

## Research Article

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# Reducing the severity of incidents or emergency in Estonian emergency calls

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opli-2024-0022>

received May 2, 2023; accepted June 30, 2024

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to analyze the calls to the Estonian Emergency Response Centre, focusing on instances where callers reduce the severity of incident or emergency in their first turn. The data comprise 39 calls from the Corpus of Emergency Calls of the University of Tartu. The analysis reveals that callers employ mitigating words and negative turn-initial utterances to reduce the severity. These words indicate the caller's uncertainty about the information provided or suggest that the reported incident or emergency is minor. The utterances are syntactically and semantically (but not prosodically) completed clauses followed by a second part of the clause construction containing specific information about the caller's issue. Functionally, these utterances serve as assessments falling into three groups based on the information they project. Some assessments project uncertain information, explicitly expressing uncertainty about the information or using the epistemic marker *ma=i=tea* 'I don't know'. The second group of assessments project information about an incident that the caller does not qualify as an emergency. The last group projects a potential incident or emergency using variants of the utterance *ei juhtund midagi* 'nothing happened'. In addition, we offer explanations for why callers reduce the severity of the incident or emergency and demonstrate that reducing severity does not lower the probability of sending assistance. This indicates that call-takers do not rely on callers' assessments when deciding whether the help is needed.

**Keywords:** emergency calls, mitigation, institutional interaction, interactional linguistics, Estonian

## 1 Introduction

The topic of our article is reducing severity of incident or emergency by callers in their first turn in the calls to the Estonian Emergency Response Centre (EERC) (telephone number 112). By 'reducing severity', we refer to the instances where callers claim uncertainty about whether there is an incident or emergency or indicate that the incident or emergency they are reporting is minor, insignificant, or accidental. Such a reduction is untypical and unexpected in emergency calls, as one would typically expect callers to emphasize the seriousness of their situation to ensure prompt assistance.

Emergency calls are institutional talks which concern medical conditions, police-relevant incidents, and rescue operations, and are characterized by specific structure and roles of the participants (e.g., Heritage and Clayman 2010, 51–68). The caller's purpose is to get help, while the call-taker has right and obligation to decide whether and what kind of help is needed (Raymond and Zimmerman 2007, 36, Heritage and Clayman 2010, 53–4, 56). For the call-takers, the call is a routine activity, and they follow the norms and agenda of the Emergency Centre. However, for callers, a call to 112 is typically a rare or unique event, they are often

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reporting a critical situation and may be stressed, nervous, or even angry (Heritage and Clayman 2010, 87–100). Most of the social actions in emergency calls are question–answer sequences where the caller is epistemically K+ and has knowledge of the problem that have occasioned the call, and the call-taker is epistemically K– and asks the questions to get information (Heritage 2012). At the same time, the call-taker has professional knowledge and experience in dealing with similar problems and situations.

Only part of the talks are real emergency calls where the caller reports an incident or emergency that requires help. Others are classified as non-emergency calls which can be divided into unintentional (misdialed numbers) and intentional non-emergency calls like offensive calls (e.g., from intoxicated persons), prank calls (e.g., from children), lonely complaint calls lacking any incident or emergency, and also irrelevant calls such as asking for the time or other information (see Tracy and Tracy 1998, Sampson 2002, Vaajala *et al.* 2013, Bain *et al.* 2016, Bolaños-Carpio 2017, EENA 2020). According to the guidelines of EERC, one should call to Centre when a situation is critical in such a way that someone's life, health, or property is in danger ([www.112.ee/en](http://www.112.ee/en)). However, the Centre also recommends people to call even when they doubt the seriousness of the incident or have reason to believe that something dangerous is potentially occurring or may occur (EERC 2020).

In the field of conversation analysis, numerous studies have explored emergency calls (see overviews Heritage and Clayman 2010, 51–100; Kevoe-Feldman 2019). We will focus here on the studies examining the first three turns of the calls.

In the first turn, call-takers respond to the summons; in the second turn, callers formulate their reason for their call (describe their problem, incident or emergency, report some activity, or make an explicit request for help), and in the third turn, call-takers initiate an interrogative series by asking questions regarding the information provided by the caller (Heritage and Clayman 2010, 57, Wakin and Zimmerman 1999, Whalen and Zimmerman 1987). Call-takers may decide that immediate assistance is required and start querying about details necessary for sending help (e.g., caller's address). However, they also may decide that additional information is needed and begin a question–answer series to determine whether there is a real emergency (Kevoe-Feldman 2019, 233–4).

Research has demonstrated how call-takers' responding variants to the summons can impact the continuation of the call. If call-takers respond to the summons with only an emergency number, callers usually inquire about a specific service. If their response includes a query about the incident, a description of the problem typically follows (Cromdal *et al.* 2012).

Estonian call-takers answer the summons with a standardized format turn, prototype variant of which is *häirekeskus tere mis juhtus?* 'Emergency Response Centre hello what happened?' (Extract 1, line 1). This is a multi-unit turn which combines self-identification of the emergency service (*Häirekeskus* 'Emergency Response Centre'), a greeting (*tere* 'hello'), and a query about the incident (*mis juhtus* 'what happened').<sup>1</sup>

(1)

- 01 CAT: *äirekeskus=tere=mis=juhtus*,  
'Emergency Response Centre hello what happened'  
02 CLL: *.hhhh (0.4) 'tere: 'helistan teile /firmast/ /küla/ külast, /maakonnast/,=h*  
'*.hhhh (0.4) hello I am calling from /company/ /village/ /county/ =h*  
03 *.hhh et=eeee meil 'plahvatas üks=eeee (.) 'auto 'klaav.*  
'*.hhh that uhm one our uhm autoclave exploded*'

The crucial part of the turn is the question *mis juhtus* 'what happened' which occurs in 90% of the calls in our database. The verb *juhtuma* 'to (unexpectedly) happen' is related to the noun *juhtum* '(unexpected) distinctive single event/incident'. The question itself is a telling question, which projects a longer answer (Thompson *et al.* 2015, Rumm 2019) and assumes that callers will report the incident, describe it, or categorize the emergency in their response (see also Whalen and Zimmerman 1987).

<sup>1</sup> Transcription conventions see Appendix.

The design of callers' responses affects how the call continues and influences the chance of receiving help. For example, Zimmerman (1992) has shown how callers provide a maximally complete story in their opening turn to elicit the appropriate form of help. Also, it has been shown that the design of explicit request affects the continuation of the calls (Larsen 2013, Kent and Antaki 2020). If the callers design their request in a format that expresses a weak/low entitlement (e.g., *I was wondering if x/Would somebody be able to x.*), call-takers typically begin a question series to ask incident-related questions. Simultaneously, such request design projects more likely that the request will not be granted.

We focus on the talks where callers describe the problem in their opening turn. In some cases, they describe the incident or emergency simply as a fact like in Extract 1 (*meil 'plahvatas üks=eeee (.) 'auto 'klaav* 'one autoclave exploded'). In some cases, they upgrade the severity of the emergency to increase the probability getting help, e.g., using extreme case formulations, intensifiers, or providing extensive details to highlight the seriousness of the problem (e.g., Tracy and Anderson 1999, Rääbis and Rumm 2022). In Extract 2, the caller begins the turn with a neutral utterance *mul=ee ja- 'vasakus jalas on siuke (.) 'valu* 'I have got such pain in my left leg' (line 4). Then he upgrades the problem using the intensifiers *nii* ('so') and *üldse* ('at all') (lines 5, 7) and the adverb *palju* ('many, much, a lot of') (line 6).

(2)

- 01 CAT: *'äirekeskus kuuleb 'tere mis 'juhtus.*  
'Emergency Response Centre is listening hello what happened'  
02 (0.7)  
03 CLL: *tere=mul=ee ja- 'vasakus jalas on siuke (.) 'valu tulnd=nagu*  
'hello I uhm have got in my left leg (.) such pain like'  
04 *'enne ei 'olnud=aga (0.5) aga=se=on=nagu=nii*  
'never before but (0.5) but this is like **so**'  
05 (0.4) *nii 'terav präegu*  
(0.4) '**so** sharp now'  
06 *võtsin just 'palju valu'vaigistid=ja=se=nagu (.)*  
'I just took **a lot** of painkillers and this like' (.)  
07 *ei 'tõmba üldse 'tagasi ma=i=sa 'ültse 'olla=nüd,*  
'does not pull back **at all** I cannot be **at all** now,'

However, there are also cases where callers use mitigated formulations that express uncertainty or lack of knowledge regarding the existence of an incident or emergency or use constructions, indicating that the incident or emergency is minor or insignificant. In Extract 3, the caller informs the Emergency Response Centre of a traffic accident he was involved in and reduces the severity of the accident by using the adjective *väike* ('small, little') (line 3).

(3)

- 01 CAT: *'häirekeskus [kuuleb] mis 'juhtus.*  
'Emergency Response Centre is listening what happened'  
02 CLL: *[tere,]*  
'hello'  
03 CLL: *mul juhtus 'väike liiklus'õnnetus.*  
'I had a **small** traffic accident'

In our article, we analyze talks where callers reduce the severity of an emergency or incident in their first turn. We have the following research questions. Which verbal means do callers use to reduce the severity of incidents or emergencies, what functions do these reducing markers serve in the talk and how to explain the reducing? How does reducing markers which diminish callers' epistemic status and express low entitlement affect the progression of the talk, and the dispatch of assistance?

As far as we know, these issues have not been previously studied, and our aim is to fill this gap. The answers to these questions will provide us a better insight into the call-takers' ways of thinking and help improve the quality of the service.

## 2 Data and method

Our data come from the Emergency Calls sub-corpus of the Corpus of Spoken Estonian of the University of Tartu (Hennoste *et al.* 2009). The corpus comprises 1,000 emergency calls of which 230 calls have been transcribed in detail. For reasons of confidentiality, all data enabling the identification of the speakers (names, addresses, social security codes, car numbers, etc.) have been changed. In the Extracts of the article, personal and place names and other references to specific persons or places have been replaced by the common name in backslashes (e.g., I am calling from the /city/) (see also Upser 2022, 426).<sup>2</sup>

We follow the principles of interactional linguistics (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018, 18–26) and use conversation analysis as a basic method (Sidnell and Stivers 2013, 77–99). From two starting points in interactional linguistics, we chose the one which starts from linguistic resources in certain sequential contexts and asks how the structures of language in this context are used in social interaction (Couper-Kuhlen and Selting 2018, 15–6).

Our starting point was the surprising observation that callers sometimes reduce their problems in their first turn. Next, we systematically went through callers' first turns, identifying all cases where they expressed uncertainty about the possible existence of an incident or emergency, or used constructions suggesting that the incident or emergency was minor, insignificant, or accidental. After setting aside non-emergency calls, we identified 39 calls that constitute our collection for analysis. We divided our findings into words and syntactic constructions and analyzed the functions of different reducing means in the talk. Thereafter, we sought to explain the use of reducing markers and analyzed how the diminishing of epistemic status and expression of low entitlement by callers affected the subsequent actions of call-takers, and how diminishing influenced the provision of assistance.

## 3 Analysis

In the following sections, we first describe the use of lexical means and then the syntactic constructions and their functions. In Section 3.1, we focus on lexical means and their functions. We highlight various lexical means and demonstrate how they are used to reduce the severity of the incident and to indicate the speaker's uncertainty about the information. In Section 3.2, we present general assessments manifested by negative utterances at the beginning of callers' turns. With these utterances, the caller claims that there is no emergency, points out a potential emergency or incident, or downgrades the certainty of the upcoming description.

### 3.1 Lexical means and their functions

Lexical means are used to reduce the severity of the incident and to indicate the speakers' uncertainty about the information they provided. In our data, most of the words used for reducing are pragmatic (discourse)

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<sup>2</sup> Permission to use emergency calls in research has been received from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Tartu. A confidentiality agreement has been signed with the Estonian Emergency Response Centre, protecting sensitive information contained in emergency calls.

particles that express uncertainty, probability, or the vagueness of information (Foolen 1996, Biber and Conrad 2009, 236–41, Zimmermann 2011, 2012–3, Hennoste et al. 2022, 8). In addition, mitigating nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and adverbs are used.

First, we discuss the case where the caller reduces the seriousness of the incident and then the case where she indicates uncertainty about the information she provided.

### 3.1.1 Words that reduce the seriousness of the incident

To reduce the seriousness of an incident or emergency, the callers use some particles (*lihtsalt*, *lissalt*, *lisalt* ‘simply, just’, *ainult*, *aint* ‘only, just’, *suht* ‘relatively’) and nouns, adjectives, and adverbs, indicating smallness of the incident or emergency (*kõks* ‘a small collision’, *väike* ‘small, little’, *natuke*, *natukene* ‘a little’) and lack of intentionality (*kogemata* ‘accidentally’).

In Extract (4), the caller reports a car accident with a pedestrian and reduces the seriousness of the incident by the noun *kõks* ‘a small collision’ and the particle *lisalt* ‘just’, and the unintentionality of causing it by the adverb *kogemata* ‘accidentally’.

(4)

- 01 CAT: *häärekeskus tere mis teil juhtus,*  
‘Emergency Response Centre hello what happened to you’
- 02 (0.6)
- 03 CLL: *tere (.) [eeee] (.)*  
‘hello uhm’
- 04 CAT: *[{tere}]*  
‘hello’
- 05 CLL: *eeee (.) olen ee/linnast/helistan:=ää õe/kaupluse/juurest*  
‘uhm (.) I am uhm/from town/calling uhm near/store’
- 06 *et=ää (0.6) üks naiste’rahvas ajas naisterahva: kogemata alla*  
‘that uhm (0.6) a lady ran over another lady **accidentally**’
- 07 *MITTE ALLA=aga lisalt sai kõksu.*  
‘not over but **just** was **hit**’  
(0.6)
- 08 CAT: *[mhmh?]*  
‘uh-huh’
- 09 CLL: *[ülekäigu]’raja juures,*  
‘at the pedestrian crossing’
- 10 (0.8)
- 11 CLL: *et nüüd ootaks=sin kiire- kiirabi.*  
‘so now (we) would wait here for an ambulance’
- 12 CAT: *mhmh*  
‘uh-huh’
- 13 (1.2)
- 14 CAT: *eee kas see autojuht jäi ise kohapeale.*  
‘uhm did this driver remain on site’
- 15 CLL: *jaa me oleme=sin koha’peal kõik.*  
‘yes we are all here on site’
- 16 (.)
- 17 CAT: *mhmh (.) kas te saate öelda selle täpse aadressi kus te asute.*  
‘uh-huh (.) could you give me exact address where you are located’

After describing his location (line 5), the caller categorizes the culprit by generic term *üks naisterahvas* ‘one lady’ (line 6). The word *üks* ‘one, here: a’<sup>3</sup> indicates that the woman is unknown to him. When describing the incident, the caller at first uses the compound verb *ajas alla* ‘ran over’. Before the second part of the verb, he adds the adverb *kogemata* ‘accidentally’ to indicate a lack of intent (line 6), and after the second part, he makes a self-repair and replaces the verb with the phrase *sai lihtsalt kõksu* ‘just was hit’ (line 7). The new version talks about minor consequences for the victim and highlights that the event does not involve agentivity. In addition, the particle *lihtsalt* ‘just’ (Rääbis and Rumm 2022) and the noun *kõks* ‘a small collision’ downgrade the seriousness of the incident. After providing additional information about the location of the accident and the gap (lines 9–10), the caller makes a request *et nüüd ootaks=sin kiire- kiirabi*. ‘so now (we) would wait here for an ambulance’. This turn is inconsistent with previous information, as an ambulance is typically needed in case of serious incidents. On the other hand, the conditional verb form *ootaks* ‘would wait’ displays low entitlement of the request (Curl and Drew 2008, Hennoste 2023, 1170), as the caller does not have the right to decide whether an ambulance is sent to the site.

The call-taker responds with a distancing particle *mhmh* ‘uh-huh’ (Hennoste 2023, 1088–90, 1122–3; line 12), and after a long gap (line 13), asks whether the driver remained on site (line 14). The fact that the call-taker does not ask about possible injuries indicates that she has categorized the accident as non-serious. However, asking for an address (line 17) suggests that some assistance is necessary in her opinion.

This is a problematic situation for the caller as in further conversation it is revealed that the accident was caused by his partner (not shown in Extract). Here, we find two strategies typically used by the callers to reduce the severity of the incident which is caused by a person close to them. First, the caller categorizes the causer of the accident by generic term, and second, he highlights that the event does not involve agentivity (Tracy and Anderson 1999, 207–10, 217–21).

### 3.1.2 Words that express the uncertainty

To indicate uncertainty about the information, they give callers use mostly modal hedging particles (*vist* ‘probably, possibly’, *äkki* ‘maybe, perhaps’, *arvatavasti* ‘presumably’, *võibolla* ‘maybe’, *tõenäoliselt* ‘probably, likely’, *ilmselt* ‘apparently’) (Hennoste *et al.* 2021, 2022, 8). In addition, some pronouns that display imprecision or uncertainty (*mingi* ‘some’, *mingisugune* ‘some kind of’) and adverbs that express vagueness of information (*kuidagi* ‘somehow’) are used.

Extract (5) illustrates a case where the caller is not sure whether her situation qualifies as an emergency and indicates to that using the hedge *vist* ‘probably’. Here, a woman calls the Emergency Response Centre and reports that she is probably going into labor.

- (5)
- 01 CAT: *‘häirekeskus kuuleb tere mis juhtus. (.) tere?*  
‘Emergency Response Centre is listening hello what happened (.) hello’
- 02 CLL: *ee (0.3) tere?=hh (.) hhh eeeee=mq (0.3) m:a=i=ole kindel*  
‘uhm (0.3) hello hh (.) hhh uhm uhm (0.3) I am not sure’
- 03 *aga ma vist vist akkan \$ sünnitama? \$ mhemhe*  
‘but I’m **probably probably** going into labor ((laughter))’
- 04 (.)
- 05 CAT: *.hhhhhh ja: eeeq vanus ja see esimene sünnitus,*  
‘and (your) age and (is it) the first childbirth’

The caller initiates her first turn with a greeting and after a long hesitation continues with the utterance *ma ei ole kindel* ‘I am not sure’, which projects uncertain information (line 2). This is followed by the

<sup>3</sup> Estonian does not have articles, but the numeral *üks* ‘one’ may function as an indefinite article.

conjunction *aga*, ‘but’ (line 3) which projects some contrast to the first utterance. However, in the next utterance, she uses the modal particle *vist* ‘probably’ (line 3), once again indicating uncertainty (Hennoste et al. 2021). The verb *sünnitama* ‘go into labor’ is uttered with a smiley voice, and after completion of the turn, she continues with laughter (*mhemhe*, line 3). A smiley voice and laughter express the caller’s embarrassment caused by her uncertainty (Jefferson 1985, Haakana 2001, Annuka 2020). The call-taker continues with a question about the caller’s age and whether this is her first childbirth, which indicates that she ignores the markers of uncertainty and interprets the situation as serious (line 5). Later in the call, it is revealed that an ambulance was sent to the site.

In this case, the caller is epistemic authority (Heritage 2012). In addition, it emerges later in the call that this is the caller’s second labor which refers to her competence. Nevertheless, she describes her situation with uncertainty, possibly due to being only 36 weeks pregnant, a detail revealed later in the call.

Extracts (4) and (5) illustrated the use of mitigating particles, nouns, and adverbs to reduce severity of the situation, and the analysis revealed two variants of reduction: the caller displays that the incident is minor or accidental, and the caller expresses uncertainty about the information she provided.

### 3.2 Syntactic means and their functions

The second group of reducing means consists of negative utterances at the beginning of callers’ first turn. Syntactically, those utterances form clauses which serve as the first part of a two-part syntactic (clause) construction. Pragmatically, these utterances are characterized as general assessments which are followed by specific information about the emergency or incident in the second part of the construction. Here, we examine three constructions that appeared in our collection. First, we discuss the case, where the caller claims that there is no emergency, then we look at the construction *juhtunud ei ole midagi* ‘nothing has happened’, and finally, we describe the epistemic marker *ma ei tea* ‘I don’t know’.

#### 3.2.1 Utterances that indicate the lack of emergency

Some turn-initial utterances indicate that there is no emergency. This is illustrated in Extract 6, where a person reports that she is unable to get into her grandmother’s apartment because the door is locked, keys are inside the keyhole, and grandmother is not responding to the doorbell or her calls.

- (6)
- 01 CAT: *häärekeskus ‘kuuleb teid tere mis juhtus.*  
‘Emergency Response Centre is listening you hello what happened’
- 02 (0.9)
- 03 CLL: *t- ää mul ei ole ‘hääreolukord aga::*  
‘uhm I don’t have an emergency situation but’
- 04 *mul on lihtsalt ma=len ‘ukse ees {-}*  
‘I have just I am in front of the door’
- 05 *.hhhhh ja: mu: ‘vanaema on nagu: (0.4) ‘teisel pool ‘ust. (0.3)*  
‘.hhhhh and my grandmother is like (0.4) on the other side of the door’ (0.3)
- 06 *mul on ‘võtmed olemas aga::*  
‘I have the keys but’
- 07 *.hh tal on ‘teisel pool ust nagu: pandud võtmed ‘ette.*  
‘.hh she has put the keys on the other side of the door in the keyhole’
- 08 (1.3) ((typing on the keyboard))  
((four turns omitted))
- 09 CAT: *et arvate et midagi võib olla juhtunud või.*

- 10                   ‘so you think that something might have happened’  
                       (0.3)  
 11    CLL:   *jaa.*  
                       ‘yes’

The caller begins her first turn with the assessment *mul ei ole 'häireolukord* ‘I don’t have an emergency situation’ (line 3). This utterance is syntactically and semantically completed construction, which is followed by the stretched conjunction *aga* ‘but’ without an intonation boundary (line 4). Thereafter, she starts with the utterance *mul on lihtsalt* ‘I have just’, where the particle *lihtsalt* ‘just’ probably projects a minor incident and/or non-emergency situation (Rääbis and Rumm 2022). However, the caller abandons the utterance and continues with a long and neutral description of the situation (lines 4–7).

The conjunction *aga* ‘but’ highlights that although there is no emergency, there is still a problem. This suggests that *aga* could be interpreted here as a concessive conjunction (Erelt 2010) and as a point making device, indicating a shift to the important or essential part of the speaker’s response (Schiffrin 1987, 164–77). During the following gap, typing can be heard (line 8), which indicates that the call-taker has interpreted the caller’s problem as a possible emergency and has begun to write down information. The call-taker then initiates a question series, and the caller gives long descriptions of her previous attempts to solve the problem (not shown in the Extract) (also Heritage and Clayman 2010, 79). It becomes evident that the grandmother has not spoken to the caller through the door, nor she has responded to the doorbell and phone. After that the call-taker makes a conclusion and asks for a confirmation: *et arvate et midagi võib olla juhtunud või* ‘so you think that something might have happened’ (line 9). The polar question particle *või* (also *vä*, *ve*, *võ*) typically indicates the questioner’s uncertainty, disbelief, or doubt about the truth of the proposition in question (Hennoste *et al.* 2019, Hennoste 2023, 1118–20). With the response particle *jaa* (line 11), the caller confirms the call-taker’s assumption that there might be some incident and at the same time distances herself from the doubtful stance of the questioner (Hennoste *et al.* 2023, Hennoste 2023, 1122). Eventually, the ambulance and rescue teams are sent to the site (not shown in the Extract). To sum up, here, the caller uses a negative turn-initial assessment to characterize the problematic situation which she does not qualify as an emergency.

### 3.2.2 *Juhtunud ei ole midagi* ‘nothing has happened’ as a marker of potential incident or emergency

Next, we will describe the use of two variants of the turn-initial utterance *juhtunud ei ole midagi* ‘nothing has happened’. The first variant *juhtunud ei ole midagi* semantically indicates the absence of an incident. This utterance can appear with variable word order (in Estonian, word order is relatively flexible) and sometimes with the short pronoun *ma* ‘I’ in the adessive case (*mul*) as an adverbial marking the possessor/experiencer (e.g. *ei=juhtund ‘midagi* ‘nothing happened’, *mul=ei=ole ‘juhtund midagi* ‘nothing has happened to me’). In Extract (7), the caller reports about a car with an open window.

- (7)  
 01   CAT:   *‘häirekeskus tere, mis teil ‘juhtus.*  
                       ‘Emergency Response Centre hello, what happened to you’  
 02                   (0.4)  
 03   CLL:   *‘tere=jõudu ei=juhtund ‘midagi=aga: sin (0.7)*  
                       ‘hello **nothing happened** but here’ (0.7)  
 04                   *olen /tänav/ /number/ ‘maja=ees=ja: sin ‘seisab üks ‘valge*  
                       ‘I am /street/ /number/ in front of the house and here stands a white’  
 05                   *‘Ford ‘kaubik=hhh (0.5) ja tal on: ‘aken ‘lahti*  
                       ‘Ford van hhh (0.5) and its window is open’  
 06                   *ja tule:d ‘peale jäänud ja ‘asjad on ‘sees=et (0.5)*  
                       ‘and lights are on and things are inside so’ (0.5)  
 07                   *eks ta on ‘unustanud=et (.) [et saate äkki ‘omaniku]*

‘well, he must have forgotten so (.) maybe you could the owner’

08 CAT: [se=on=sis ‘kus linnas/tänav/]  
‘this is then in which town/street’

The caller begins his turn with a syntactically and semantically completed construction *ei=juhtund ‘midagi* ‘nothing happened’, followed by the concessive conjunction *aga* ‘but’ and a long pause (line 3). He then continues with a description about a car which window is open (lines 4–6). The construction *ei=juhtund ‘midagi* ‘nothing happened’ suggests that there is no incident, but the concessive conjunction *aga* projects contrast with the first part of the turn and following description of the situation implies a potential emergency. Here again, the conjunction is a point making device, indicating a shift to the essential part of here response (Schiffrin 1987, 164–77).

The call-taker interrupts the caller at a point where the description is sufficient to assess the severity of the problem (line 7) and proceeds with the question about the address (line 8), indicating that she interprets the problem to be dealt with.

In this Extract, the caller is a bystander drawing attention to a situation that may escalate into an incident. In such cases, the caller often first provides a description of the situation (Heritage and Clayman 2010, 81). Such cases do not fall within the core of emergency situations, but this is a situation in which calling is recommended (EERC 2020). The call-taker does not consider the claim that nothing has happened but relies on the caller’s description. In this case, assistance was not dispatched because the issue was resolved when the driver of the van arrived during the call.

The utterance *juhtunud ei ole midagi* may also include adverbs and adjectives like *otsestelt* ‘directly, strictly’, *suur* ‘big’, *kiire* ‘urgent’, *traagiline* ‘tragic’, which in positively formatted syntactic constructions would express the severity, but in negative constructions function as downgrading markers (*‘otsestelt ei=juhtund ‘midagi* ‘strictly nothing has happened’, *midagi suurt ei=juhtund* ‘nothing big has happened’, *mul: (.) midagi ‘traagilist ei ‘juhtunud* ‘nothing tragic has happened to me’). These utterances imply that there is a minor incident. However, our data reveal that in this case too, a potential emergency or incident occurs. In Extract (8), the caller reports about the smell of fuel oil.

(8)

01 CAT: ‘häirekeskus ‘kuuleb tere mis teil ‘juhtus.  
‘Emergency Response Centre is listening hello what happened to you’  
02 (0.6)  
03 CLL: *ee ‘tere=jõudu. ‘otsestelt ei=juhtund ‘midagi aga*  
‘uhm hello. **nothing happened directly** but’  
04 *v:äike prob’leem on:=hh/linnaosas/(0.5)*  
‘there is a little problem hh in/the district of the city’ (0.5)  
05 */tänav/ ja /tänav/ tänavate ‘kandis:=e:t=ee*  
‘around the /street/ and /street/ streets, that uhm’  
06 *‘õhus=on: ‘meeletu masuudi’hais.*  
‘there is an enormous smell of fuel oil in the air’  
07 (2.3) ((typing on the keyboard))

The caller initiates his turn with the utterance *‘otsestelt ei=juhtund ‘midagi* ‘nothing happened directly’, where the adverb *otsestelt* ‘directly, strictly’ avoids the interpretation that there is no incident at all. Here again, the utterance is followed by the conjunction *aga* ‘but’. Thereafter, the caller uses the phrase *väike probleem* ‘a little problem’, suggesting that there is no incident and reducing the problem (line 4). Then he adds information about the smell of fuel oil, this time using the extreme adjective *meeletu* ‘enormous’ (line 6), thus hinting at a possible problem. Here again, the concessive conjunction *aga* ‘but’ marks a move to the important information.

This information is followed by a gap during which the call-taker types (line 7), which indicates that she interprets the situation as something requiring assistance. After the gap, the caller continues with more specific information, concluding with a repetition of the terrible smell of fuel oil (not shown in the Extract).

Although the utterance *juhtunud ei ole midagi* refers to the absence of an incident, and the same utterance with adverbs and adjectives projects a minor incident, both assessments almost always project information about a potential or supposed incident or emergency. (There is one case in our data where the second part of the construction includes information about a general health problem: *mul=ei=ole juhtund midagi aga* (0.8) *tervis=on kehva* ‘nothing has happened to me but (0.8) my health is poor’.)

### 3.2.3 *Ma ei tea* ‘I don’t know’ as marker of downgrading the certainty

Finally, we will describe the use of the epistemic marker *ma ei tea* ‘I don’t know’.<sup>4</sup> In our data, the negation word *ei* ‘no, not’ is reduced to *i* and the marker is pronounced as a single prosodic word (*ma=i=tea*). Extract (9) illustrates a case where a woman has called the Emergency Response Centre because of her child’s breathing difficulties.

- (9)
- 01 CAT: *hääre’keskus kuuleb teid*  
‘Emergency Response Centre is listening you’
- 02 (0.4)
- 03 CLL: *eeee tere=t ma=[i=tea]=t mul on ‘tunne*  
‘uhm hello I don’t know I have a feeling’
- 04 CAT: *[tere.]*  
‘hello’
- 05 CLL: *et laps ei saa hingata et kuidagi [{-}]*  
‘that the child can’t breathe that somehow’
- 06 CAT: *[a öölge aa]dress palun*  
‘but tell me the address please’

In this call, the question *mis juhtus* ‘what happened’ is missing (line 1), giving the caller the opportunity to choose herself how to begin the call. Despite this, the caller still describes the situation (comp. Cromdal et al. 2012). She begins her turn with a hesitation, followed by a greeting and *ma=i=tea* ‘I don’t know’ (line 3), which formally implies that the caller lacks knowledge. However, the construction is followed by the utterance *mul on ‘tunne* ‘I have a feeling’ (line 3), which indicates that the caller lacks definite knowledge. This suggests that *ma=i=tea* functions as an epistemic marker, downgrading the certainty about the upcoming description. Such usage of *ma=i=tea* as a turn preface has been revealed in other contexts as well (Keevallik 2003, 87–8, 2011, 187–8). The caller then provides the main information *laps ei saa hingata* ‘the child can’t breathe’ and probably begins some description (line 5). Here, the call-taker interrupts her turn and immediately asks for the address (line 6). The question reveals that she ignores the caller’s uncertainty and has taken the situation as a serious emergency requiring immediate assistance.

In this extract, there were two markers indicating uncertainty. However, in our data, there are also cases where *ma=i=tea* ‘I don’t know’ alone projects uncertain information and reduces the severity of the incident.

In this section, we examined turn-initial utterances which form the first part in a two-part syntactic construction. We found that utterances claiming no emergency project incidents that the speaker does not qualify as an emergency (Extract 6). Two variants of *juhtunud ei ole midagi* ‘nothing has happened’ project a potential incident or emergency (Extracts 7 and 8), while the turn preface *ma=i=tea* ‘I don’t know’ acts as an epistemic marker and projects uncertain stance towards the about whether the incident exists (Extract 9).

<sup>4</sup> The construction can also occur in other functions, we do not address these cases here (see, e.g., Keevallik 2011, Lindström et al. 2016).

## 4 Discussion and conclusion

We analyzed the first three turns in calls to the Estonian Emergency Centre, focusing on callers' first turns which are responses to the call-takers question *mis juhtus* 'what happened'. Our analysis revealed that in 17% of cases in our data, callers reduce the severity of the incident or emergency, either by expressing uncertainty about whether there is an incident or emergency or by indicating that the incident or emergency they report is minor, insignificant, or accidental. We analyzed which means are used by callers for reducing and examined the functions of the means.

The first group of means employed are lexical items (Extracts 4 and 5), most of which are pragmatic/discourse particles (hedges, softeners). These particles are not specific to emergency calls, most of them are among the most frequent pragmatic particles in spoken Estonian (Hennoste et al. 2021, 2022).

The second group of means consists of negative utterances at the beginning of the turn. These utterances are syntactically and semantically (but not prosodically) completed clauses followed by a second part of the clause construction containing specific information about the caller's problem. Functionally, these utterances are assessments that fall into three groups based on the information they project.

Some assessments project uncertain information, indicating that callers are uncertain about whether there is an incident or emergency. These assessments include the expression of uncertainty about the information like *m:a=i=ole* 'kindel' 'I am not sure' (Extract 5), and turn initial epistemic marker *ma=i=tea* 'I don't know' (Extract 9). The marker *I don't know* is used in the same function in various contexts, and its use has been revealed across several languages (see overview by Lindström et al. 2016). As far as we know, this usage has not been observed in emergency calls.

The second group of assessments project information about an incident that the caller does not qualify as an emergency, like *mul ei ole* 'häireolukord' 'I don't have an emergency situation' (Extract 6).

The last group projects potential incident or emergency. Here, the negative utterance *ei juhtunud midagi* 'nothing happened' is used, which formally expresses the absence of an incident (Extract 7), and variants of the same utterance containing adverbs or adjectives (like *suur* 'big', *kiire* 'urgent', *traagiline* 'tragic', etc.) which in negative constructions downgrade the reference of the utterance and therefore seriousness of an incident (Extract 8). These assessments seem to be specific to emergency calls, as they do not occur in a similar function outside of emergency calls in the Corpus of Spoken Estonian of the University of Tartu (approximately 2 million transcribed words).

Assessments are typically followed by the contrastive–concessive conjunction *aga* 'but'. In our examples, it is generally a substantive contrast between mitigating and the following part of the turn. If the assessment states that there is no emergency or incident, the following part contains information that says that something might be an issue (Extracts 6 and 7). The conjunction could also indicate that the following part of the construction contains unexpected information compared to what was previously said (Extract 8) and could also serve as a point-making device which indicates that the speakers are moving to the important part of the answer (Extracts 6, 7, and 8; Schiffrin 1987, 164–77).

In some cases, callers use a single reducing tool (Extracts 6 and 7), but often multiple different tools are employed in the same turn (Extracts 4, 5, 8, and 9).

The caller's purpose is to get help, and reducing the severity of the situation is untypical and unexpected in emergency calls. This raises the question of why callers reduce the severity of the incident or emergency. There could be several explanations as to why callers use reducing means.

First, spoken dialogue employs a lot of softeners/hedges (Extracts 4 and 5). This is driven by the need to respond quickly to the partner's turn, which does not always allow for finding the exact expression (Biber and Conrad 2009, 236–41, Hennoste et al. 2021). In emergency calls, another aspect that explains the use of softeners/hedges also becomes evident: the caller is often stressed or nervous. In addition, the fact that the call-taker's answer to the summons lacks a conventional opening sequence (greeting exchange), and in the very first turn, there is a question might also have an impact (Heritage and Clayman 2010, 53–4, 56, Rääbis 2009).

Second, sometimes the caller is closely related to the person involved in the incident and reducing the incident/emergency may serve to reduce potential blame (Extract 4, also Tracy and Anderson 1999).

Third, the callers are expected to have knowledge about the incident or emergency they report. Knowledge is a scalar phenomenon, ranging from complete knowledge to very little knowledge. Callers in our data express uncertainty about the information they possess, indicating that they do not take full epistemic responsibility for it. The marker *I don't know* (Extract 9) signals the smallest possible epistemic responsibility for the information (Lindström *et al.* 2016).

Fourth, although the Emergency Response Centre recommends calling even for minor issues, by assessment, *there is no emergency* the callers indicate that their information does not meet their criteria for an emergency and contradicts the caller's understanding that the call to the Emergency Centre implies an emergency (Extract 6).

Fifth, by using the utterance *nothing has happened*, callers align their response with the question which implies an incident (Extract 7). At the same time, it highlights that the answer is unexpected from the perspective of the call-taker's question *what happened* assuming the incident.

Sixth, if the caller's knowledge is incomplete or the problem does not meet the emergency/incident criteria for them, then their response is a dispreferred answer and therefore general assessments at the beginning of the turn are used also to delay the dispreferred information (Schegloff 2007, 58–96).

The most interesting case is the utterance that *nothing has happened* with adjectives/adverbials which implies that nothing serious or tragic has happened but projects information about a potential emergency (Extract 8). These cases need further analysis to explain the motivations of the callers.

The caller's descriptions of the emergency can also be interpreted as implicit requests for help. Using reducing markers, callers express a low entitlement. Studies on callers' explicit requests have revealed that when callers use the formats that express a low entitlement, call-takers initiate the question series, and such formulations often project a lower probability of sending assistance (Larsen 2013, Kent and Antaki 2020). This suggests that reducing the severity of the problem can lead to a similar outcome. However, our data and analysis do not support this conclusion.

First, there are cases where the call-taker initiates the question series (like in Extract 6), but there are also cases where the call-taker immediately decides on the need for assistance. This is evidenced by the fact that she asks immediately for information necessary for dispatching assistance (the address, Extract 9).

Second, reducing the severity of the incident does not mean that the call-taker accepts the caller's assessment and decreases the likelihood of sending help. On the contrary, among the 39 analyzed cases, assistance was not dispatched in only seven cases; two cases did not qualify as incidents, and in one case, the potential incident resolved itself. In addition, there is no difference between reducing the severity of the incident and expressing uncertain knowledge about its existence.

In summary, our analysis suggests that call-takers do not rely on callers' assessments of the probability, smallness, or existence of the incident or emergency. Instead, they use the acquired specific information and rely on their agenda and experience to determine what information to consider as a feature of an emergency.

Given that reducing the severity of incidents or emergencies by callers in their first turn is a common practice in Estonian emergency calls. It is important to note that despite callers' attempts to mitigate the severity of the situation, it is often a serious matter. It is essential for call-takers to efficiently recognize and address potential emergencies based on the information provided. Therefore, it is crucial to address this behavior in the training of emergency call-takers to improve the quality of service.

**Acknowledgments:** We thank the editors and anonymous reviewers for valuable comments on earlier drafts of this article.

**Funding information:** The study was funded by the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies), the Estonian Research Council grant PRG341 ("Pragmatics overwrites grammar: subjectivity and intersubjectivity in different registers and genres of Estonian"), and Estonian Ministry of Education and Research grant EKKD-TA16 ("Language in the digital age: Spoken interaction and instant messaging").

**Author contributions:** All authors have accepted responsibility for the entire content of this manuscript and approved its submission. Tiit Hennoste prepared the final manuscript with contributions from all co-authors.

**Conflict of interest:** The authors state no conflict of interest. T.H. is a guest editor for the Special Issue on Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Language. He was not, however, involved in the review process of this article. It was handled entirely by other Editors of the Journal.

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## Appendix

### Transcription conventions

|        |                                   |
|--------|-----------------------------------|
| .      | falling intonation                |
| ,      | slightly falling intonation       |
| ?      | rising intonation                 |
| ‘word  | emphasis                          |
| [ ]    | overlapping talk                  |
| (.)    | micropause, less than 0.2 s       |
| (0.5)  | silence in tenths of a second     |
| =      | latching                          |
| WORD   | talk louder than surrounding talk |
| wo: rd | lengthening                       |
| wor-   | cut-off word                      |
| \$ \$  | smiley voice                      |
| .hh    | audible inbreath                  |
| hh     | audible outbreathing              |
| {-}    | unintelligible stretch of talk    |
| {word} | transcriber’s uncertain hearing   |
| (( ))  | transcriber’s comments            |
| CLL    | caller                            |
| CAT    | call-taker                        |