Thinking about thinking in Estonian
Tom Roberts, UC Santa Cruz

Introduction: A long-standing question in the study of attitudes asks why certain verbs may embed certain complement types. In English, for instance, think only appears with declarative complements, wonder only with question complements, and know with either. Many verbs that fall in the third category are factive, though this correlation is imperfect (Egré 2007, Hacquard 2013). In Estonian there are two verbs that are both often translated as English ‘think’: arvama and mõtlema. Despite these verbs’ semantic proximity, arvama can only embed declarative complements, whereas mõtlema may embed both complement types. Furthermore, their pragmatic profiles differ, e.g., only arvama may be used to hedge an assertion. In many languages, nonfactive, non-communicative representational attitude verbs like think forbid interrogative complements, but mõtlema does not seem to obey this generalization. Here, I examine the syntactic and pragmatic environments in which arvama and mõtlema occur as a probe for understanding why they permit the complements they do and shed light on embedding behavior of attitude verbs more generally.

Declarative/Interrogative Complements: Estonian arvama is like think in that it selects only for declarative complements. Mõtlema, on the other hand, may select for both declarative and interrogative complements. In the latter case, its meaning is reported to be similar to wonder, in that the attitude holder both doesn’t know the answer to the embedded question, but seeks to know it. This pattern is demonstrated in (1) and (2).

(1) Talumees arvab/mõtleb, et kass sõi hiire ära.
Farmer.NOM think.3SG that cat.NOM eat.PAST.3SG mouse.PART up
‘The farmer thinks that the cat ate the mouse.’

(2) Ma *arvan/mõtlen kas oksendan selle välja või ei.
I think.1SG Q vomit.1SG it.PART out or not.
‘I wonder whether I will vomit it up or not.’

Pragmatic Uses: Representational attitude verbs often serve pragmatic functions, such as distancing a speaker from steadfast commitment to a proposition or attributing an evidential source, if the question under discussion is addressed by the complement (Heim 1992, Simons 2007, a.o.). In (3), we see that arvama may be used to hedge, but mõtlema may not. These verbs are rife with such pragmatic distinctions, and thus may be fruitful in determining their differing semantics.

(3) Context: I ask Gladys why Mary is not at the meeting. She replies:
   a. Ma arvan/#mõtlen, et Mary on Bostonis.
      I think.1SG that Mary be.3SG Boston.INESS
      ‘I think that Mary is in Boston.’

Conclusion: This presentation compares two Estonian attitude verbs with broadly similar meanings (nonfactive belief verbs) but different complement distributions to investigate when complement types can be used to differentiate attitude verbs. Investigating the syntactic and pragmatic environments of these verbs, which differ considerably, provides helpful clues into their semantics in ways investigating only the complements they embed cannot.