

Intonation and polarity sensitive indefinites in Russian polar questions

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ZU BERLIN



ZAS semantic circle talk
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Overview

1. Introduction

2. Background

3. Semantic contrast

4. Syntactic contrast

5. Conclusion and outlook

In today's presentation

- We are going to talk about negated polar questions with negative concord items in Russian.
- We have found two distinct intonation contours in these questions.
- We claim that they build two contrasts – semantic and syntactic.
- Semantically, they correspond to two negation types, outer and inner.
- The differences in their syntactic structure lead to two different ways of negative concord items licensing.

Russian polar questions (*yes/no*; PQs)

Restan (1972); King (1994); Geist & Repp (2023); Korotkova & Esipova (2024), a.m.o

particle strategy: verb fronting + *li*

- (1) a. Kupil **li** Maks v magazine xleb?
bought LI Max in shop bread
'Did Max buy bread in the shop?' LIPPQs

intonation strategy: declarative word order + Q-PEAK

- (2) a. Maks kupil_{Q} v magazine xleb_{Q}?
Max bought in shop bread
'Did Max buy bread in the shop?' INTONPPQs

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- (1) a. Kupil **li** Maks v magazine xleb?
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- b. Ne kupil **li** Maks v magazine xleb?
not bought LI Max in shop bread
'Didn't Max buy bread in the shop?' LINPQs

intonation strategy: declarative word order + Q-PEAK

- (2) a. Maks kupil_{Q} v magazine xleb_{Q}?
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'Did Max buy bread in the shop?' INTONPPQs
- b. Maks ne kupil_{Q} v magazine xleb_{Q}?
Max not bought in shop bread
'Did Max not buy bread in the shop?' INTONNPQs

NCIs in PQs: previous observations

Haspelmath (2001); Rossyaykin (2022); Letuchiy (2024), a. o.

Russian is a strict negative concord language.

- one semantic negation expressed by several items
 - negative concord items (NCIs) are based on *wh*-words
 - NCIs are only possible if licensed by the predicate negation
- (3) Nikto nikoga ničego *(ne) govoril.
who.NCI when.NCI what.NCI not said
'No one ever said anything.'

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NCIs are banned from negative LIPQs.

NCIs in PQs: previous observations

Brown & Franks (1995); Romero & Han (2004); Abels (2005); Zanon (2023), a. o.

- negation is too high to licence NCIs in LIPQs
- NCIs should block verb movement
- negation is not interpreted there, i.e., expletive or **OUTER**
- outer is opposed to **INNER**, which is semantically interpreted

(4) *Ne prišel li nikto na večerinku?
not came LI who.NCI on party
'Didn't anybody come to the party?'

LIPQs

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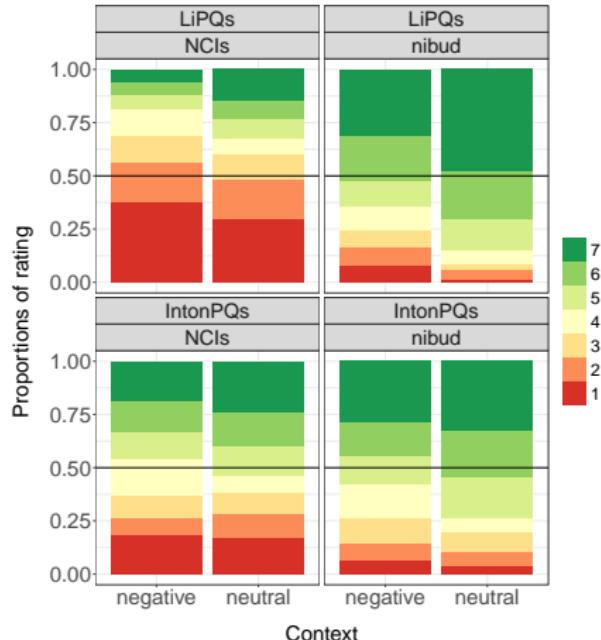
- NCIs are attested in INTONPQs

(5) Nikto ne prišel na večerinku? INTONPQs
who.NCI not came on party
'Did anyone come to the party?'

Negative PQs: experiment

- replication of Staňková (2023)
- naturalness judgment task
- online LReX, no audio
- $2 \times 2 \times 2$

STRATEGY	INDEFINITE	CONTEXT
LiPQs	NCIs	negative
INTONPQs	<i>nibud'</i>	neutral

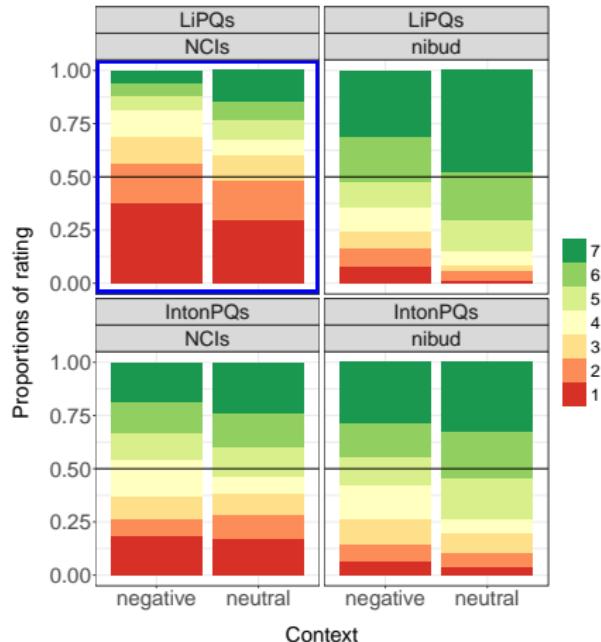


Onoeva & Šimík (2023), descriptive stat

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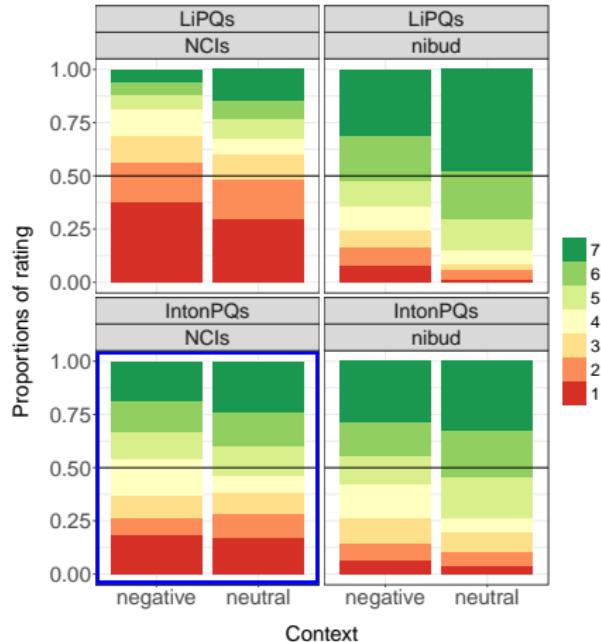


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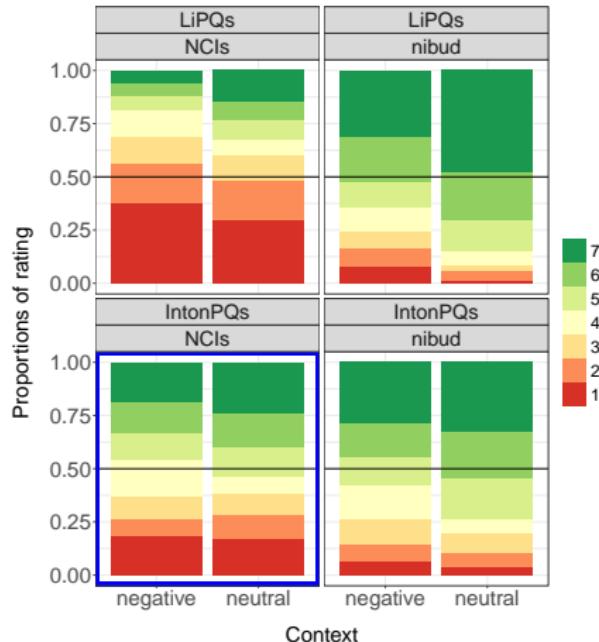


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→ Why did the participants behave this way?

Intonation strategy: Q-peak

Meyer & Mleinek (2006); Rathcke (2006); Esipova & Romero (2023); Esipova (2024)

- declarative word order and **L+H* pitch accent**
- 2 possible positions in positive PQs
- but **one locus** of prominence

(6) Ty nalil mne glintvejna? 🔊
you poured me mulled-wine
'Did you pour me mulled wine?'

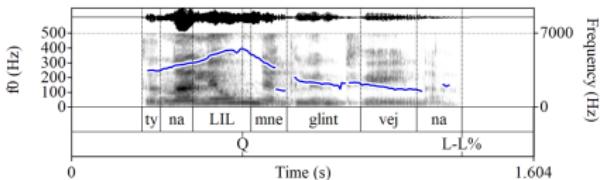
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- stressed syllable of finite verb
- neutral and unbiased
- polarity-seeking



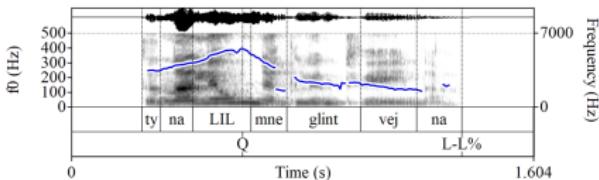
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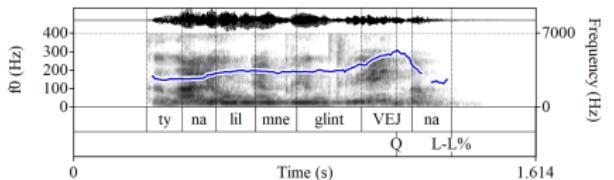
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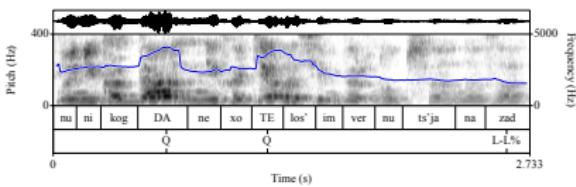
- linearly last stressed syllable
- *why*-type parent QUD
- explanation-seeking



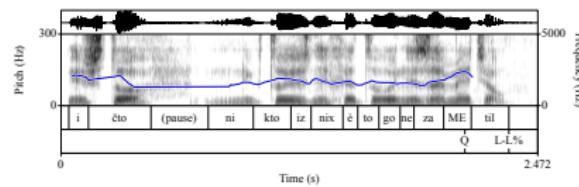
Corpus examples

Grišina (2015)

- (7) Nu nikogDA_Q ne xoTE_Qlos' im vernut'sja nazad_{L-L%}?
- well WHEN.NCI not wanted them return back
- ‘Well, have they ever wanted to go back?’



Pitch contour of (7)



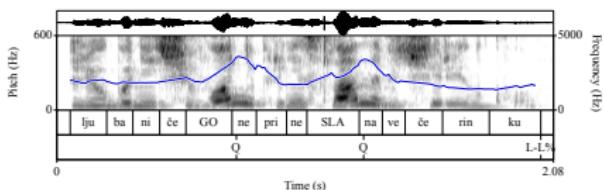
Pitch contour of (8)

- (8) I čto, nikto iz nix ètogo ne zaME_Qtil_{L-L%}?
- and what WHO.NCI from them this not noticed
- ‘So none of them noticed that?’

Our finding

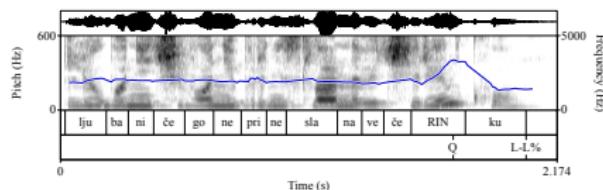
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Ljuba nci.what not brought on party
'Did Ljuba bring anything/nothing to the party?'

- two loci of prominence



2 Q-peaks pattern

- explanation-seeking pattern

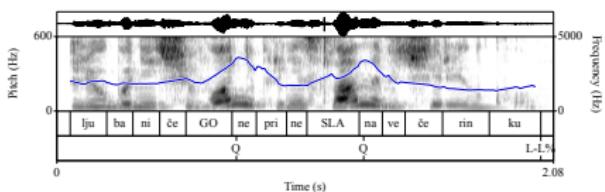


1 Q-peak pattern

Our finding

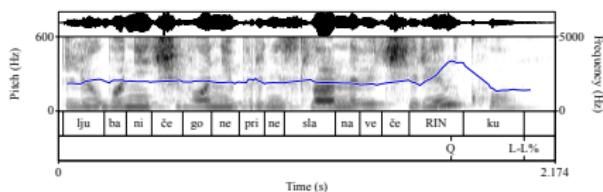
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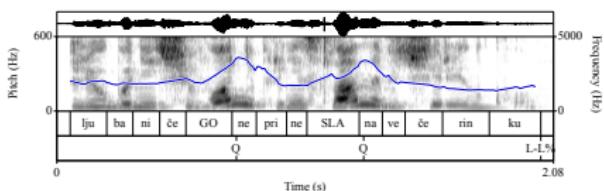
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Do these two distinct intonation patterns lead to different meanings?

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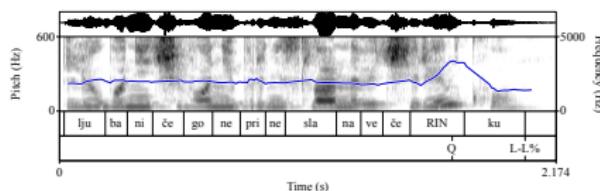
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2 Q-peaks pattern

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1 Q-peak pattern

Research question no. 1

Do these two distinct intonation patterns lead to different meanings?

- negation in INTONPQs with NCIs and 2 Q-peaks is outer
- negation in INTONPQs with NCIs and 1 Q-peak is inner

Compatibility with particles: *slučajno*

Šimík (to appear); Zanon (2023); Bill & Koev (2023)

- *slučajno* ‘accidentally’ as a modal particle
 - Eng. *by any chance*, Cz. *náhodou*
- available only in PQs with negation in this use

(10) Ljuba slučajno ničeGO_Q ne prineSLA_Q na večerinku? (2 Q-peaks)

Ljuba SLUČAJNO NCI.what not brought on party

‘Did Ljuba bring anything to the party by any chance?’

(11) *Ljuba slučajno ničego ne prinesla na večeRIN_Qku? (1 Q-peak)

Ljuba SLUČAJNO NCI.what not brought on party

‘*Did Ljuba bring nothing to the party by any chance?’

Compatibility with particles: *čto li*

Restan (1972); Bernasconi (2023); Onoeva (2024)

- a modal particle *čto li* ‘what whether’
 - Eng. *or something*, Ger. *wohl*, Hun. *talán*
- available in statements, imperatives and PQs

(12) *Ljuba čto li ničeGO_Q ne prineSLA_Q na večerinku? (2 Q-peaks)

Ljuba čTO LI nci.what not brought on party

‘Did Ljuba bring anything to the party or something?’

(13) Ljuba čto li ničego ne prinesla na večeRIN_Qku? (1 Q-peak)

Ljuba čTO LI nci.what not brought on party

‘Did Ljuba bring nothing to the party or something?’

Contexts and evidence

Romero & Han (2004); Sudo (2013); Gärtner & Gyuris (2017); Goodhue & Wagner (2018)

- (14) Addressee had a birthday party last week.

- (15) Ljuba ničego ne prinesla na večerinku? (2 Q-peaks/1 Q-peak)
Ljuba nci.what not brought on party
'Did Ljuba bring anything/nothing to the party?'
 $p = \text{Ljuba brought something to the party.}$

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- a. no evidence: Speaker merely wants to know whether their friend Ljuba brought something or not.
2 Q-peaks ✓ 1 Q-peak ✗
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 - evidence for p : Addressee told Speaker that all her friends brought presents.
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Answers to INTONNPQs with NCIs

Krifka (2013); Goodhue & Wagner (2018); Geist & Repp (2023), a.o.

- (16) Ljuba ničego ne prinesla na večerinku?

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'Did Ljuba bring anything/nothing to the party?'

- a. Da , ona prinesla tort .

2 Q-peaks ✓ 1 Q-peak ?/X

'Yes, she brought a cake.'

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'No, she brought a cake.'
- c. Da , one ničego ne prinesla . 2 Q-peaks ✗ 1 Q-peak ✓
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- interchangeability of *yes* and *no* only for 1 Q-peak PQs
- 2 Q-peaks answer pattern is the same as for positive PQs

Interim summary

- Two intonation patterns correspond to two distinct negation meanings.
- Negation in NPQs with 2 Q-peaks is not interpreted, so it is outer.
 - compatible with *slučajno*, incompatible with *čto li*
 - do not need salient evidence for $\neg p$ in context
 - do not allow the interchange between *yes* and *no*
- Negation in NPQs with 1 Q-peak is interpreted, so it is inner.
 - incompatible with *slučajno*, compatible with *čto li*
 - felicitous only in context with salient evidence for $\neg p$
 - allow the interchange between *yes* and *no*

Outer negation meaning

- inner negation is interpreted → no special treatment necessary
- but what is the meaning of outer negation?

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 - native speaker intuition: outer negation PQs are less intruding
- expression of epistemic possibility at a non-at-issue level

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Šimík (to appear, 2024)

(17) English high negation
 $\llbracket \text{En high neg} \rrbracket^c = \lambda p \lambda w [p(w)] \bullet \forall w' [\text{MB}(w', w) \rightarrow p(w')]$

(18) Czech high negation
 $\llbracket \text{Cz high neg} \rrbracket^c = \lambda p \lambda w [p(w)] \bullet \exists w' [\text{MB}(w', w) \wedge p(w')]$

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Research question no. 2

How can outer negation in NPQs with 2 Q-peaks licence NCIs?

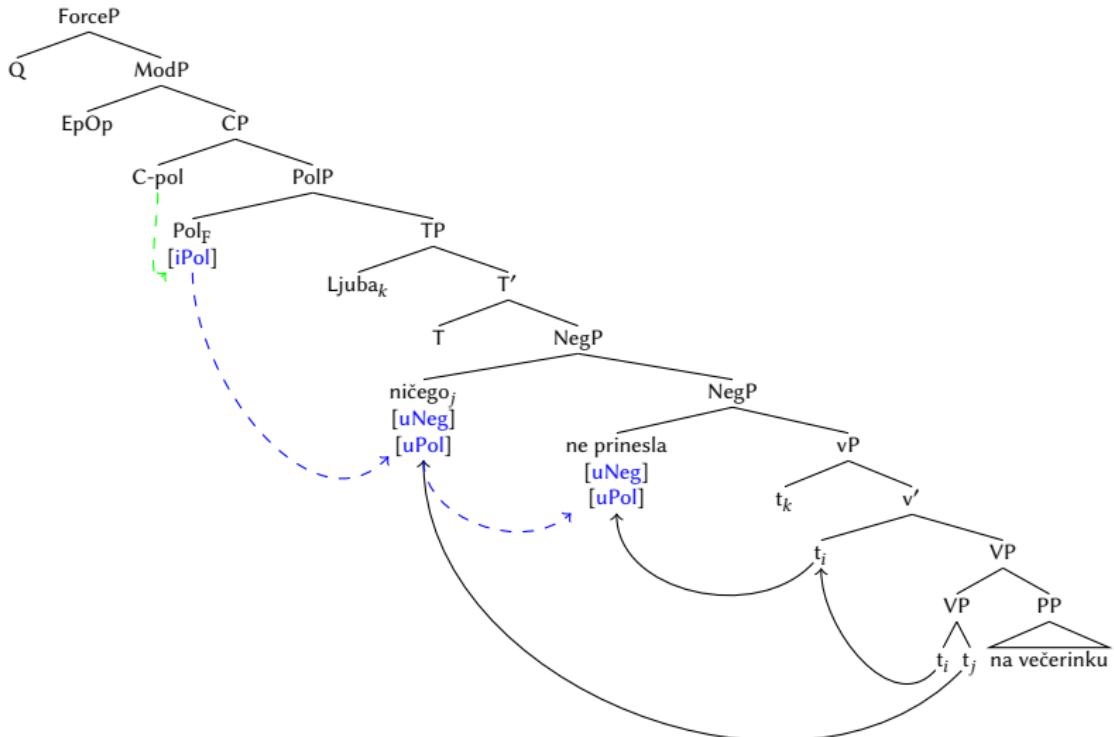
Our proposal

- Intonation is crucial: In outer negation PQs, the NCI receives a Q-peak as well as the verb.
- In polarity seeking PQs, we assume a functional projection Pol above TP that is different from semantic negation operator.
- Beck (2006): In wh-questions, wh-words introduce alternatives that must be bound by a question operator that can “ignore the ordinary semantic value of its sister, and elevate its focus semantic value to the ordinary semantics”.
- Meyer & Mleinek (2006): ”the sentence-type feature [Q] acts similarly as a focus particle in Russian YNQs, obligatorily binding a focused constituent in its scope”.
- Pol, that is F-marked, agrees with elements that bear an uninterpretable polarity feature: the verb and the NCIs. This is marked by intonation.

Outer negation with NCI

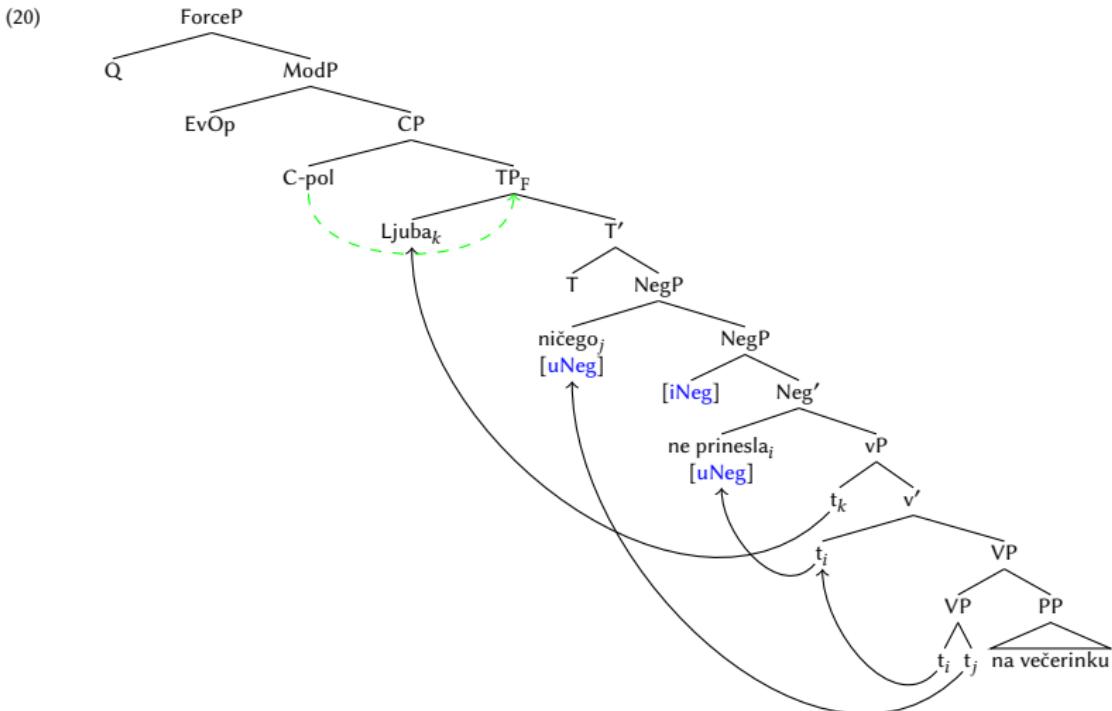
Zeijlstra (2004); Beck (2006); Meyer & Mleinek (2006); Richards (2010); Bailyn (2011); Letuchiy (2025)

(19)



Inner negation with NCI

Zeijlstra (2004); Beck (2006); Meyer & Mleinek (2006); Bailyn (2011); Letuchiy (2025)



Outer vs. inner negation INTONPQs

Outer negation PQ (polarity seeking)	Inner negation PQ (explanation seeking)
no [iNeg] in SpecNegP, negation is not interpreted	there is [iNeg] in SpecNegP, negation is interpreted
there is PolP, Pol is F-marked → polarity-seeking	no PolP, TP is F-marked → explanation seeking
Agree relation between C_pol and Pol	Agree relation between C_pol and TP
NCIs are licensed as a part of Pol-NCI-V agreement chain	NCIs are licensed by [iNeg] in Spec-NegP
Pitch accents indicate the long-distance Agree relation between Pol, NCI, and V	Pitch accent is placed according to default prominence (Büring 2016), same locus of prominence as in assertions with sentence focus

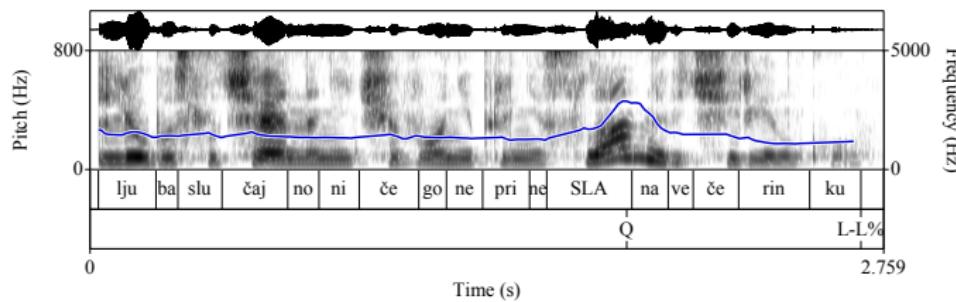
Predictions

1. Non-accented NCIs are not licensed in PQs with outer negation
2. PQs with outer negation and multiple NCIs have multiple Q-peaks
3. Affirmative polarity-seeking PQs also have a Q-peak on the verb
4. *Nibud'*-indefinites are licensed differently, so they receive no Q-peak

1. Pitch accent on NCI is obligatory

INTONPQs with outer negation are degraded without pitch accent on the NCI → born out

- (21) *Ljuba slučajno ničego ne prineSLA_Q na večerinku_{L-L%}? 🔊
- Ljuba SLUČAJNO WHAT.NIBUD' not brought on party
- *Did Ljuba bring anything to the party by any chance?

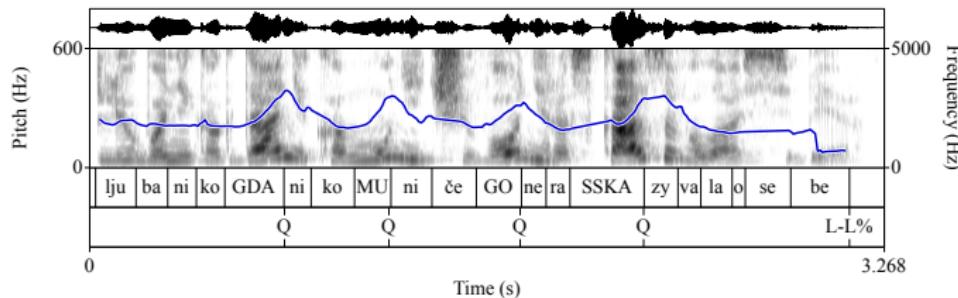


Pitch contour of (21)

2. Multiple NCIs

Multiple NCIs in outer negation PQs lead to multiple Q-peaks
→ born out

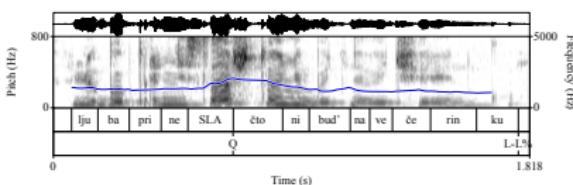
- (22) Ljuba nikogDA_Q nikoMU_Q ničeGO_Q ne rassKA_Qzyvala o
Ljuba nci.when nci.whom nci.what not told about
sebe_{L-L%}? 
herself
'Did Ljuba ever tell anyone anything about herself?'



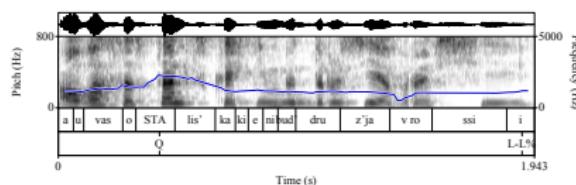
3. Affirmative polarity-seeking PQs

Q-peak on the inflected verb → born out

- (23) Ljuba prineSLA_Q čto-nibud' na večerinku_{L-L%}? 🔈
Ljuba brought WHAT.NIBUD' on party
'Did Ljuba bring anything to the party?'



Pitch contour of (23)



Pitch contour of (24)

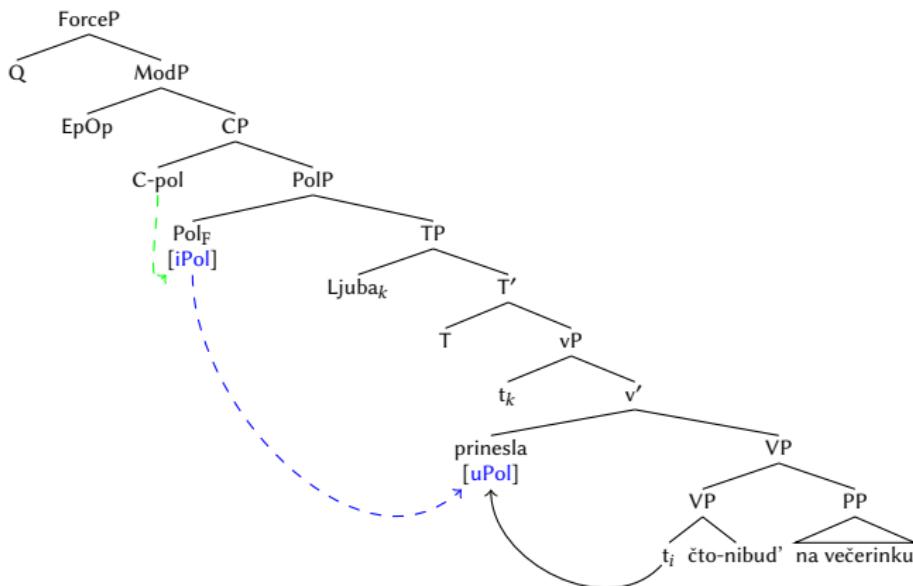
- (24) a u vas oSTA_Q lis' kakie-nibud' druz'ja v Rossii_{L-L%}? 🔈
A at you left WHICH.NIBUD' friends in Russia
'Do you still have any friends in Russia?'

Grišina (2015)

Positive PQ

Beck (2006); Meyer & Mleinek (2006); Richards (2010); Bailyn (2011)

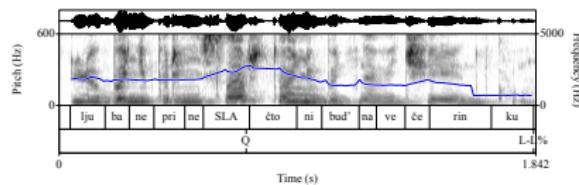
(25)



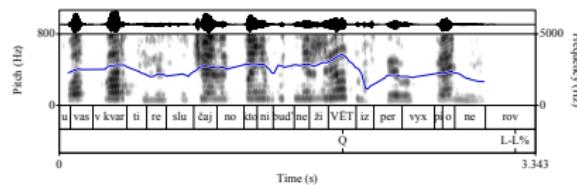
4. *Nibud'-indefinites*

No Q-peak on *nibud'*-indefinites in negative PQs → born out

- (26) Ljuba ne prineSLA_Q čto-nibud' na večerinku_{L-L%}? 🔍
Ljuba brought WHAT.NIBUD' on party
'Did Ljuba bring anything to the party?'



Pitch contour of (26)

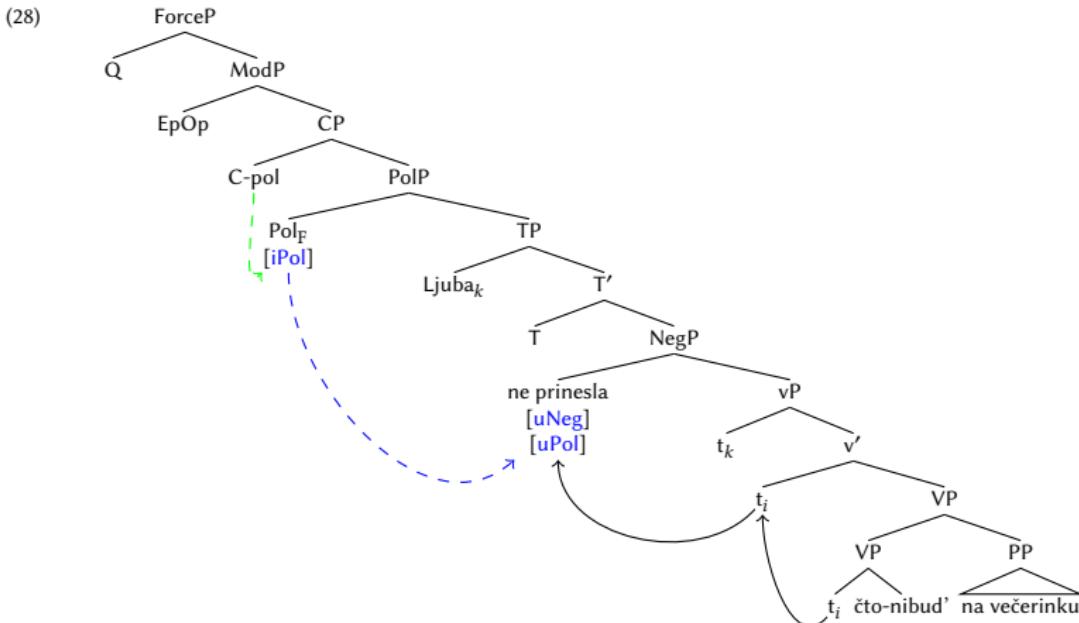


Pitch contour of (27)

- (27) A u vas v kvartire slučajno kto-nibud' ne žiVĚT_Q iz pervyx
A at you in flat SLUČAJNO WHO.NIBUD' not lives from first
pionerov_{L-L%}? 🔍
pioneers
'Does anybody from the first pioneers live in your flat, by any chance?' Grišina (2015)

Outer negation with *nibud'*-indefinite

Zeijlstra (2004); Beck (2006); Meyer & Mleinek (2006); Richards (2010); Bailyn (2011); Letuchiy (2025)



Puzzle: outer negation PQs with a single accent on NCI

- (29) Ljuba ničeGO_Q ne prinesla na večerinku_{L-L%}?
Ljuba nci.what not brought on party
'Did Ljuba bring anything to the party?'

- Only possible when NCI precedes the verb:

- (30) *Ljuba ne prinesla na večerinku nikaKOJ_Q podarok_{L-L%}?
Ljuba not brought on party nci.which present
'Did Ljuba bring any gift to the party?'

- Another case where a polarity seeking PQ has one locus of prominence that is not the verb and not the narrow focus:

- (31) VSE_Q studenty rabotajut nad projektom_{L-L%}?
All students work on project
'Are all students working on the project?'

Conclusion

- We investigated the underexplored phenomenon of negative INTONPQs with indefinites in Russian.
- Two distinct intonation patterns with different distributions indicate two different interpretations and structures.
- The pattern with 1 Q-peak (usually sentence-final) corresponds to inner negation. The pattern with 2 Q-peaks (on the verb and the NCI) indicates outer negation.
- In outer negation INTONPQs, NCIs can be licensed as a part of a Pol-NCI-V agreement chain, if they are stressed.
- An attempt to model the relation between polarity and focus through a C-pol operator.
- A step towards a unified approach to PQs with different information structure and intonation patterns in Russian.

Outlook

- What would be the semantic derivation of negative INTONPQs and the denotation of C-pol?
- Can the analysis be extended to LI PQs? What about embedded LI PQs?
- How and why is Russian different from languages (e.g., Czech and Polish) that do not accent the verb even in PQs with SVO word order?
- What other intonation patterns can be found in Russian PQs? What is the distribution of other indefinites in them?

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