stranger for directions or interacting with customer service over the phone. Generally, the speaker in these cases presents an obliging tone, similar to rough English paraphrases like *I don't suppose that...* or *Do you happen to...*:

(3)   Ega sa ei   oska   öelda, kus
EGA you NEG can.NEG say   where
asub   Eesti Pank?
is.located Bank of Estonia
'I don't suppose you could tell me where the Bank of Estonia is?'

(4)   Ega sul   ratas ei ole?
EGA you.ADE bike NEG be.NEG

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[1]In fact, *ega* has yet another life as a coordinating conjunction. I set this version of *ega* aside here.

[3]*Ei* can in fact be omitted in *ega*-sentences so long as the connegative verb is still present and thus the sentence is still identifiably negative-marked (Tamm, 2015).

'Do you happen to have a bike?'

The second class of *ega*-questions function like tentative assertions that $\neg p$, while additionally seeking confirmation from the addressee whether this is in fact the case (Metslang, 2017). This profile is reminiscent of tag questions (see e.g. Reese and Asher 2007).

(5) Ega jaanipäeva   viktoriin liiga raske
     EGA Midsummer.GEN quiz   too difficult
     ei   olnud?
     NEG was.NEG
     'The quiz about Midsummer wasn't too difficult, right?'   (Tamm 2015:411)

(6) Ega sa midagi pole   unustanud?
     EGA you anything be.NEG forgot.NEG
     'You haven't forgotten anything, right?'
     (Sign after airport security checkpoint)

While *ega*-questions of the confirmation sort are felicitous if the speaker seems to reasonably expect that p is false ((7) in Context 1), they are infelicitous if the addressee is neutral with respect to the truth or falsity of p (Context 2) or biased towards the truth of p (Context 3):

(7) *A doctor asking a patient a standardized series of questions to make a diagnosis:*
     Ega sul   ei ole   valu seljas?
     EGA you.ADE NEG be.NEG pain back.INE
     'You don't have back pain, right?'
     Context 1: Patient burned their hand on a stove. (7)✓
     Context 2: Doctor has no information about patient's status. (7)#
     Context 3: Patient fell off a ladder. (7)#

What both of these species of questions have in common is that the speaker presents themselves as committing (at least contingently) to $\neg p$, but solicit a response from the addressee to either agree with or refute $\neg p$.

2.2 *Ega* in assertions

In contrast with its questioning uses, *ega* has a life as an 'adversative' particle in assertions. Informally, it indicates that the speaker is committed to the truth of $\neg p$, in contrast with some existing evidence for p. As Keevallik and Habicht (2017) put it, *ega* 'challenges something that has been assumed by the prior speaker'. This assumption can come from many sources, including implicatures of previous speech acts (Keevallik, 2009) or even

the addressee's (even non-linguistic) behavior (8).

(8) *A left dirty dishes in the sink and asks B to clean them. B responds:*
     Ega ei   ole   sinu ema!
     EGA NEG be.NEG your mother
     'I'm not your mother!'

In (8), B is not challenging a literal assertion of motherhood, but rather the apparent implication of A's behavior. Importantly, however, *ega*-assertions are not licensed in cases of bald-faced disagreement, i.e. in responses to assertions of p itself (note that B's response in (9) is similarly infelicitous without the polarity particle *ei* 'no'):

(9) A: Ma võitsin mängu.
         I   won   game
         'I won the game.'
     B: #Ei, ega sa ei   võitnud!
         no EGA you NEG win.PAST.NEG
         '(No), you didn't win!'

2.3 Summary

Though *ega*-questions and *ega*-assertions differ fundamentally in whether they seem to be requesting information or providing it, both convey that the speaker believes $\neg p$ and that there is some reason to believe that p.

3 *Ega* as a context update modifier

In this section, I will motivate the central analytical claim of this paper: despite often being used to ask questions, *ega*-sentences are always declarative, and the interrogative uses are derived by means of a crucial interaction between the meaning of *ega* and its contexts of use. Throughout this section, I will only examine *ega*-sentences are always negative (that is, having the form *ega not-p*), since positive *ega*-sentences are rare; the polarity restriction itself will be addressed in §4.

3.1 *Ega*-questions are declarative

In order to obtain a unified analysis of *ega*, we must contend with the apparent heterogeneity of discourse functions of *ega*-claims. On the basis of the discourse effects of *ega*-questions, we might assume they are in fact interrogative clauses. However, there is good reason to believe that *ega*-questions are in fact declarative.

In terms of core sentence structure, declaratives and interrogatives are identical in Estonian; there

is no obvious syntactic difference between a declarative and its corresponding polar interrogative, and there has been argued to be no reliable prosodic difference between them either (Keevallik, 2003; Asu, 2006; Salveste, 2015). Rather, neutral polar questions are typically characterized by adding a left-periphery particle *kas* to a corresponding vanila declarative.

(10)   a.   Liis on kodus.
            Liis is home
            'Liis is home.'
       b.   Kas Liis on kodus?
            Q   Liis is home
            'Is Liis home?'

Absent a syntactic signature of clause type, we can only argue that *ega*-sentences are interrogative indirectly, but in fact, two additional pieces of evidence point toward a declarative analysis. First, as Keevallik (2009) points out, *ega* often co-occurs with epistemic particles that are incompatible with bonafide interrogatives, such as *vist* 'probably, I assume'. This is even the case in *ega*-sentences whose apparent discourse function is to request information (11):

(11)   Ega sul   ei   köeta   vist.
       EGA you.ADE NEG heat.PASS.NEG probably
       'I assume that your place is not heated?'
       (Keevallik 2009: 152)

Second, both *ega*-assertions and checking questions require the speaker to be biased toward the belief that $\neg p$ (as opposed to p), which is entirely unsurprising if *ega*-sentences are declaratives, since uttering a declarative sentence $\neg p$ (absent special intonation) typically commits the speaker to $\neg p$. We will revisit this notion in more detail below. It might seem at first glance that polite requests like (3) run counter to this line of reasoning, since the speaker in such cases clearly does not believe $\neg p$. I will propose that this is an artifact of the polite reasoning contexts: in fact, speakers of such *ega*-questions are presenting themselves as believing $\neg p$ for politeness reasons; I spell this out more concretely in §3.4.1.

I take these pieces of evidence to jointly tip the scales in favor of a declarative analysis of *ega*. One possible issue is that on their face, *ega*-sentences can be embedded under anti-rogative verbs—those which permit interrogative but not declarative complements—like *küsima* 'ask' and *uurima* 'investigate' in the following examples from blogs.

(12)   Nancy   isa   küsib, et ega teil
       Nancy.GEN father asks   that EGA you.ADE
       ju   seal Eestis   kartuleid et
       after.all there Estonian.INE potatoes NEG
       kasvatata.
       grow.INF
       'Nancy's father asks whether you really don't grow potatoes there in Estonia.'[4]

(13)   Praamil   tuleb kohe   onu
       ferry.ADE comes immediately uncle
       kandikuga ja uurib,   et ega sa
       tray.COM and investigates that EGA you
       teed ei   taha.
       tea NEG want.NEG
       'On the ferry, the waiter comes right away with a tray and asks whether you would like some tea.'[5]

To my knowledge, *ega* occurs embedded under anti-rogative predicates only when those predicates have a quotative reading. For instance, (12) and (13) both exhibit obgliatory indexical shift: second person pronouns in the embedded clause refer to the addressee in the reported discourse context rather than the reader of the blog, characteristic of quoted, rather than indirectly reported, speech in Estonian (Teptiuk and Hirvonen, 2021). Thus, I follow Rudin (2019) in assuming that these are not instances of bonafide clause embedding, but rather mere quotation, in which *ega* is part of the reported speech (for ways of working this out more concretely, see a.o. Lahiri 2002 and Davidson 2015).

One final issue I will note is that if *ega*-sentences are declaratives, we might expect that they could be composed with *kas* to make a polar interrogative, but *ega* cannot co-occur with clausemate *kas* (14).

(14)   *{Kas ega/ega   kas} sul   ratas ei
       Q   EGA/EGA Q   you.ADE bike NEG
       ole?
       be.NEG
       Intended: 'Don't you have a bicycle?'

I suggest that this is likely to be a fact about syntax—*kas* and *ega* both occur somewhere in the left periphery of a clause, above the canonical subject position and below the complementizer. If *kas* and *ega* are both competing for the same syntactic slot, their inability to co-occur is expected.[6]

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[4] http://marikatom.blogspot.com/2010/05/uks-harilik-kartulivotu-paev.html

[5] Abridged from https://lillelaps.blogspot.com/2013/01/tsivilisatsioonide-kokkuporke-koht.html

[6] A reviewer points out that this competition story requires

3.2 *Ega* in the Table model

In assertive contexts, *ega* often serves the purpose of canceling an implicature, that is, *ega* $\neg p$ is uttered in contexts in which the addressee might have some 'good reason' in principle to believe p. We could equally characterize questioning uses of *ega* in a similar way, roughly that the addressee is presenting themselves as believing $\neg p$, despite such evidence, but additionally requiring some input from the addressee to settle the matter. I will treat the evidential requirement as the core contribution of *ega*:

(15) **Licensing conditions on *ega*, informal version**
Ega $\neg p$ is licensed iff there exists a body of evidence jointly available to the speaker and the addressee which could lead the addressee to form the belief that p.

To make my assumptions about components of discourse more precise, I adopt a version of the Table model of discourse Farkas and Bruce (2010). In a nutshell, the Table model distinguishes three main parts of utterance meaning: semantic denotation, the commitments it places upon speakers, and how the utterance guides potential futures of the conversation.

The Table model consists of four main components:

- A Stalnakerian **common ground** cg consisting of all propositions all discourse participants are publicly committed to, which describes a **context set** cs of all worlds compatible with cg ($cs = \bigcap cg$)

- The **Table**, a set of issues to be jointly resolved in the discourse[7]

- A set of **discourse commitments** DC_X for every discourse participant X consisting of propositions X has publicly committed to

- A **projected set** ps of possible common

grounds enhanced by resolutions of the current QUD

In this model, discourses are assumed to be driven by a cooperative goal to shrink cs. This is achieved by making utterances which raise and resolving **issues**. Issues are sets of classical propositions (i.e., sets of sets of worlds), which are raised by being put on the Table, and resolved by a context set that entails one of its constituent propositions. Uttering a declarative sentence contributes an assertion, as follows:

(16) ASSERTION: Uttering a declarative sentence which expresses proposition p in context i yields an output context o s.t. (Farkas and Bruce 2010: Ex. 9)[8]
 a. $T_o = T_i + \{p\}$
 b. $DC_{Sp,o} = DC_{Sp,i} + p$
 c. $ps_o = \{cg_i + p\}$
 d. $c_o = c_i$ in all other respects

An assertion does three things: puts the singleton issue $\{p\}$ on the Table, commits the speaker to the truth of p, and adds an enhancement of the common ground with p to the projected set, intuitively specifying that the addressee should resolve the issue $\{p\}$ by adding p to the common ground.

I propose that uttering *ega not-p*, contributes the normal discourse effects of asserting $\neg p$ and additionally carries two presuppositions, contributed lexically by *ega*. I frame these presuppositions for the moment as licensing conditions on uttering negative *ega*-sentences rather than giving a lexical entry for *ega* itself due to complications about how *ega* interacts with polarity, which will be revisited in §4.

(17) **Licensing conditions on *ega*, final**
ega not-p can be uttered in context c iff:
 a. $p \notin DC_{Ad}$
 b. There is a body of evidence E accessible to Sp and Ad in c such that $E \models p$

The condition in (17a) states that it is not already common ground that the addressee believes p, which ensures that *ega* is not utterable in contexts where the addressee has asserted p themselves. and

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the condition in (17b) that the speaker believes that there is some contextually available evidence that entails that p. Taken together, *ega* expresses an estimation of the addressee's information state: it doesn't yet have p in it, but there is mutually available evidence that could lead them in that direction.

At this stage, the presupposition is still modeled somewhat informally. For the purposes of this paper, I will abstract away from how to model this presupposition more precisely, while acknowledging it raises interesting questions for future work; the important point of the subsequent analysis will be how this licensing condition at an intuitive level interacts with context.

3.3 *Ega*-assertions

Recall that in assertive cases, an *ega*-claim typically is taken to straightforwardly assert the prejacent, but indicates there was nevertheless reason to disbelieve that prejacent. Moreover, an *ega*-assertion is 'epistemically strong' as Keevallik (2009) puts it: it conveys a sense that the speaker is especially committed to the truth of $\neg p$. I propose that *ega*-sentences take on this assertive flavor when uttered in contexts in which the speaker has a greater **epistemic authority** with respect to p than the addressee, in the sense of Northrup 2014. Roughly, $AUTH_X(p)$ indicates the degree to which X is a reliable source about the truth (or falsity) of p:

(18) *Ega not-p* is interpreted as an assertion iff:
  a. $AUTH_{Sp}(p) > AUTH_{Ad}(p)$

A plain assertion of $\neg p$ commits the speaker to the truth of $\neg p$ with the reasonable assumption of the Gricean maxim of Quality, namely that people only assert propositions they believe to be true (Grice, 1975). The strengthening effect in *ega*-assertions comes from the contrast between a speaker's uttering $\neg p$ in a context in which they are a greater authority on it than the addressee—performing a canonical assertion—and *ega*'s presupposition requiring the context to be such that there is good reason for the addressee to believe p.

In other words, the speaker is demonstrating their commitment to $\neg p$ *despite evidence to the contrary*, and *ega* explicitly signals to the addressee not to be fooled by the evidence for p. This tension naturally gives rise to the sense that *ega*-assertions are especially forceful: a sincere assertion of $\neg p$ in the fact of evidence for p requires the speaker to be so certain that they override any ambient evidence for p.

3.4 *Ega*-questions and addressee authority

Unlike *ega*-assertions, *ega*-questions seem to solicit information from the addressee. While the two types of *ega*-questions (polite requests and checking questions) seem nevertheless distinct on the surface, they have a common core in that they both suggest that the speaker is a lesser epistemic authority on p than the addressee. If the speaker is unlikely to believe $\neg p$, we get the polite request reading; if the speaker is likely to believe $\neg p$, we get the checking reading.

3.4.1 Polite requests

One prototypical use of *ega*-questions is to make a polite request of the addressee. Given our declarative semantics, and the assumption that uttering declarative sentences adds their propositional content to the speaker's discourse commitment, this might seem an odd function. I propose that it can be understood by considering the interaction between the semantics of *ega* and general constraints on *politeness*. Consider (19):

(19) Context: Telephone call to an information line.

   Ega te   ei   oska   öelda Võru
   EGA you.PL NEG can.NEG say   Võru.GEN
   bussijaama   telefoninumbrit?
   bus station.GEN phone number.PRT
   'I don't suppose you can tell me the phone number of the Võru bus station?'
        (Keevallik and Habicht 2017: ex. 33)

Polite request interpretations of *ega* arise when it is common ground both that the speaker believes p, and that the speaker believes that the addressee has greater authority than them with respect to the truth of p:

(20) *Ega not-p* is interpreted as a polite request iff:
  a. $B_{sp}(p)$
  b. $AUTH_{Sp}(p) < AUTH_{Ad}(p)$

The story goes like this: the speaker presents herself as committing to $\neg p$—in (19), that the addressee cannot provide the bus station's phone number. In this particular discourse context, it is implausible that the speaker actually believes $\neg p$, since they would not be calling otherwise. In the terms of Rudin (2022), the caller makes an INSINCERE

(and thus pragmatically marked) discourse move by committing themselves to $\neg p$, while assuming that the addressee has evidence for p.

The act of making a commitment which is known to be insincere to all discourse participants can only be cooperative if being insincere is a way for the speaker to avoid committing a more egregious pragmatic violation, as in Optimality Theoretic approaches to pragmatics (e.g. Dekker and van Rooy, 2000).

In the case of *ega*, I propose that the competing pragmatic constraints at play are SINCERITY (committing oneself only to that which they believe to be true, Rudin 2022) and POLITENESS.[9] The idea is this: the presupposition of *ega* requires the caller in (19) to believe the addressee has good reason to believe they *can* report the number—in this case, the evidence being their job in a call center.

If we consider a plausible alternative utterance to (19) the speaker could have asked instead which is a bonafide interrogative (e.g. *What is the phone number of the bus station?*), such an utterance is preferable in terms of SINCERITY, since uttering an interrogative does not commit the speaker to any one particular answer to the question it denotes (Farkas and Bruce, 2010; Farkas and Roelofsen, 2017). However, the *ega*-request is more POLITE because it gives the addressee a chance to save face—maintain a positive social image—in the sense of Brown and Levinson (1987).

In Brown & Levinson's view, disagreeing with a preceding assertion is a face-threatening move. If the addressee has to decline the speaker's *ega*-request, itself socially undesirable, they can do so by *agreeing* with the speaker's presented commitment $\neg p$. In other words, the speaker sacrifices sincerity to mitigate the addressee's possible loss of face by letting them 'agree their way out' of a potentially face-endangering situation should they have to give the speaker an answer they don't want. If the addressee was asked directly for the phone number and couldn't provide it, they would incur a double-whammy of social violations: being unable to answer a question, and being unable to help the speaker. By saying an *ega*-sentence instead, the speaker presents themselves as believing the addressee can't help them, giving the addressee a way to decline the request while saving face.

Given a choice between being insincere and being impolite, then, the proposal is that speakers are opting for the former when they make a polite request using *ega*. (In OT terms, we could say that the goal of being POLITE *outranks* that of being SINCERE.)

3.4.2 Checking questions

Recall that checking *ega*-questions—requests for the addressee to validate the truth of $\neg p$— convey that the speaker is fairly sure that $\neg p$ is the case, but nevertheless wants some validation about this from the addressee. I formalize the felicity conditions as follows:

(21)   *Ega not-p* is interpreted as a checking question iff:
   a. $\neg B_{sp}(p)$[10]
   b. $AUTH_{Sp}(p) < AUTH_{Ad}(p)$

Normally, making assertions in a context where the addressee is assumed to be a greater authority about the truth of the asserted proposition is infelicitous:

(22)   #You're hungry. (Northrup 2014: ex. 129)

This can be again be attributed to the Gricean maxim of Quality: the speaker's evidence is not sufficient to make their claim. With *ega not-p*, the tension between apparently asserting $\neg p$ on one hand and presupposing evidence for p on the other poses a natural conflict that demands resolution. Uttering *ega not-p* emphasizes this mismatch. If the speaker is taken to be an authority on p, the addressee has no reason not to take them at their word that $\neg p$. But if the *addressee* is an assumed authority, highlighting the conflict between the speaker's epistemic state and contextual evidence can only serve the function of asking the addressee to make the call between them.

For instance, in the forum post in (23), the speaker follows up a question about whether it is potentially problematic to forget taking antidepressants with an *ega*-sentence about specific repercussions:

(23)   Can constantly changing antidepressants and forgetting to take them have a negative

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[9]This is of course a gross oversimplification, since politeness itself involves many competing constraints, but I leave the formulation fairly general here for purposes of space.

[10]Note that this condition requires merely that the speaker not believe p, rather than the stronger condition that they believe $\neg p$. I make this formal choice to allow for the fact that the speaker's bias for $\neg p$ might fall short of what we would want to call 'belief'. I assume that the fact that *ega* is incompatible with contexts where the speaker is neutral about p comes from the infelicity of asserting $\neg p$ in such a context.

effect?...

> Ega sellest ei teki epsilepsiat või
> EGA this NEG cause.NEG epilepsy or
> šõsofreniat[sic]?
> schizophrenia?
> 'This doesn't cause epilepsy or schizophre-
> nia?' (etTenTen)

In this advice-seeking situation, the speaker puts forward $\neg p$ as their 'best guess' for what is true, while signaling to the addressee that they would like confirmation. Had they asserted $\neg p$ directly, they would have conveyed that there was no reason to believe otherwise than $\neg p$, a nakedly odd conversational move to make if the addressee knows more about the truth of p.

3.5 Analytical summary

In this section, I proposed that three kinds of *ega*-sentences—assertions, polite requests, and checking questions—arise from a unified denotation of such sentences being uttered in contexts with different configurations of speaker belief and relative authority between speaker and addressee.

In particular, the sense of *questioning* in the latter two cases arises from the use of *ega*-statements in contexts where the speaker has relatively low epistemic authority about the truth of the prejacent. In effect, *ega* serves to highlight a contrast between the assertion that $\neg p$ and some available evidence for p, and uttering it in contexts where the addressee is in a better position than the speaker to resolve this tension gives rise to the 'inquisitive' function of *ega*-questions.

4 Whence the polarity generalization

One outstanding issue given the analysis of *ega* thus far is its allergy to positive sentences:

(24) *Ega sul on valu seljas.
     EGA you.ADE is pain back.INE
     'You EGA have back pain.'[11]

After all, the intuitive characterization of *ega*-sentences is that they presuppose there was good reason to believe p, but this presupposition does not in and of itself derive the polarity restriction on *ega*-sentences.

To probe the polarity constraint, we must first make explicit what *ega* itself contributes to interpretation, rather than just its discourse effects in full

utterances. There are two plausible logical forms for *ega*-sentences with negation if we treat *ega* as a propositional operator. One is that *ega* takes the prejacent $\neg p$ as an argument (*ega* $(\neg p)$)[12] and presuppose there is evidence for the negation of the argument, p. The other is that *ega* takes the positive prejacent as an argument, but occur itself within the scope of negation ($\neg$(*ega* p)), and presuppose that there is evidence for that argument p.

These LFs make different predictions for what *ega* should mean in non-negated contexts. If *ega* takes widest scope, we expect *ega* p to have an analogous reading to *ega* not-p: that is, *ega* p should **assert** p and presuppose evidence for $\neg p$. On the other hand, if *ega* scopes below negation, *ega* in a positive sentence should reinforce the alignment of the speaker's assertion that p with evidence for p.

In fact, *ega* does show up in positive sentences, albeit rarely (25). Such cases only exhibit the former reading, suggesting that *ega* takes wide scope:

(25) *A comment on a newspaper article about cat rabies with a picture of a cat claimed to be unrelated to the story:*

> Ega see pildil olev kass on ka
> EGA this picture.ADE be.PCP cat is also
> kahtlase näoga...
> suspicious face.COM
> 'In fact the cat in this picture looks suspicious too...'
> (Keevallik and Habicht 2017, ex. 27)

The author of (25) asserts a positive p (*The cat has a suspicious face*), but indicates this is contrary to a contextually-supported assumption that the cat does not have rabies. Keevallik and Habicht (2017) take examples like (25) to indicate that *ega* in assertive contexts is not limited to negative sentences, and note that similar examples occur more commonly in spoken language.

But if *ega* p is in fact *possible*, we have a conundrum: why is it nevertheless so rare in non-negated contexts? Because the polarity restrictions on *ega* are not categorical, we don't want to derive its negative tendencies by all-or-nothing constraints, such as by stipulating that *ega* is a negative polarity item.

A full account of the polarity sensitivity of *ega* is outside the scope of this paper, but I suggest that the paucity of positive *ega*-sentences could be a

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[11] I use an asterisk here to indicate systematic unacceptability rather than ungrammaticality *per se*.

[12] We might also think *ega* operates at the level of illocutionary force and instead takes an utterance or a sentence as an argument; for present purposes what matters is whether or not negation is inside whatever argument is fed to *ega*.

distributional artifact arising from an asymmetry in the pragmatics of uttering positive and negative declaratives.

It is a longstanding observation that negative assertions are pragmatically marked: uttering $\neg p$ often presupposes (in a weak, defeasible sense) that there was reason to believe that p or that p was under discussion, where uttering p has no analogous implications (Givón, 1978, et seq.). Given independently-motivated pressures to presuppose as much as possible (perhaps analogous to a principle like Maximize Presupposition, e.g. Heim 1991), we might expect that negative sentences are preferred utterances over logically equivalent positive sentences (e.g. *John is not married* vs. *John is a bachelor*) in contexts where there is evidence to believe that these sentences are false (i.e. that John is married).

Of course, *ega* itself also presupposes the existence of evidence which conflicts with a prejacent proposition, so the explanation could be that *ega* requires the exact kind of input contexts which would lead one to prefer a negative sentence over a positive alternative, so we expect the negative version to be used unless there is some special independent pressure to pick the positive alternative specifically, whatever this pressure might be. This story generates the testable hypothesis that positive *ega*-sentences are generally less acceptable than interpretively equivalent negative *ega*-sentences. For example, we might expect that (25) would be less acceptable in the same context than a similar version where the prejacent of *ega* is a negative proposition, e.g., *This cat isn't healthy*. I leave exploration of this hypothesis for future research.

5   Conclusion

A major project at the semantics-pragmatics interface is understanding the relation between the denotation of a sentence and the function of uttering that sentence in context. This paper brings new data from Estonian to bear on this task. I have argued that the discourse particle *ega*, despite having a seemingly expansive range of potential discourse effects, can receive a single unified denotation if we make sensible assumptions about the way its semantics interacts with contexts of use. The apparent 'inquisitivity' of *ega* in some contexts, rather than being a result of inherently inquisitive semantics, comes from the tension inherent in making assertions that presuppose there is evidence to the contrary in contexts where the addressee is better equipped to adjudicate between these conflicting sources.

The role that discourse particles have in determining discourse function remains a fertile ground for cross-linguistic exploration. Just as interrogative sentences can serve many different kinds of communicative functions besides just asking questions (Lauer and Condoravdi, 2012), there are likewise multiple pathways to generating questioning speech acts, and this paper represents an attempt to chart a new part of this underexplored terrain. A broader view of the typology of inquisitive pragmatics may help us get closer to understanding the ur-question: What *is* a question, anyway?

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