

# CLEANING AUNTS AND POLICE UNCLES IN ACTION. UNVEILING GENDER DYNAMICS IN ESTONIAN COMPOUND WORDS

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on the use of compound words ending with *tädi* ‘aunt’ and *onu* ‘uncle’ in the 2021 Estonian Web Corpus. The aim is to determine the frequencies and semantic categories of such compounds as well as to analyze how occupational titles that incorporate these gender-specific words are used. Therefore, this paper primarily seeks to understand why terms related to kinship, like *tädi* and *onu*, are integrated into compound words denoting occupations. The data is subjected to corpus-assisted discourse analysis, revealing that compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu* express various semantic categories, and these occupational titles serve several purposes in Estonian public discourse. Additionally, the study shows that such compounds carry gender stereotypes and that titles ending with *tädi* are more often associated with lower prestige.

**Keywords:** Estonian, gender-marked vocabulary, corpus linguistics, corpus assisted discourse studies, kinship terminology

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## 1. Introduction

The topic of gender and the linguistic representation of gender has been widely studied in many branches of linguistics throughout the world. However, Estonian, as a grammatically genderless language, has received relatively little attention in relation to gender marking. There have been a few studies on the use of gendered compound words, for example, words ending with *mees* ‘man’ and *naine* ‘woman’ (see Olt 2004; Puna 2006; Kasik 2015; Kaukonen 2022). Yet, there are other gender-marked words used in compounds, such as *tädi* ‘aunt’ and *onu* ‘uncle’, which have yet to be investigated. In Estonian, the terms *tädi*

and *onu* are primarily used to denote kinship, but, as is often the case in other languages, they also serve other purposes. For instance, they are commonly used when addressing children or referring to unfamiliar individuals or family friends. Additionally, *tädi* and *onu* frequently appear in compound words denoting occupations, such as *koristajatädi* ‘cleaning aunt’ or *arstionu* ‘doctor uncle’.

This article focuses on the compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu* that indicate occupations, since gendered vocabulary that refers to occupations often reflects gender differentiation and the unequal treatment of the sexes in occupations (Penelope 1988: 120–121; Holmes & Sigley 2002: 252). It should be noted that *tädi* and *onu* do not appear in the official occupational titles of Estonian, but represent more colloquial language use. In this paper, I will demonstrate that *tädi* and *onu* are frequently used in a humorous and derogatory manner. Specifically, I will illustrate how gender stereotypes are manifested in such occupational titles, shedding light on which professions are more commonly associated with which gender, along with their relative prestige. The gender stereotypes I refer to are mainly beliefs about occupational and social roles that are assumed to be held by men or by women more dominantly (Gygax et al. 2016; Vaidya 2019). Additionally, the paper provides an overview of the semantic categories of compounds ending with *tädi* and *onu* in the 2021 Estonian Web Corpus, aiming to elucidate the general expressions conveyed by compound words featuring these kinship terms.

Therefore, the research questions that I aim to find answers to are as follows:

1. How many compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu* occur in the 2021 Estonian Web Corpus, and what are the proportions of words referring to men and to women?
2. What kinds of semantic categories do the compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu* belong to?
3. What kinds of occupations do the compounds ending with *tädi* and *onu* mark?
4. How are compounds referring to occupations utilized in practice? Are *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds used differently?

The article starts with an introduction to kinship terminology, research on fictive kinship terms, and gendered occupational titles both in

other languages and in the Estonian language. Subsequently, I examine the frequencies and the semantic categories of *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds and compare them to other gender-marked compounds ending with *naine* ‘woman’, *mees* ‘man’, *tüdruk* ‘girl’ and *poiss* ‘boy’. Finally, the paper delves into the usage of occupational titles ending with *tädi* and *onu*. Since such compounds are typically found in informal language in Estonian, the aim is to uncover their intended usage (i.e., what could be the potential reasons for language users to choose a term like ‘police uncle’ instead of ‘police officer,’ for example).

While studying generic gendered vocabulary and its male bias is more common in linguistics (see Cooper 1984; Gygax et al. 2008; Gygax et al. 2009; Stout & Dasgupta 2011) this paper looks into the use of specific gendered words that nevertheless uncover patterns similar to generic language use. Such an approach also helps to unveil societal attitudes toward gender roles and the roles of men and women in society. This is particularly valuable in a grammatically genderless language, where exclusively studying generic vocabulary carries the risk of overlooking significant patterns.

## 2. Kinship terminology and fictive kinship

Kinship terminology, according to Read (2015), represents “the terms used to refer to, or express, the corpus of culturally recognized kinship relations one individual can have to another individual in a particular society” (Read 2015: 61). As is the case with naming conventions for cultural constructs, kinship terminology exhibits variation across different societies and languages. Semantic analysis of kinship terms is often based on two necessary components – relative age and gender distinctions (Borges 2013: 3). An illustrative instance involves the differentiation of siblings based on age in certain languages such as Tamil, resulting in the use of distinct terms for older sisters and older brothers (Srisatkunarajah 2012). Hence, the examination of kinship terms based on gender serves to illustrate the construction of a particular kinship system. In many cases, kinship terms also function as address terms (Fitch 1998, cited through Afful 2006: 277). Personal address terms often reflect social and cultural values, such as communication principles, social and political changes, personal identities and

relationships between speakers (Fitch 1991; Trudgill 2000: 16; Clyne et al. 2009). Address terms therefore help sociolinguists understand different linguistic behaviors, interpersonal relationships and attitudes of language users.

On the example of Colombian use of ‘mother’ (*madre*), Fitch (1991) has described how address terms that refer to kinship can often be used in different semantic ways. The literal meaning for *madre* is used by a child when referring to their (biological) mother. However, a woman could also be addressed as *madre* when the speaker wants to convey affection, solidarity, irony, or even flirtation (Fitch 1991: 255–256, 260–261). This linguistic phenomenon is called fictive kinship and denotes the use of certain kinship terms when there are no kin relations or, sometimes, any acquaintance between the language user and the referent (Gu 1990). Mainly, in anthropology, fictive kinship is defined as a phenomenon related to the chosen or so-called voluntary family; in other words, a person might use fictive kinship terms when referring to someone they consider family-like (Nelson 2014). In this study, I rely on Gu (1990), for whom fictive kinship indicates, more generally, speakers using kinship terms without any implied kinship or familial relation. According to Fitch (1991), fictive kinship terms include, for example, words like ‘mother’, but also ‘brother’, ‘sister’, ‘grandma’, ‘grandpa’, as well as ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’ in many languages (Gu 1990; Nelson 2014).

Clyne et al. (2009) mention how children in Sweden from the 1960s until 2000s commonly addressed their friends’ parents and older family friends as *aunts* and *uncles* (Clyne et al. 2009: 87). Kiss (2022), in her study of address terms in the Tatar language spoken in Finland and Estonia, explains that in Tatar-speaking communities, speakers use fictive kinship terms to address people older than them, since addressing someone exclusively by name is sometimes considered disrespectful. Such terms also include ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’ (i.e., *apa* and *abiy* in Tatar), usually added after the name of the person and used to refer to an older sister or brother, among other things (Kiss 2022: 64–65). Some kinship terms in Chinese languages also have an extended usage – words for ‘grandma’ and ‘grandpa’ as well as ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’ are used without any kin relations with the addresser (Gu 1990: 250). Such terms, when used in the correct context, show politeness in Chinese culture. Srisat-kunarajah (2012) describes the same phenomenon in the Jaffna dialect

of Tamil language, spoken in Sri Lanka. Younger generations in that society have a tendency to refer to an elderly man or woman outside the family as an uncle or an aunt. Kinship terms are, in that case, used to express politeness, intimacy, respect and affection to familiar non-kinfolk (Srisatkunarajah 2012: 200).

Several studies suggest that fictive kinship terms ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’, particularly ‘aunt,’ can occasionally carry pejorative connotations. For example, some younger female participants in Clyne et al.’s (2009) research mentioned that being called an aunt by unfamiliar children was unpleasant or surprising for them. Another study that addresses the Swedish word *tant* ‘aunt’ similarly claims that the word does not only represent a polite term for older female relatives or older women in general, it is also used as a derogatory term indicating “a hefty and serious matron with a fondness for clothing that is comfortable and practical, whence [originates] the adjective, *tantig*, for ‘frumpishness’ and ‘outdatedness’. Yet a *tant* is also someone who dares to speak her mind without a thought of pleasing others.” (Lövgren 2013: 120). In Kiss’ (2022) thesis, several participants in the Tatar community in Finland mentioned that the fictive use of ‘aunt’ may have a derogatory meaning for them. For example, some (mainly younger and female) Tatars view being called aunts or uncles an indication that they are considered old (Kiss 2022: 67). Gu (1990) describes how, already in the 1990s, her English female friend felt offended when a group of Chinese children called her an aunt, as a gesture of politeness in Chinese (Gu 1990: 250). Drawing from personal experiences and anecdotes from individuals within my social circle, I can affirm that similar interpretations appear in the context of Estonia as well – women, and occasionally men, consider being referred to as ‘aunt’ or ‘uncle’ by unfamiliar individuals offensive or awkward.

As can be seen from the discussion above, there are many societies where *aunt* and *uncle* are used to address unrelated people who are usually older than the speaker. Generally, this usage derives from the speakers’ desire to express politeness, affection or respect. However, it can also have the opposite effect due to age implications.

### 3. Issues of gender marking in occupational titles

Feminist linguistics has studied different issues of gender representation across languages (see Cooper 1990; Cameron 1992; Pauwels 2003). Because of the traditional divisions and unequal treatment of the sexes in the workplace, the use of gendered occupational titles is an important target of the feminist critique of language (Holmes et al. 2009: 192). The tendency to label professional terms with a gendered word shows a deep embeddedness of gender roles in our semantic space (Penelope 1988: 121). Language reflects the prevalence of men in many positions, since most role nouns and occupational terms referring to men are generic, i.e. they can be used to refer to a person of any gender. This indicates that a man is a standard, while a woman is an anomaly that needs a special marking; in other words, the place of women in our society is reflected in language and in occupational terms in turn (Cooper 1990: 17; Penelope 1988: 119–121; McConnell-Ginet 2020: 50–51).

According to Niedzwiecki (1993), occupational titles have much more than just an empirical meaning in language. An occupational title is the result of historical, linguistic, social, cultural and psychological factors. In the minds of language users it evokes more than just an occupation: for example, the clothes worn in the job, tools and equipment, working conditions, social positions, duties, salary scale, etc. (Niedzwiecki 1993: 47–48) The gender stereotype associated with certain occupational words in the minds of language users is activated during the processing of linguistic units, leading people to associate particular occupations with specific genders (Kennison & Trofe 2003: 366; Oakhill et al. 2005).

Previous research shows that terms referring to men indicate higher prestige occupations. In an analysis of the Corpus of Historical American English, Baker (2014) found that compounds ending with *-man* denote positions of influence and leadership (such as *congressman*, *chairman*), but also occupations related to law enforcement and protection (*police-man*, *fireman*), transportation (*boatman*, *horseman*), while occupational titles for women expressed service-related tasks (such as *needlewoman*, *serving-woman*, *washwoman*). The words referring to women in more powerful positions had much lower frequencies in the corpus. This indicates that many occupations have been historically held by men and confirms that professions have a gender-stereotypical distribution

(Baker 2014: 83–86). However, Baker’s findings illustrate much older language use, and today’s language may have different patterns.

Due to the influence of feminist activism and a desire to increase social inclusion, there have been initiatives in several countries to adopt more gender-inclusive language. This includes gender-neutral occupational titles, which have been introduced to minimize gender bias in language and to enhance the visibility of all genders. For example, words such as *flight attendant* and *chair* (as opposed to *stewardess* and *chairman*) are used more often now in English; likewise, in languages with grammatical gender, gender asterisks, dots, split forms etc. are used to combine the male and female grammatical gender in nouns (see Gerritsen 2002; Gabriel et al. 2018; Xiao et al. 2023).

#### 4. Gender-marked words and occupational titles in Estonian

Estonian is a Balto-Finnic language that is genderless from the perspective of grammar. Therefore, gender in Estonian is only expressed lexically either through full lexemes (e.g. *mees* ‘man’, *naine* ‘woman’, *tüdruk* ‘girl’, *poiss* ‘boy’) or through compounding using either a gender-specific initial form (e.g. *naisarst* ‘female doctor’, *meesmodell* ‘male model’) or a gender-specific base form (e.g. *esimees* ‘chairman’, *ärinaine* ‘businesswoman’, *presidendiproua* ‘madame president’ or ‘wife of a male president’, *õpetajahürra* ‘Mr. Teacher’). Some derivational suffixes referring to females have also been introduced to Estonian following the example of other languages. Derivatives are only used to refer to female agents and representatives of different ethnicities, for example, *lauljanna* ‘female singer’, *venelanna* ‘female Russian’, *poetess* ‘female poet’, *sõbratar* ‘female friend’, ‘girlfriend’ etc. (Kasik 2015: 243–245; Hasselblatt 2015).

As Aikhenvald (2016: 217) has mentioned, lack of grammatical gender does not correlate with gender equality or neutrality. Gender bias can take many forms in a language beyond grammar: it can be presented indirectly, through discourses and context, but also through lexical resources (Mills 2008; Thomas & Wareing 1999: 67–80). Thus, issues of stereotyping and gender bias have also been described in several studies on Estonian (see Piits 2015; Raadik 2016; Kaukonen 2022). The issue of occupational titles in Estonian has been discussed, for example, by Puna (2006), who studied gendered vocabulary in Estonian

dictionaries (1950s–2000s) and texts. She observed that in the case of compound words denoting occupations and activities, gender marking in Estonian is closely linked to traditional gender roles and the perception that certain professions are more suitable for men, while others are considered more appropriate for women. Occupations that have historically been associated with men, such as hunting, fishing, or seafaring, are more commonly represented through compound words ending with *mees* ‘man’. Additionally, the majority of compound words ending with a gender-specific term indicate a male, primarily because there was no corresponding term to describe a woman working in the same field. Hence, numerous instances of a generic masculine are found within occupational titles. In addition, compound words denoting a masculine gender cover more areas of activity (Puna 2006: 39–40, 88). An article published in Estonian feminist opinion portal Feministeerium reports that words that include generic masculine in Estonian feed the idea that it is more accepted and historically justified to see a man in social positions and occupations. A woman requires specific identification when occupying these roles, whereas a man is typically regarded as self-evident in such a context (Kuusik 2015).

Estonian kinship terms *tädi* ‘aunt’ and *onu* ‘uncle’ in occupational titles have also been mentioned by Puna (2006), who states that these terms (together with other word units referring to gender) in compound words indicate occupations considered either masculine or feminine – like *sepaonu* ‘blacksmith uncle’ or *koristajatädi* ‘cleaning aunt’. She also points out that *tädi* and *onu* in compound occupation words are used jokingly. *Kokatädi* ‘cook aunt’ and *garderoobitädi* ‘cloakroom aunt’ are, according to her, lexicalized words, since holders of these occupations are females who work at schools, and children use such words to refer to unfamiliar older people. She mentions that a female holder of a more prestigious position is usually referred to as a woman. It can be concluded that more serious areas are those associated with men, because a woman has to behave according to a masculine model in such a profession. Aunts are therefore mainly women who do not work in professions that are considered dignified (Puna 2006: 39–41, 58).<sup>1</sup>

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1 Compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu* are difficult to translate into English. Therefore, I have translated them as close to the original as possible (as aunt and uncle), however in English, other words could be used idiomatically in some cases (for example, *cleaning lady*).



While Puna's analysis concerned the language use of the 2000s, in the following analysis I will look at compound words, more precisely occupational titles ending with *tädi* 'aunt' and *onu* 'uncle', in more recent data.

## 5. Method and data

The data used in this study comes from the web subcorpus of the Estonian National Corpus of 2021. This corpus includes genres such as blogs, encyclopedias, forums, periodicals, and online commerce which have been gathered in the year 2021 (Koppel, Kallas 2022: 207, 210, 214). To navigate the corpus, I used the SketchEngine corpus software (see Kilgarriff et al. 2004). With the Wordlist tool, SketchEngine allows users to search for compound words ending or beginning with a selected word or lemma. I searched for compound words ending with the lemma *tädi* and *onu* as well as *naine*, *mees*, *tüdruk* and *poiss*. I downloaded the results together with their frequencies as a Microsoft Excel file and analyzed the data in greater detail. I classified each word that occurred in the data by its frequency into a semantic category, based on the meaning of the first part of the compound. To discern how compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu* are used, I used a concordance tool to select the five most frequent occupational titles and downloaded 100 random usage examples for each word.<sup>2</sup>

The data was analyzed using the method of corpus-assisted discourse studies. While critical discourse analysis focuses on ideologies, social and cultural practices, power and values reflected in language use (Wodak 1989; van Dijk 1993; Fairclough 2001), corpus-assisted discourse studies (or CADS) studies language as a discourse through corpus data (McEnery & Baker 2015; Partington et al. 2013; Ancarno 2020). According to Conrad (2002: 78), "corpus linguistics is thus particularly helpful in providing "big picture" perspectives on discourse – determining patterns of language behavior across many texts, identifying typical and unusual choices by users, and describing the interactions among multiple variables". Thus, in this study, I am relying on CADS by looking at frequencies quantitatively and analyzing

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2 There were fewer occurrences for nouns ending with *onu* compared to nouns ending with *tädi*, therefore there were also fewer analyzed concordance lines.

the context of use qualitatively, focusing on patterns in the usage of compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu*. The qualitative study uses thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke 2006; Clarke & Braun 2017) to identify and analyze themes of usage patterns and discourse analysis (see van Dijk 1993; Wodak 1997; Fairclough 2001) to analyze and interpret the concordance lines of *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds. Mixing quantitative and qualitative methods provides a more nuanced understanding of a problem; where frequency data shows the validity of language phenomena and the analysis of the context of use helps scholars identify hidden discursive patterns in the language (Baker & Levon 2015: 233; Ancarno 2020: 175).

## 6. Results

In the following section, I will discuss the frequencies, ratios and usage of compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu* in the 2021 Estonian Web Corpus. In the first subsection, I will give a brief overview of the frequencies of other gender-marked compounds in the corpus. In the second subsection, I will focus on *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds. In the third one, I will analyze occupational titles ending with *tädi* and *onu* and the usage of the titles that occur most frequently.

### 6.1. An overview of the frequencies of gender-marked compound words

Table 1 shows the gender-marked vocabulary compound word groups of the 2021 web corpus and their approximate frequencies, namely, their token and type frequencies (Stefanowitsch 2020: 311–313), that have been rounded to the nearest hundred. In this context, token frequency refers to the absolute frequency of gendered compound words within the corpus (i.e. how many occurrences of *tädi*-compounds can be found), while type frequency denotes the number of different compounds in the corpus (i.e. how many different *tädi*-compounds emerged). For this article, I have selected the following compound words for comparison: words ending with *naine* ‘woman’ and *mees* ‘man’ and words ending with *tüdruk* ‘girl’ and *poiss* ‘boy’, since these are the most common words denoting gender across age groups.

Table 1. An overview of the frequencies of gender-marked compound words.

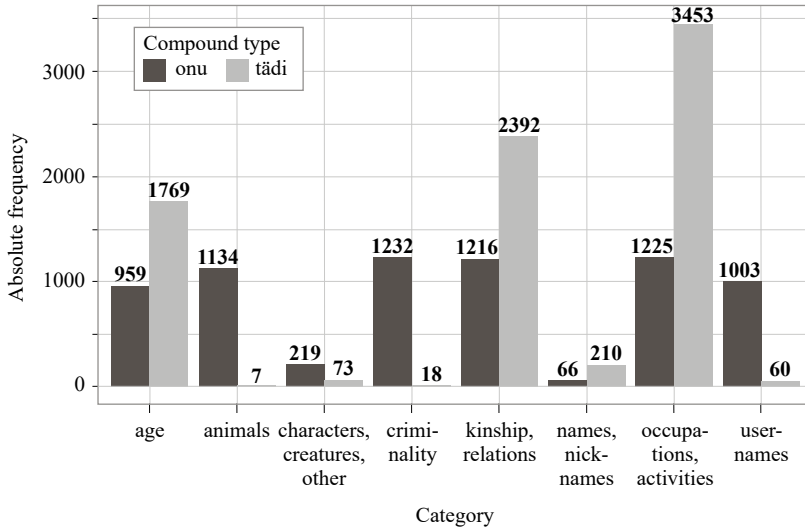
Compound group	- <i>naine</i> 'woman'	- <i>mees</i> 'man'	- <i>tüdruk</i> 'girl'	- <i>poiss</i> 'boy'	- <i>tüdi</i> 'aunt'	- <i>onu</i> 'uncle'
Token frequency	≈ 39 300 (8%)	≈ 431 200 (92%)	≈ 12 200 (28%)	≈ 31 100 (72%)	≈ 6500 (52%)	≈ 6100 (48%)
Type frequency	≈ 730	≈ 3500	≈ 850	≈ 1600	≈ 830	≈ 700
Examples	<i>perenaine</i> 'mistress of a household', lit. 'family woman', <i>jahinaine</i> 'huntswoman' 'huntswoman' 'master of a household', <i>rekordinaine</i> 'record woman', <i>maanaine</i> 'country woman'	<i>jahimees</i> 'huntsman', <i>vanamees</i> 'old man', <i>peremees</i> 'master of a household', lit. 'family man', <i>jutumees</i> 'storytelling man'	<i>ilmatüdruk</i> 'weather girl', <i>koolitüdruk</i> 'school girl', <i>emotüdruk</i> 'emo girl', <i>tantsutüdruk</i> 'dance girl'	<i>spordipoiss</i> 'sports boy', <i>naabripoiss</i> 'neighbour boy', <i>paipoiss</i> 'good boy', <i>tuulepoiss</i> 'wind', lit. 'wind boy'	<i>kokatädi</i> 'cook aunt', <i>vanatädi</i> 'old aunt', <i>mustlastädi</i> 'gypsy aunt', <i>Alma-tädi</i> 'aunt Alma'	<i>valurionu</i> 'guard uncle', <i>vanaonu</i> 'old uncle', <i>vuntsionu</i> 'moustache uncle', <i>Mationu</i> 'uncle Mati'

The percentages indicated in the table have been calculated from a specific group of gender-marked words – *naine/mees*, *tüdruk/poiss* and *tädi/onu*. Thus, *naine*-compounds make up 8% of the *naine*- and *mees*-compounds and so on. This indicates that the words referring to men predominate in this compound group. The highest frequencies both in a specific group of words and in total are compound words ending with *mees*. Compound words, such as *jahimees*, *esimees*, *põllumees*, are also the most lexicalized in Estonian, representing generic masculinity and emphasizing gender less than other compound words. In addition, for compounds ending with *tüdruk* and *poiss*, which refer to younger females and males and express, for example, professions and activities (*ilmatüdruk* ‘weather girl’; *kokapoiss* ‘cook boy’), age (*beebitüdruk* ‘baby girl’), relationships and marital status (*ekstüdruk* ‘ex girl’), characteristics (*pahapoiss* ‘bad boy’) etc., the words denoting men have a higher frequency. The dominance of *poiss*-compounds may also have its roots in tradition: historically, society has often placed greater emphasis on the activities of boys and men. On the other hand, *poiss* is seemingly more gender-neutral than *tüdruk*, because of the tradition of applying the generic masculine to all genders. As a result, *poiss* is more commonly used in compound words that refer to inanimate objects (such as *tuulepoiss* ‘a wind’).

Words ending with *tädi* appear with a slightly higher frequency than *onu*-compounds in the corpus and likewise constitute a higher percentage of compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu*. In comparison to the frequencies of other word groups, this was the only group where the ratio slightly favors words referring to women. I will discuss this phenomenon more thoroughly in the discussion section.

## 6.2. Compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu*: semantic categories

The semantic categories of *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds and their absolute frequencies are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Frequencies of more dominant semantic categories of *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds.

The figure displays the absolute frequencies of the most frequent semantic categories that emerged. This means that categories with an absolute frequency below 100 for both compound groups are not shown in the figure, but I will identify them below.

It can be observed that *tädi*-compounds most commonly conveyed the category of occupations and activities. Within this category, there were words that denoted occupational titles (such as *arstitädi* ‘doctor aunt’), as well as words that referred to a woman engaged in a particular hobby or activity (such as *fitness-tädi* ‘fitness aunt’). Thus, in this article I have divided all role nouns under this classification, encompassing both occupational titles and words denoting fields of activity. Other more frequent categories that emerged with *tädi*-compounds were kinship and other relations (including words such as *vanatädi* ‘great aunt’, *naabritädi* ‘neighbour aunt’, etc.) and age (*vanatädi* ‘old aunt’, *vanuritädi* ‘oldster aunt’ etc.). *Tädi* is also quite often attached to proper names (e.g. *Rita-tädi* ‘aunt Rita’, *Tiia-tädi* ‘aunt Tiia’ etc.). Some words, such as *vanatädi*, were classified into two different categories at the same time.

Interestingly, the most frequent category for *onu*-compounds was criminality. This group includes one of the most common and lexicalized *onu*-compounds, *kommionu* (jocular reference to a pedophile, lit. ‘candy

uncle’). Secondly, words indicating occupations and activities emerged (*kullerionu* ‘courier uncle’, *valvurionu* ‘guard uncle’). The word *onu* in Estonian often appears in the names of various animals, often used when talking to children (such as *põdraonu* ‘uncle moose’, *jänkuonu* ‘uncle rabbit’ etc.). Furthermore, both *tädi* and *onu* appeared in usernames on online forums or blog titles as well as in the names of different characters, creatures, and even inanimate phenomena (*äikeseonu* ‘lightning uncle’, *vässuonu* ‘uncle tiredness’). These instances were classified into the category of “characters, creatures and other“.

The categories that were less frequent for both *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds included properties; place of residence; behavior; race, ethnicity, and religion, as well as looks and sexuality. Despite their infrequent occurrence, some unique examples emerged, for instance, words like *külmikonu* ‘refrigerator uncle’, which describes a muscular man resembling a fridge, or the newly coined term *ega-ma-siin-teie-jaoks-ei-ole-tädi* ‘nor-am-I-here-for-you-aunt’, referring to a female customer service representative who is indifferent and rude to customers. Additionally, compounds related to appearance exhibited some gender bias – when describing women, using *tädi* to characterize looks often carries negative or sexualized connotations (*notsutädi* ‘a woman with a pig-like appearance’, *pandatädi* ‘a woman with dark circles under her eyes’, *koll-tädi* ‘ogre woman’, *tissitädi* ‘a woman with larger breasts’), whereas for men, hairstyles or body hair were primarily mentioned (*rastaonu* ‘rasta uncle’, *vuntsionu* ‘moustache uncle’). This indicates that *tädi*-compounds are more commonly used for criticizing a (female) person’s appearance.

### 6.3. Occupational titles ending with *tädi* and *onu*

In the following subsection, my primary focus is on identifying the occupations associated with *tädi* and *onu* and whether titles denoting women and men correspond to different occupations, thereby revealing gender-based occupational stereotypes. To categorize occupational titles, I considered words that appeared at least three times.

Table 2 below displays an overview of the different types of occupations that emerged with *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds. The percentages here show the proportion of certain types of occupations among all occupational titles ending with either *tädi* or *onu*.

Table 2. Occupational titles ending with *tädi* and *onu*.

Type of occupation	<i>tädi</i> -compounds		<i>onu</i> -compounds		Examples
	Token frequency	Type frequency	Token frequency	Type frequency	
	total absolute frequency of occupational titles = 3453		total absolute frequency of occupational titles = 1225		
Customer service	1502 (44%)	57	87 (7%)	12	<i>raamatukogutädi</i> 'library aunt', <i>garderoobitädi</i> 'wardrobe aunt', <i>müüjaonu</i> 'seller uncle', <i>kelnerionu</i> 'waiter uncle', <i>kassatädi</i> 'cashier aunt'
Healthcare	464 (13%)	10	150 (12%)	1	<i>arstitädi</i> 'doctor aunt', <i>arstionu</i> 'doctor uncle', <i>haiglatädi</i> 'hospital aunt'
Jobs including children; social work	378 (11%)	15	–	–	<i>koolitädi</i> 'school aunt', <i>kasvatajatädi</i> 'kindergarten teacher aunt', <i>hooldajatädi</i> 'caretaker aunt'
Repairing and construction	–	–	66 (5%)	8	<i>remondionu</i> 'repair uncle', <i>elektrionu</i> 'electricity uncle', <i>toruonu</i> 'pipe uncle'
Culture and entertainment	42 (1%)	8	58 (5%)	7	<i>kunstitädi</i> 'art aunt', <i>giiditädi</i> 'guide aunt', <i>kaameraonu</i> 'camera uncle', <i>kirjanikuonu</i> 'writer uncle'
Law enforcement	134 (4%)	7	247 (20%)	10	<i>politsetitädi</i> 'police aunt', <i>politseionu</i> 'police uncle', <i>turvapädi</i> 'security aunt', <i>valvurionu</i> 'guard uncle'
Media and journalism	29 (1%)	4	35 (3%)	4	<i>raadiotädi</i> 'radio aunt', <i>teleonu</i> 'TV uncle', <i>leheonu</i> 'newspaper uncle'

Type of occupation	<i>äidi</i> -compounds		<i>onu</i> -compounds		Examples
	Token frequency	Type frequency	Token frequency	Type frequency	
Business, entrepreneurship	–	–	14 (1%)	4	<i>kohvikuonu</i> 'cafe owner uncle', <i>naftaonu</i> 'petroleum uncle', <i>korp-onu</i> 'corporate uncle'
Science and technology	–	–	17 (1%)	5	<i>teadlaseonu</i> 'scientist uncle', <i>keeleonu</i> 'linguist uncle', <i>tehnikaonu</i> 'technology uncle'
Management, politics, banking	43 (1%)	6	66 (5%)	8	<i>pangaonu</i> 'bank uncle', <i>juhitiädi</i> 'chief aunt', <i>riigionu</i> 'government uncle', <i>eurotädi</i> 'european parliament aunt'
Cleaning service	130 (4%)	3	7 (1%)	1	<i>koristajädi</i> 'cleaning aunt', <i>pesumajädi</i> 'landromat aunt', <i>prigionu</i> 'garbage uncle'
Jobs with animals; farmwork	111 (3%)	8	4 (0.3%)	1	<i>koeratädi</i> 'dog aunt', <i>farmitädi</i> 'farm aunt', <i>farmerionu</i> 'farmer uncle'
Other (such as vehicle driving, esotericism, sports etc.)	40 (1%)	9	79 (6%)	16	<i>trammitädi</i> 'tram aunt', <i>inglitädi</i> 'angel aunt', <i>esotericist</i> , <i>spordionu</i> 'sports uncle', <i>kirkionu</i> 'church uncle'
Unprocessed words	580 (17%)		395 (32%)		



The compound words ending with *tädi* marked 10 types of occupations, while those with *onu* marked 12 types of occupations. Generally, the types of occupations were the same for *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds. However, there were differences in the more frequently expressed occupations. *Tädi* in occupational titles primarily marked professions related to customer service (44% from all occupational titles), healthcare (13%), and jobs involving children or social work (11%), while *onu* in occupational titles predominantly represented law enforcement (20%), followed by healthcare (12%) and customer service (7%). Thus, *tädi* and *onu* in occupational titles reveal traditional gender roles and occupational gender differentiation – women are more often associated with occupations related to children, teaching, and (elder) care, while men are often found in the role of guards and police officers. As for *tädi*-compounds, there were no instances of words expressing occupations related to repairing and construction, business and entrepreneurship, and science and technology. This suggests that these areas are perceived as more masculine. Furthermore, while customer service was one of the most frequently expressed occupations for both *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds, it was more prevalent in *tädi*-compounds. This indicates that women are more often associated with occupations that are considered to have a lower status in society, such as customer service. This was also illustrated by different meanings of compounds such as *pangatädi* ‘bank aunt’, which referred to a teller, and *pangaonu* ‘bank uncle’, which referred mostly to a banker.

Thus, occupational titles ending with *tädi* and *onu* reflect the traditional gender associations with regard to occupations, highlighting those typically attributed to women and men. They also reveal that words denoting women are more frequently linked to lower-status occupations.

#### 6.4. Usage of occupational titles ending with *tädi* and *onu*

To gain a comprehensive understanding of the usage patterns of these words, I have individually marked the example sentences and categorized them based on the context.

The five most frequent occupational titles ending with *tädi* among the concordances of which I analyzed were *kokatädi* ‘cook aunt’, *söögitädi* ‘dining room aunt’, *arstitädi* ‘doctor aunt’, *raamatukogutädi* ‘library aunt’ and *koristajatädi* ‘cleaning aunt’. I analyzed and classified 500

lines of concordances of occupational titles ending with *tädi* in total. The five most frequent occupational titles ending with *onu* selected for concordance analysis were *politseionu* ‘police uncle’, *arstionu* ‘doctor uncle’, *korraldajaonu* ‘organizer uncle’, *militisaonu* ‘militia uncle’ (the term refers to the police of the Soviet period), and *valvurionu* ‘guard uncle’. Since occupational titles ending with *onu* were less frequent in the corpus, for some words, fewer than 100 sentences appeared. In total, there were 293 lines of concordance for *onu*-ending compounds. All the examples in the analysis below are displayed in their original form.

In many examples, the usage categories overlapped, and one example sentence could serve multiple purposes simultaneously. For instance, the distinction between jocose and derogatory or critical use is not always clear-cut because humor and irony can sometimes conceal underlying criticism (Wilson & Sperber 1992: 60–61; Barbe 1995: 12). The conclusions are drawn on the basis of the surrounding context, the researcher’s knowledge of the language as a native speaker and a large amount of corpus data, which often helps to reduce subjectivity (Stefanowitsch 2020: 15). Interpretations for the found patterns often result from the researcher’s intuition and introspection; it is thus not possible to completely remove introspection, but it can be restricted (Klavan et al. 2013: 18; Mautner 2009: 45; Baker 2006: 18). Furthermore, since *tädi*- and *onu*-compounds represent more colloquial and thus unedited language, examining the additional meanings of informal and non-standardized usage helps to better uncover covert patterns of gendered usage.

### ***Tädi*-compounds**

The main categories for the usage of occupational titles ending with *tädi* were: 1) warmth and familiarity, 2) jocular usage, 3) dissociation, 4) belittling and mocking and 5) self-irony.

The most frequent function was expressing **warmth and familiarity**, which made up 54% of the all 500 usage examples. Some of the examples categorized under each function were simultaneously categorized with more than one function. For instance, several examples were used to convey both warmth and humor. *Tädi* is often used to refer to a stranger when talking to kids, thus it appeared in examples where language users spoke to or about children. In this case, *tädi* conveys familiarity and warmth. *Tädi* is a simple and understandable word for

children, and it has become customary to refer to women who work with children as ‘aunts’ (example 1). Examples where *tädi* appeared to express positive emotions were also classified under the warmth and familiarity category.

1. *Ta on olnud **kokatädi** Valga lastekodus 20 aastat, lastekodu hing ja süda. Noorte sõnul on ta on väga soe ja südamlik inimene.* ‘She has been a **cook aunt** at Valga’s orphanage for 20 years, the heart and soul of the orphanage. According to the youngsters, she is a very warm and affectionate person’

33% of the examples of the occupational titles ending with *tädi* indicated a **jocular usage**. Since the communicative purpose of joking is to amuse listeners or readers (Ritchie 2003: 15), *tädi* helps to add a humorous note to a story (examples 2–3). One could argue that the jocular or playful nature of *tädi* becomes evident in almost every situation where adults use childlike language to refer to each other. Using *tädi* this way indicates the situational inappropriateness and absurdity, which help others to understand that something is said jokingly (Ritchie 2003). In addition, several humorous examples concealed underlying irony, derision or slight ridicule directed to the person named *tädi* (examples 2–3).

2. [---] *ning just vappu pidi olema see päev, mil ka muidu korralik **raamatukogutädi** ennast juba kell kaksteist päeval täis joob.* ‘[---] and May 1 was supposed to be the day when the otherwise proper **library aunt** gets drunk already at twelve o’clock in the afternoon.’
3. [---] *nägin ma u 30-aastast naist, kes oli oma poisipea lillaks värvitud. Ja mitte selliseks **lasteia söögitädi** hallikaks-lillaks, vaid ikka seda ‘kõige moekamat’ tooni [---]* ‘I saw a 30-year-old woman who had dyed her short hair purple. And not like the gray-purple of the kindergarten **dining aunt**, but the ‘most trendy’ shade [---]’
4. *Arsti juures sai nalja ka. **Arstitädi** oli veidi hajameelne või planeerimata ja sagis ringi kogu aeg [---]* ‘There was also fun at the doctor’s. The **doctor aunt** was a bit distracted or unplanned and fussing around all the time [---]’

11% of the *tädi*-compounds were used to **express dissociation**. This category is related to language users' aim to express negative politeness due to the social distance arising from differences of status and role (Brown & Levinson 1987; Cutting & Fordyce 2021: 19–20) between the writer and a person they refer to with *tädi*. In most cases, *tädi* appears when the writer is a bit offended by the actions of a person they name *tädi* (example 4).

5. *Lõunasöögist loobusin, sain veel söögitädilt pahandada, et tema eraldi mulle pärast toitu tooma ei tule.* 'I gave up lunch, **dining aunt** scolded me that she wouldn't come to bring food for me specifically later on.'

In 9% of the example sentences, *tädi* was used for **belittling and mocking**, demonstrating that this word can have an insulting function. Here, *tädi* appeared with negative adjectives, such as *paks* 'fat', *kuri* 'mean', *ebaviisakas* 'impolite', *õudne* 'scary', with complements such as *mingi arstitädi* 'some doctor aunt' (example 6). The female job holder could also be described with additional insulting words like "biddy" etc. (example 7). As in examples 6 and 7, the language user aims to convey criticism or dissatisfaction, which leads to the assumption that *tädi* is chosen as a means of mocking the person in question.

6. *Ma polnud suitsu tol ajal suhu ka võtnud, olin kategooriliselt suitsuvastane ja mingi arstitädi tuleb mind suitsetajaks tembeldama.* 'I hadn't even smoked at that time, I was categorically against smoking, and some **doctor aunt** came to label me as a smoker.'

7. A: *Kusjuures ma pole LOTR'i lugenud ja raamatukogutädi ei laenutanud ka, sest arvas, sest arvas, et olen juba lugenud.* 'Whereas I haven't read LOTR and the **library aunt** didn't lend it to me either because she thought I had already read it.'

B: *Mutt ei laenutanud, sest arvas, et oled lugenud? Appikene.* 'The biddy didn't lend the book because she thought you had read it? God forbid.'

Within this category, another discourse of belittling became evident: *tädi* becomes a mean of insulting when the language user aims to denote a person's lower status. If a female worker occupies a lower position, *tädi* may be used to humiliate or insult her (example 8). Additionally, *tädi* may be used to refer to a hypothetical person rather

than the individual who is the intended target of the insult. For instance, in examples 9 and 10, insults are directed towards the office manager of a skiing association and a film director, respectively. In such instances, a woman referred to as *tädi* represents a lazy, uneducated, underpaid or talentless person.

8. [---] *assistendiks saab praegune söögitädi.* [---] *50 aastane keskharidusega tädi, kes on siiani tõesti ainult lapiga vehkinud* [---]. ‘[---] the current **dining aunt** will be the assistant. [---] A 50-year-old aunt with a secondary education who has really only waved a cloth around so far [---]’
9. *Kuidas saab suusaliidu büroojuht niisugust juhmi juttu ajada? Ta peaks kuskil koristajatädi olema.* ‘How can the office manager of the skiing association talk such nonsense? She should be a **cleaning aunt** somewhere.’
10. [---] *vaadates filmi jääb mulje, et [---] filmi ise tegi mingisugune koristajatädi, kes stuudiot koristamas käib.* ‘[---] watching the film, one gets the impression that [---] the film itself was made by some kind of a **cleaning aunt** who goes to clean the studio.’

Only 1% of examples were used for **self-irony**. Here, I listed cases where the language users ironically referred to themselves with an occupational title word ending with *tädi* (example 11).

11. *Aga ma lähen nüüd oma kokatädi ülesandeid täitma.* ‘But I’m going to perform my **cook aunt’s** duties now.’

### **Onu-compounds**

For occupational titles ending with *onu*, four usage categories emerged: 1) jocular usage, 2) warmth and familiarity, 3) dissociation and 4) belittling and mocking. Furthermore, in 3% of the examples, the word *korraldajaonu* ‘organizer uncle’ was used as a nickname for Estonian musician and TV and radio presenter Indrek Vaheoja. Thus, I will not present these examples in the analysis of usage. The categories for *onu*-compounds are almost the same as those of *tädi*-compounds, but there are differences in the frequencies.

Unlike the *tädi*-compounds, **jocular usage** was the most frequent usage for *onu*-compounds comprising 72% of the examples. In these examples, a somewhat humorous context was created by using the *onu*-suffix in occupational titles (examples 12–14). This mostly became evident in the texts on platforms used to share stories or experiences such as diaries, blogs (on travelling, cars, personal incidences etc.) and forums. Therefore, similarly to *tädi*, *onu* in occupational titles is often used to emphasize a jocular note when telling a story, since it adds absurdity and hilarity. However, there were no instances of *onu* being used humorously to ridicule somebody.

12. *Õhtul tervitad jälle **valvurionu**, kellest üks vene mees on eriti tõsine tegija. Tema silme all küll ei julge ükski pätt tulla sinna laamendama.* ‘In the evening, you will greet the **guard uncle** again, one of whom is a Russian man who is particularly tough. Under his eyes, no rascal dares to come to wreck things there.’
13. *Julgust kokku võttes suutsin ka ühele kohalikule poolakast **korraldaja-onule** selgeks teha oma tooli vajaduse [---]* ‘Gathering my courage, I also managed to explain my need for the chair to one of the local Polish **organizer uncles**’
14. *Mina jällegi väidan, et ei olemas elementaarset viisakust (sa ei lupsa tupest välja öeldes **arstionule** „Tere“ vaid on olemas õpitud baasviisakus.* ‘Again, I claim that there is no in-born politeness (you don’t say “Hello” to the **doctor uncle** when coming out of a womb), but there is basic politeness that is learned.’

*Onu*-compounds that **express warmth and familiarity** made up 19% of the examples and were characteristic of child language or cases where language users’ wrote about or referred to children (example 15). Thus, *onu* might refer to a male pediatrician or police officer who, for some reason, engages with children. There were also examples where *onu* was used to express positive emotions, when the compound word was accompanied by adjectives such as *sõbralik* ‘friendly’, *tore* ‘pleasant’, *vahva* ‘great’, *tubli* ‘good’ etc. (example 16).

15. *Me lapsega täname ka kõiki suvepäevalisi, korraldajaonusid ning lastega tegelevaid tädiseid* ‘My child and I would also like to thank all the participants of the summer days, **organizer uncles** and aunts working with children.’
16. *Kui tunduma hakkas, et Tallinn pole enam kaugel, leidis tee ääres sõbralik politseionu, kes meid õigele rajale suunas.* ‘When it started to seem that Tallinn was not far away, there was a friendly **police uncle** on the side of the road who directed us to the right track.’

16% of the selected occupational titles ending with *onu* expressed **dissociation**. Dissociation derived from the status differences between the writer and the person referred to with an *onu*-compound. Since many of the analyzed occupational titles represent law enforcement or protection officers (*police uncle, militia uncle, guard uncle*), the status difference and the related dissociation is connected to the authoritative position of a male person named *onu* and their ability to limit the freedom of the writer (example 17).

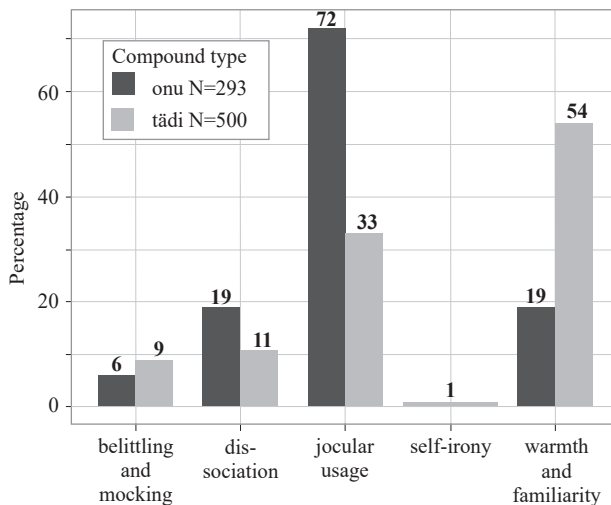
17. *[---] sõbraga juba soetasime suurte poiste käest rattad ja mootori aga peagi tulid müllitsaonud ja viisid meie lootustandva „projekti“ minema [---]* ‘my friend and I already bought bikes and a motor from the big boys, but soon the **militia uncles** came and took our promising “project” away’

Lastly, in 6% of the examples, *onu* was used in occupational titles for **belittling and mocking**. This was illustrated by adjectives such as *nõme* ‘sucky’, *diktaatorlik* ‘dictatorial’, by using titles such as “sir” ironically etc. While *tädi* was often employed to mock an inferior status in an additional belittling discourse, *onu* did not serve that function; instead, it was primarily used to express criticism and dissatisfaction (examples 18–19).

18. *Naljakas, et härra arstionu ei tea, et sellistest jahutamistest võib põie-põletiku saada.* ‘It’s funny that **sir doctor uncle** doesn’t know that you can get cystitis from such coolings.’

19. *See, mis Lokaali ees IGAL lahtioleku-ööl toimub, on lihtsalt masendav, aga selle peale ei pilguta politseionud silmagi – las peksavad ja kaklevad [---].* ‘What happens in front of Lokaal EVERY night when they are open is simply depressing, but the **police uncles** don’t even blink an eye at it – let them beat each other and fight [---]’
20. *ma usun iseennast rohkem kui arstionusid, kes teenivad selle pealt, et mul sitt oleks [---]* ‘I believe myself more than the **doctor uncles** who make money off me feeling like shit’

Usage functions and their occurrence percentages are summarized in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2.** Usage categories of *tädi*- and *onu*-ending occupational titles.

In conclusion, *tädi* was used in occupational titles predominantly to express warmth and familiarity, whereas *onu* mostly emerged in jocular usages. The prevalence of compounds ending with *tädi* used to express warmth shows that this word carries a positive connotation. The results also indicated that *tädi* is very frequently employed in children’s language or when discussing children, which encourages language users’ to convey warmth. Additionally, both *tädi* and *onu* in compound words are often used jokingly, to emphasize the absurdity or humor of a situation, which was also claimed by Puna (2006) in her analysis. Some examples



of *tädi* in these cases also revealed hidden ridicule. Moreover, it was found that these expressions can be used in more negative ways as well, such as for insulting, belittling, mocking or expressing dissatisfaction and criticism. These results will be addressed in greater detail in the following discussion section.

## 7. Summary and discussion

This article focused on compound words, more precisely, occupational titles ending with *tädi* ‘aunt’ and *onu* ‘uncle’ in the web subcorpus of the Estonian National Corpus 2021. The terms *tädi* and *onu* mostly indicate kinship in Estonian. However, this paper shows how the field of usage of these words has expanded. The results demonstrate that, while such words are generally used to express warmth or humor, in certain contexts they can also serve as linguistic tools for insulting. It is further revealed that *tädi* and *onu* in occupational terms may be related to traditional gender roles and stereotypes, sometimes assigning a less authoritative social position to women.

Firstly, *tädi*-ending compounds occurred about 6500 times and *onu*-ending compounds about 6000 times in the corpus, meaning that the proportions of occurrences are almost equal (52% vs. 48%). An overview of other gender-marked compound words showed that compounds ending with *tädi* and *onu* were the only word group where the proportions of words referring to women and to men were almost equal. In comparison, compounds ending with *naine* ‘woman’ made up only 8% of the group of *naine*- and *mees*-compounds, and compounds ending with *tüdruk* ‘girl’ constituted 28% of the *tüdruk*- and *poiss*-compound group. This suggests that the word *tädi* and its compounds potentially convey a wider range of usages in communication and, moreover, that *onu* is likely not perceived to be as generic as *mees*- and *poiss*-compounds. Furthermore, *tädi*, usually denoting an older woman and mainly representing children’s language, is more informal and thus less neutral relative to the other female-referring compounds.

Compounds ending with *tädi* and *onu* express various semantic categories: *tädi*-compounds most frequently marked occupations and activities, then kinship and other relations, followed by age. Words ending with *onu* also marked occupations and activities with great occurrence,

but the most frequent category was criminality (*kommionu* ‘candy uncle’, i.e. a pedophile, *mõrvarionu* ‘murderer uncle’). This indicates that *onu* might be used in prejudiced ways that affirm the assumption that “crime is symbolically masculine and masculinity supplies the motive for a good deal of crime“ (Naffine 1987: 43). Similarly, this is possibly why a word like *kommitädi* ‘candy aunt’ was less frequently used and, in some instances, did not refer to criminal behaviour, but simply to a woman sharing or selling candy. Considering that *onu* is associated with child language, using it in a term that denotes a pedophile likely softens the actual meaning of the word as a way to safeguard the child’s psyche and avoid explicit discussion of what such a criminal might do.

Occupational titles ending with *tädi* were more prevalent in the sphere of customer service (professions such as librarian, sales assistant, ticket seller and checker, receptionist, dining service worker, wardrobe worker etc.), healthcare and childcare. In contrast, occupational titles ending with *onu* were more prevalent in occupations related to law enforcement, healthcare and customer service. The division of occupations in the compound words ending with *tädi* and *onu* reveals stereotypical gendered associations. Firstly, nouns ending with *tädi* and *onu* seem to reflect traditional gender roles; that is, women typically assume caregiving roles and are more often associated with children, while men occupy more authoritative professions, such as those in law enforcement, which involve more accountability, decision-making and the enforcement of rules and regulations. In addition, men are more commonly found in fields such as construction, business, entrepreneurship and science, fields which are traditionally not considered suitable career paths for women; this is also reflected in the data. While this could simply indicate coincidental occupational gender differences, these results seem more indicative of a sectorial segregation, that is, a system in which women are overrepresented in low-paid sectors such as those in care or education, that are systematically undervalued. The claim that such a system exists has been substantiated by numerous studies (e.g.; Tucker & Vogtman 2023; EU Commission 2022). In the specific case of Estonia, evidence of such a system can be observed in the results of the Estonian Census of Population from 2021 (Rahvaloendus 2021), which indicated that more women as opposed to men are employed in healthcare and social welfare (86% women), in education (83%) and

in the service sector (82.3%). Another study similarly has shown that, out of a total of 247 women working in companies with the highest turnovers in Estonia, only 23 of those women serve on their company's board of directors (Velleste 2023). Accordingly, in the present study, *tädi* appears more often to represent professions of a lower prestige, as well as salary, thus reflecting the existence of such a system in language use. The claim that such a system exists and is influencing language usage can also be supported by statistics pertaining to salary: men have higher salaries in most of the professions represented by the analyzed occupational titles – for example, women earn on average a total of 733 euros less than men as cleaners, cooks, canteen workers and police officers (Statistics Estonia 2022). The idea that the bias of traditional gender roles and hierarchical differences in occupations is reflected in the usage of occupational titles ending with *tädi* and *onu* can be further supported by considering the differences in meaning that arise when compounded with the same morpheme. For instance, in the seemingly parallel words *pangaonu* 'bank uncle' and *pangatädi* 'bank aunt' the former primarily refers to a banker, the latter to a teller. All in all, the usage of occupational titles ending with *tädi* and *onu* seem to reveal social attitudes and bias behind the statistics.

The analysis of usage revealed that *tädi*-compounds were most frequently used to express warmth and familiarity. In certain professions, it has been observed that a woman is automatically referred to as an aunt when occupying the role. This usage of *tädi* is particularly noticeable in professions related to children and caretaking, where aunts are frequently employed as school cooks, school library workers, or pediatricians. The same applies to *onu*, but *onu*-compounds had a lower frequency in this particular usage. In contrast, *onu*-compounds were primarily used in a joking manner. Language users chose the word to emphasize humor or absurdity, which is largely caused by adults using children's language to label each other when the context does not involve children. *Tädi* also emerged in this usage, but often in a slightly different manner. In several instances, the use of *tädi* revealed hidden ridicule aimed at the individual referred to as such. This was based on stereotypical characteristics attributed to a female worker, such as the belief that a librarian is always dull and orderly (example 2 in the analysis above) or that a dining room worker is chubby or has a gray hair (example 3). Given that *tädi* appeared in terms stereotypically and

negatively describing a female person's physical attributes (such as big breasts, using Botox etc.), it raises the hypothesis that *tädi* is often used to make surface-level jokes based on stereotypical female characteristics and aging. This aligns with the findings of Lövgren (2013: 133), according to which aunt is often jokingly used by younger females, serving as a warning against aging, but also certain lifestyle and appearance choices. Estonian women's magazines have also addressed this through articles with titles like "How aunt-like are you?", presenting a list of characteristics that describe aunt-like behaviour as a "warning" for younger women (Naistekas 2006). Nevertheless, both *tädi* and *onu* have positive connotations as well, referring to a caring, heartfelt and sympathetic older woman or man.

The differences in usage can also be illustrated by another word pair, for example, the usage of *arstionu* and *arstitädi*. *Arstitädi* mainly referred to a pediatrician, midwife, or veterinarian (in 48% of the 100 example sentences), whereas *arstionu* was used less in this context (in 35% of the 100 sentences), referring mostly to a primary care physician, ER doctor, ambulance worker, and, in one example, even a car mechanic. *Arstionu* and *arstitädi* are both, however, used to bridge the gap between a child patient and a doctor, when referring to a pediatrician. In addition, both *tädi* and *onu*-compounds were used to express dissociation. This often arises from the social distance between the writer and the person they refer to. As for *onu*-compounds, this was mostly associated with police officers and militias, who possess greater authority in enforcing the law. In contrast, *tädi*-compounds were more commonly linked to dining room workers, cleaners and librarians, who have the capacity to comment on people's behaviour.

The present findings also provide evidence that such compounds can act as linguistic means for belittling, mocking or expressing dissatisfaction and criticism. This indicates that *tädi* and *onu* undergo semantic change, as an example of semantic pejoration (Schulz 1990; Borkowska & Kleparski 2007) – where a word develops additional negative connotations that are not inherent to its original meaning. Here, it is evident that originally kinship-indicating terms can act as insults in certain contexts. Nonetheless, upon closer examination of the outcomes associated with derogatory usage, it becomes evident that some gender distinctions might exist in this context as well. *Tädi*-compounds seem to serve as a means of insulting when the woman referred to works in a lower-status

position. Using *tädi* in these contexts could therefore increase the offensive effect when attempting to belittle or mock such a woman. Furthermore, it is employed as an insult towards a third person, a distinction not observed with *onu*. *Tädi* often signifies an inferior status; when a woman is working in a low-status occupation, she gets called *tädi* more frequently than a man would be called *onu* in a similar position. This coincides with Puna's (2006) findings about the word: a female representative of high-status professions is presumably not referred to as an aunt, which might be why words like *äritädi* 'business aunt' or *professoritädi* 'professor aunt' did not occur or occurred with very low frequencies in the corpus. Yet, such words are always context sensitive and may acquire additional connotations. The limitations of the present study include the analysis of only specific uses of *tädi* and *onu*, and such an analysis may not translate to all other cases. Nevertheless, as the results have demonstrated, it is possible to find evidence of traditional gender roles, stereotypes and derogation due to the subordinate status embedded in the meaning of words, which is especially visible in the case of women.<sup>3</sup>

In summary, the preceding analysis shows that words such as *tädi* and *onu* often function as examples of fictive kinship in the Estonian language. These terms are predominantly utilized within the domain of children's language or for humoristic purposes. However, they simultaneously appear to have stereotypical connotations within the Estonian lexicon. Notably, this includes connotations that associate women with roles characterized by childcare and nurturing responsibilities. Because of such connotations, labeling an individual as *tädi* might perpetuate the perception of women as maternal figures and caregivers contrasted to men, who are perceived as being disciplinarians and authoritative figures. Furthermore, the term *tädi* can also symbolize a cultural phenomenon, representing a label for an aging woman and/or a woman who has adopted a lifestyle that society sees as old-fashioned. Hence, the linguistic markers of gender provide insights into the prevailing notions and societal attitudes of a given culture. They also reflect the language

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3 In the Estonian Combined Dictionary (ÜS 2023) the word *tädilik* 'aunt-like' is followed by the description "to signify what is traditionally considered characteristic of a simple woman, often with a derogatory connotation", while *onulik* 'uncle-like' is "like an uncle (as an older man, kindly guiding and instructing)".

users' comprehension of gender dynamics – even in seemingly gender neutral languages such as Estonian.

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**Kokkuvõte. Elisabeth Kaukonen: Koristajatädid ja politseionud tegustemas. Tuvastades soodünaamikat eesti keele liitsõnadest.** Artikkel keskendub *tädi*- ja *onu*-lõpuliste liitsõnade kasutusele 2021. aasta eesti keele veebikorpusel, eesmärgiga välja selgitada seesuguste sõnade esinemissagedused ja tähendusrühmad. Lähemalt on analüüsitud *tädi*- ja *onu*-lõpulisel ametisõnu. Seega püüab artikkel peamiselt vastust leida küsimustele, miks kasutatakse sugulusele osutavaid termineid, nagu *tädi* ja *onu*, ametit väljendavates liitsõnades ning millised on seesuguste sõnade kasutusmustrid. Materjali analüüsiti korpuspõhise diskursuseanalüüsi meetodiga. Tulemused näitavad, et *tädi*- ja *onu*-lõpulised liitsõnad väljendavad mitmesuguseid tähendusvaldkondi ning et sellistel ametisõnadel on eesti keele avalikus diskursuses palju kasutusvõimalusi – näiteks kasutatakse *tädi*- ja *onu*-liitsõnu nii positiivses kui ka negatiivses tähenduses. Sellele lisaks on tulemustest ilmne, et seesugused liitsõnad ja nende kasutus peegeldavad soostereotüüpe ning et *tädi*-lõpulised liitsõnad on sageli seotud madalama prestiižiga kui *onu*-lõpulised.

**Märksõnad:** eesti keel, sooliselt markeeritud sõnavara, korpuslingvistika, korpuspõhine diskursuseanalüüs, sugulusterminoloogia