Patterns of Prosodic Prominence in Russian Yes-No Questions

Roland Meyer

University of Regensburg, Germany

`rmeyer@sprachlit.uni-regensburg.de`

Russian has two fundamental ways of signalling a direct Yes-No Question (YNQ): either (i) by attaching the enclitic particle *li* to the first phonological word of a sentence (*li*-YNQs), or (ii) by imposing a specific accent and prominence pattern on what otherwise looks superficially like a declarative clause (intonational YNQs) – cf. (1)-(2-a). Truly empirical studies both on (i) and (ii) are rare, although there exists a rather elaborate normative description of prosody in traditional sources (Bryzgunova, 1977). The goal of the present paper is to draw from corpora and experimental prosodic data in order to make our picture of Russian YNQs more complete, and to argue for a specific proposal on how the different types could be analyzed.

Both type (i) and type (ii) are interesting for theories of prosody, sentential mood and focus marking. According to current descriptions, the item in front of *li* in type (i) must be focused, unless it is the finite verb of the clause (King, 1994). Unfortunately, this analysis has never made explicit whether it identifies the focus of a YNQ on the basis of accent marking, possible answers (cf. Krifka 2001), or a combination of both. Authentic data show that constituents other than the one preceding *li* may just as well be contrasted and carry the most prominent accent in appropriate contexts (3). Notably, the item preposed in front of *li* still corresponds to the focus of an appropriate answer. Second, the actual shape of the accents involved in *li*-questions and their place in the prosodic system of Russian has not been described. Third, the situation in embedded yes-no interrogatives, where *li* is the obligatory marker of sentence type, has not been scrutinized yet – although examples with preposed foci in embedded clauses occur rarely and are usually degraded. In the present paper, these descriptive issues about *li* questions are addressed on the basis of a transcribed audio corpus of Russian radio interviews (about 40 000 sentences), complemented by acceptability judgments from interviews. On the theoretical side, it is shown how different types of focus must be distinguished to account for *li*-YNQs.

YNQs of type (ii) commonly display a specific pattern of prosodic prominence which is different from the one used in declaratives (Ladd, 1996): in an "out of the blue" utterance, the finite (main or auxiliary) verb has to be most prominent (2-a), whereas in declaratives, highest prominence would, as a rule, rest on the clause-final constituent –

(2-c). Any different accent marking in an intonational YNQ is understood as conveying a contrastive focus, according to Ladd (1996) – (2-b). This raises at least the following two problems: (a) We seem to need distinct rules for the focus-accent relation in Russian YNQs vs. declaratives, and (b) deaccenting need not necessarily convey contextual givenness (in the sense of Schwartzschild 1999) in YNQs. Put this way, Russian intonational YNQs would not only differ typologically from e.g. English ones, but also complicate the Russian system of accent/focus and accent/mood relations considerably. In order to disentangle the most relevant contextual factors, a production and perception experiment was conducted. 20 participants in the production task had to read test sentences in contexts requiring either maximal focus ("out of the blue"), or minimal or contrastive focus on different words of the sentence, either as intonational YNQs or as the respective declarative clauses. The sentences produced were compared with each other on a relative time scale, measuring absolute timing and F_0 height at each quarter syllable. The results show that the accented syllable in YNQs reaches a significantly higher F_0 value, and that this F_0 maximum occurs significantly later, than in the respective declaratives. The shape of the accent did not differ among the various focus conditions in YNQs – other than in Russian declaratives, where contrastive and information foci are for the most part accentually distinct. In the perception task, 24 participants had to identify questions vs. statements, which was unproblematic almost independently of the focus condition under which the test sentence had been uttered. The studies confirm (i) that there is a single accent indicating YNQ mood, and (ii) that accent shape does not distinguish focus types in Russian YNQs. In accordance with these findings, I propose that the interrogative sentence type marker [+Q] itself acts as a focusing particle and associates with a focused constituent which is marked by the YNQ accent (an idea discussed by Reich 2001 and references therein for German *ob 'whether'*). This means that in the case of maximal prominence on the verb, the verbal focus need not associate with a VERUM element (as it would be common in German or in Russian declaratives), and thus the typical disputational effect of VERUM focus does not arise (cf. Romero and Han 2004 for an account of VERUM in German YNQs). Apart from VERUM effects, a focus on sentential polarity in YNQs has no real semantic impact, since the alternatives evoked by focusing are part of the ordinary semantics of the question anyway.

Authentic data from our corpus agree with this picture, but add further refinements: First, there are perfectly acceptable cases of "out of the blue" YNQs in which the focus/accent relation works as in declaratives – namely when larger, non-minimal constituents are being contrasted (cf. Mehlig 1990 for a different analysis). This is expected if the whole larger constituent may associate with [+Q]. Second, when the nuclear accent falls on the finite verb, there can be secondary accents expressing focus or contrast – (4). Following the above ideas, given that [+Q] binds the verbal focus already, other foci (bound by additional operators) become possible. To summarize, in this paper I use experimental, interview and prosodic corpus data to fill descriptive gaps concerning the prominence-focus relation in Russian YNQs. Theoretically, these

data support a specific analysis of intonational YNQs which involves a focus-sensitive sentence type marker [+Q], and a dissociation of the concepts of focus-by-answerhood vs. contrastive focus in *li*-YNQs.

Examples

(1) *Kupila li Maša   knigu?*
bought LI M.-NOM book-ACC
'Did Maša buy a book?'

(2)   (a) *Maša   kuPIla knigu?*
M.-NOM bought book-ACC
'Did Maša buy a book?'

   (b) *Maša kupila KNIgu?*
'Was it a book that Maša bought?'

   (c) *Maša kupila KNIgu.*
'Maša bought a book.'   (after Ladd 1996)

(3)   *[Context: "Some pensioners now get their money from a special fund." — "Do they get enough?" — "No."]*

   A   dostatočno li polučajut ostal'NYe pensionery? — Net, tože ne
and enough   LI get-3PL   other   pensioners   no   also not
dostatočno.
enough
'And do the other pensioners get enough? — No, (they do) not (get) enough either.'   (Radio Mayak)

(4) *[Burjatskij jazyk   poxož na mongolskij] vy MOžete ponimat'*
Buryat   language similar to Mongolian you can   understand
mongòlov?
Mongolians-ACC
'[Is the Buryat language similar to Mongolian,] can you understand the Mongolians?'   (Radio Mayak, cf. fig. 1)
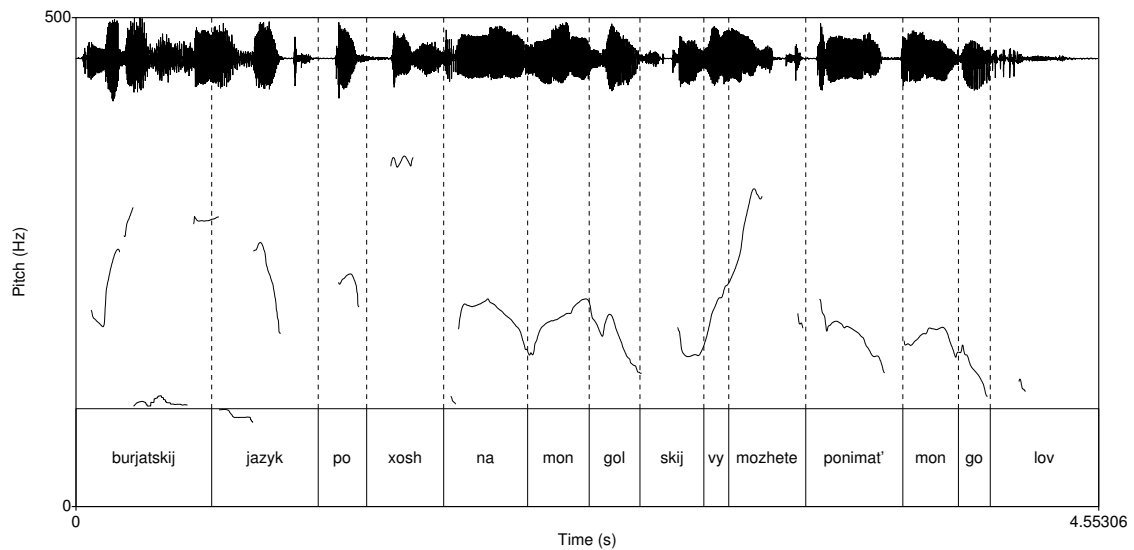
Figure 1: Primary (*MOžete*) and secondary (*mongòlov*) accents in Russian YNQs

References

Bryzgunova, E. A. (1977). Zvuki i intonacija russkoj reči. Moskva.

King, T. H. (1994). Focus in Russian Yes-No Questions. Journal of Slavic Linguistics, **2**(1):92–102.

Krifka, M. (2001). For a Structured Meaning Account of Questions and Answers. In C. Féry and W. Sternefeld, eds., Audiatur Vox Sapientiae: A Festschrift for Arnim von Stechow, studia grammatica. Akademie-Verlag, Berlin.

Ladd, R. D. (1996). Intonational Phonology, volume 79 of Cambridge Studies in Linguistics. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Mehlig, H.-R. (1990). Überlegungen zur Thema-Rhema-Gliederung. In W. Breu, ed., Slavistische Linguistik 1989. Beiträge des Konstanzer Slavistischen Arbeitstreffens, volume 260 of Slavistische Beiträge, pp. 189–236. Sagner.

Reich, I. (2001). Zur Kongruenz von Frage und Antwort im Deutschen. Ph.D. thesis, University of Tübingen, Tübingen.

Romero, M. and C. Han (2004). On Negative Yes/No Questions. Linguistics and Philosophy, **27**:609–658.

Schwartzschild, R. (1999). Givenness, AvoidF and Other Constraints on the Placement of Accent. Natural Language Semantics, **7**:141–177.