

# **Intonation and polarity sensitive indefinites in Russian polar questions**

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UNIVERSITÄT  
ZU BERLIN



Polar Question Form[s] Across Languages 2  
24 April 2025, Amsterdam

# **Overview**

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**1. Introduction**

**2. Background**

**3. Semantic contrast**

**4. Syntactic contrast**

**5. Conclusion and outlook**

# In today's presentation

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- We are going to talk about negated intonation 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)

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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<sub>{Q}</sub> v magazine xleb<sub>{Q}</sub>?  
Max bought in shop bread  
'Did Max buy bread in the shop?' INTONPPQs

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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<sub>{Q}</sub> v magazine xleb<sub>{Q}</sub>?  
Max bought in shop bread  
'Did Max buy bread in the shop?' INTONPPQs
- b. Maks ne kupil<sub>{Q}</sub> v magazine xleb<sub>{Q}</sub>?  
Max not bought in shop bread  
'Did Max not buy bread in the shop?' INTONNPQs

# NCIs in PQs: previous observations

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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) **Ni-kto ni-koga ni-čego \*(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.

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- 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?	LIPQs
	not came L1 who.NCI on party	
	‘Didn’t anybody come to the party?’	

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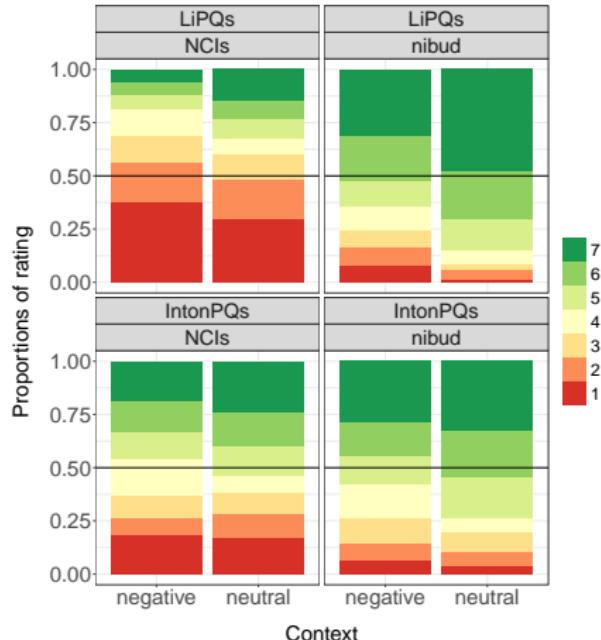
NCIs are attested in INTONPQs.

(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

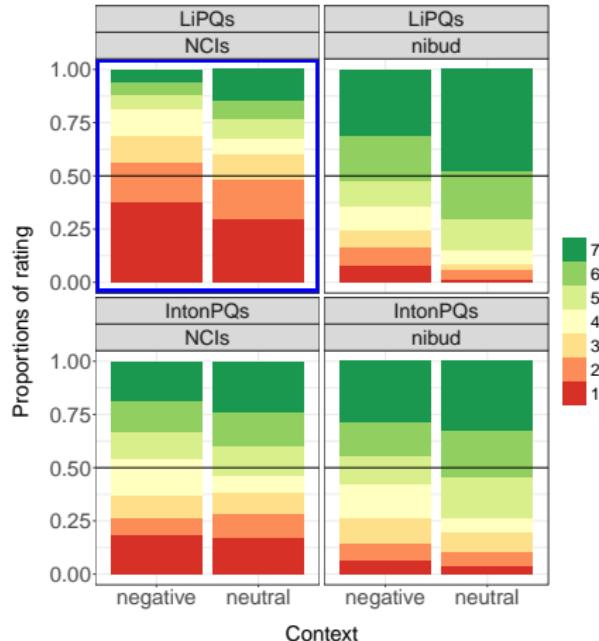


Onoeva & Šimík (2023), descriptive stat

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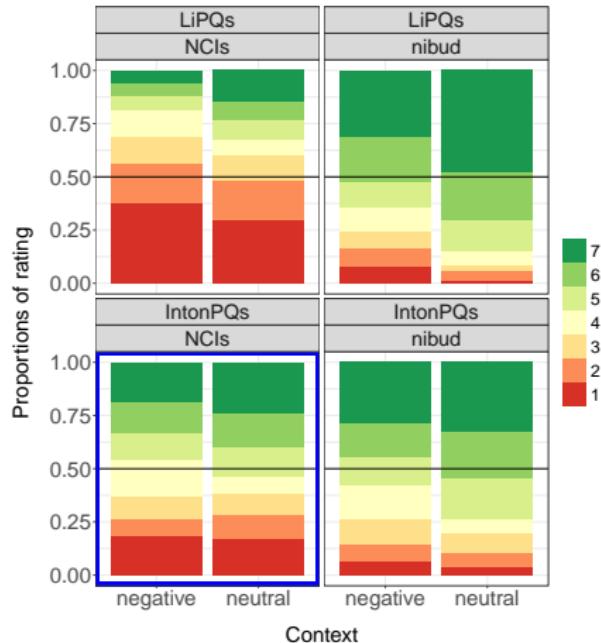


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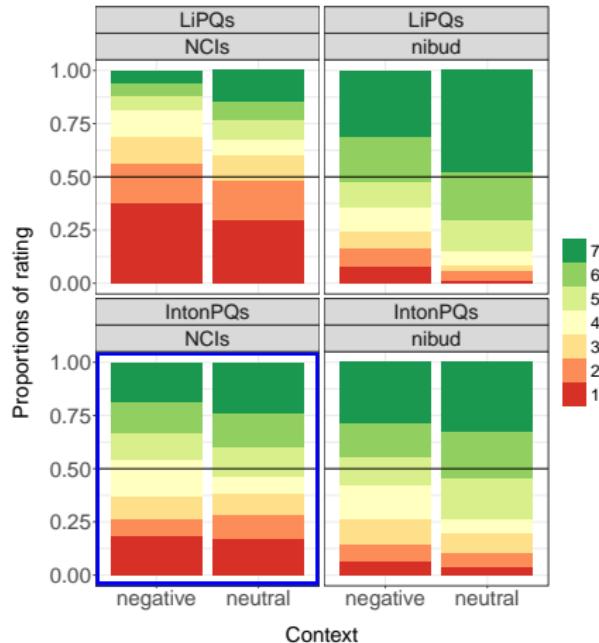


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→ Why did the participants behave this way?

# Intonation strategy: Q-peak

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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?'

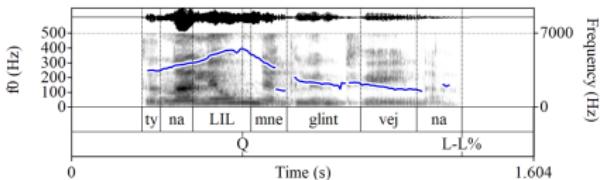
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- stressed syllable of finite verb
- neutral and unbiased
- polarity-seeking



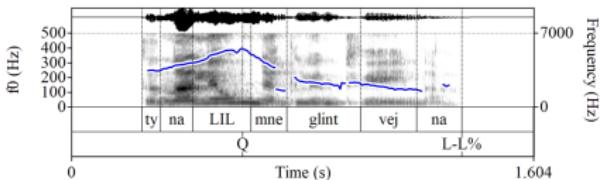
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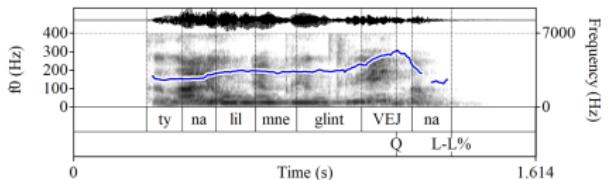
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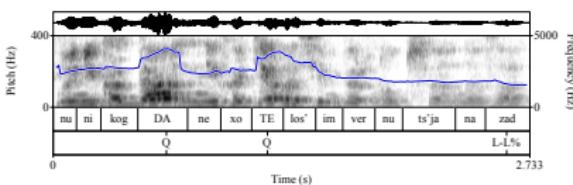
- linearly last stressed syllable
- *why*-type parent QUD
- explanation-seeking



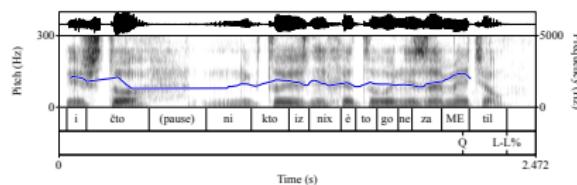
# Q-peak in negated PQs: corpus

Grišina (2015)

- (7) Nu nikogDA<sub>Q</sub> ne xoTE<sub>Q</sub>los' im vernut'sja nazad<sub>L-L%</sub>? 🔊  
well WHEN.NCI not wanted them return back  
'Well, have they ever wanted to go back?'



Pitch contour of (7)



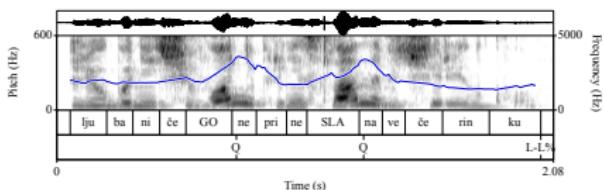
Pitch contour of (8)

- (8) I čto, nikto iz nix ètogo ne zaME<sub>Q</sub>til<sub>L-L%</sub>? 🔊  
and what WHO.NCI from them this not noticed  
'So none of them noticed that?'

# Our finding

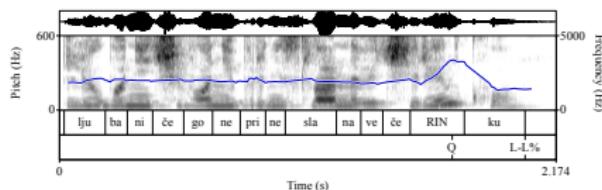
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Ljuba nci.what not brought on party  
'Did Ljuba bring anything/nothing to the party?'

- two loci of prominence



2 Q-peaks pattern

- explanation-seeking pattern

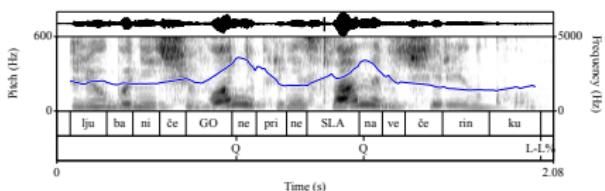


1 Q-peak pattern

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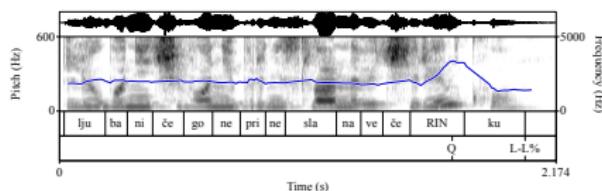
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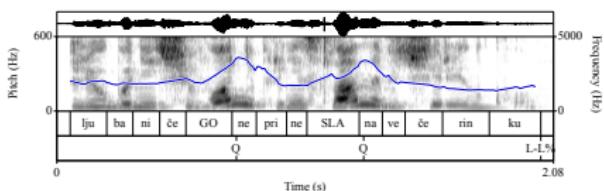
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Do these two distinct intonation patterns lead to different meanings?

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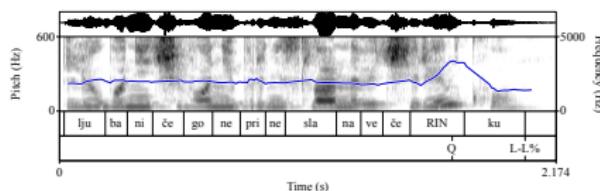
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1 Q-peak pattern

## 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*

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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<sub>Q</sub> ne prineSLA<sub>Q</sub> 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<sub>Q</sub>ku? (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*

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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<sub>Q</sub> ne prineSLA<sub>Q</sub> 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<sub>Q</sub>ku? (1 Q-peak)

Ljuba čTO LI nci.what not brought on party

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

# Contexts and evidence

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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)  
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'Did Ljuba bring anything/nothing to the party?'  
 $p = \text{Ljuba brought something to the party.}$

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2 Q-peaks ✗      1 Q-peak ✓

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# Answers to INTONNPQs with NCIs

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

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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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- c. Da , one ničego ne prinesla . 2 Q-peaks ✗ 1 Q-peak ✓  
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'No, she didn't bring anything.'

- 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

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- 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

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- 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  
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## Research question no. 2

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

# Our proposal

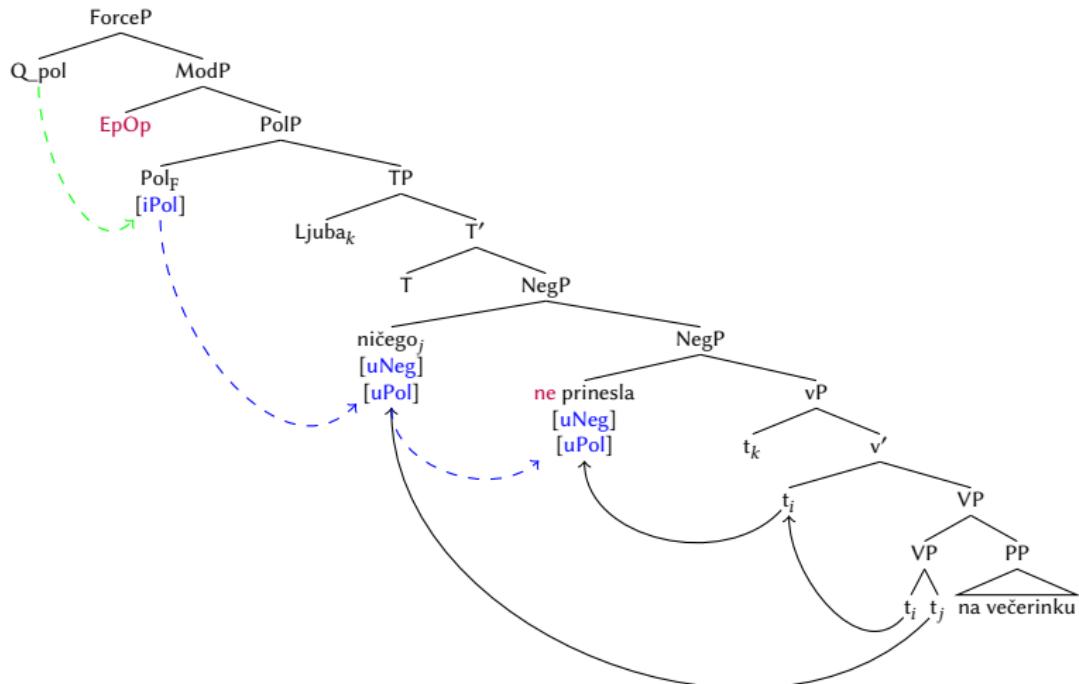
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- Intonation is crucial: In outer negation PQs, the NCI receives a Q-peak as well as the verb.
- In polarity seeking PQs, we assume a functional projection Pol above TP that is different from semantic negation operator.
- Beck (2006): In wh-questions, 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

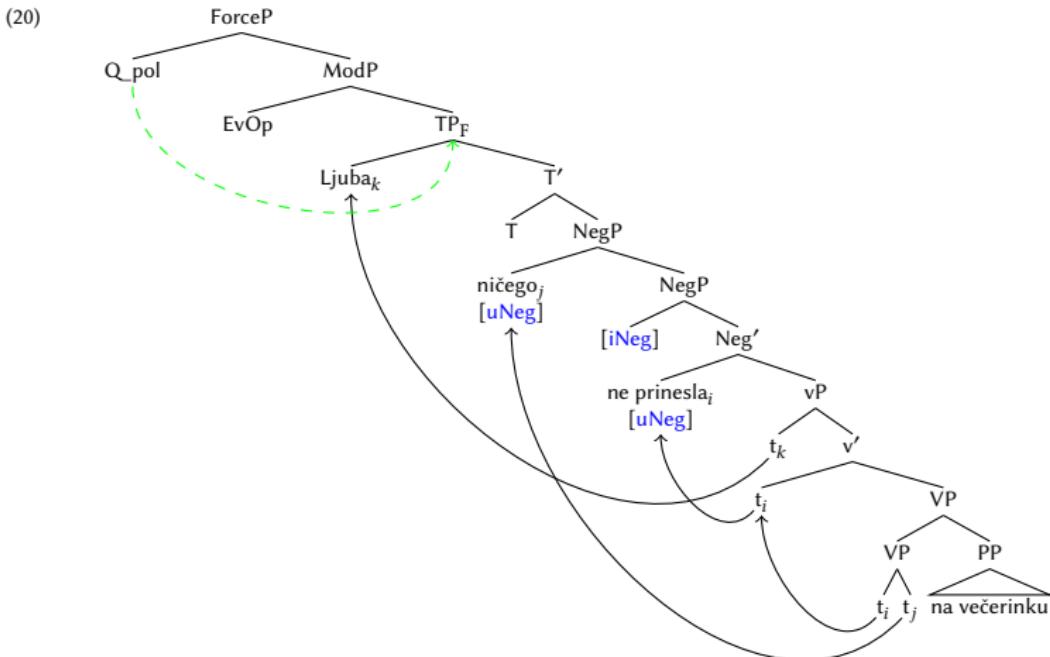
Zeijlstra (2004); Beck (2006); Meyer & Mleinek (2006); Richards (2010); Bailyn (2011); Letuchiy (2025)

(19)



# Inner negation with NCI

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



# Outer vs. inner negation INTONPQs

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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 Q_pol and Pol	Agree relation between Q_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

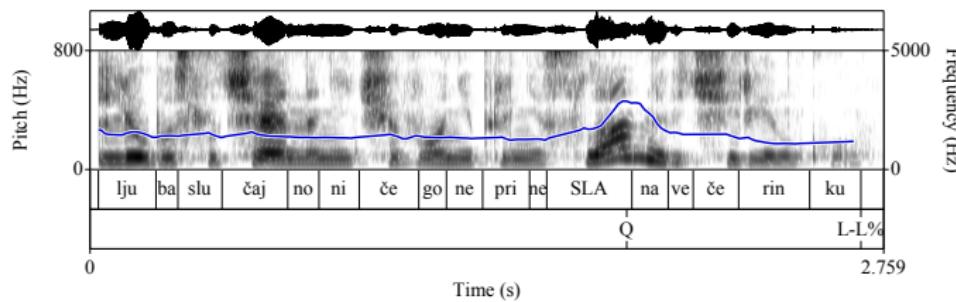
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1. Non-accented NCIs are not licensed in PQs with outer negation
2. PQs with outer negation and multiple NCIs have multiple Q-peaks
3. Affirmative polarity-seeking PQs also have a Q-peak on the verb
4. *Nibud'*-indefinites are licensed differently, 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

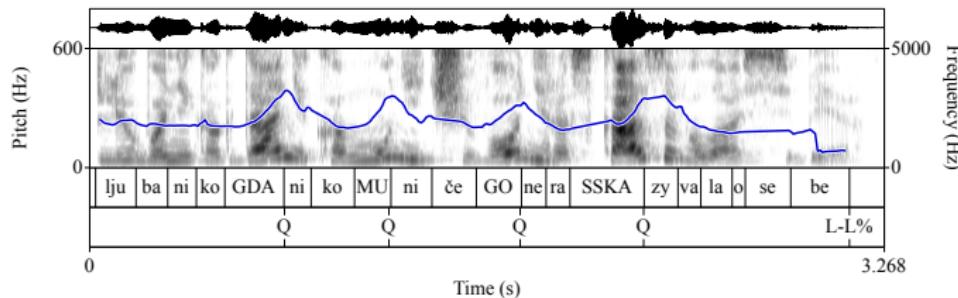
- (21) \*Ljuba slučajno ničego ne prineSLA<sub>Q</sub> na večerinku<sub>L-L%</sub>? 🔊
- Ljuba SLUČAJNO WHAT.NIBUD' not brought on party
- \*Did Ljuba bring anything to the party by any chance?



## 2. Multiple NCIs

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

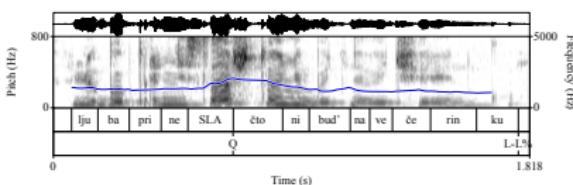
- (22) Ljuba nikogDA<sub>Q</sub> nikoMU<sub>Q</sub> ničeGO<sub>Q</sub> ne rassKA<sub>Q</sub>zyvala o  
Ljuba nci.when nci.whom nci.what not told about  
sebe<sub>L-L%</sub>?   
herself  
'Did Ljuba ever tell anyone anything about herself?'



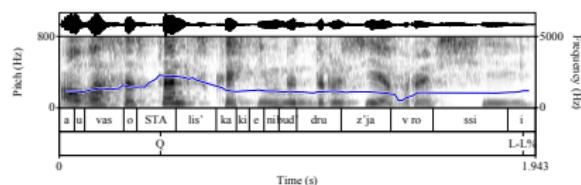
### 3. Affirmative polarity-seeking PQs

Q-peak on the inflected verb → born out

- (23) Ljuba prineSLA<sub>Q</sub> čto-nibud' na večerinku<sub>L-L%</sub>? 🔈  
Ljuba brought WHAT.NIBUD' on party  
'Did Ljuba bring anything to the party?'



Pitch contour of (23)



Pitch contour of (24)

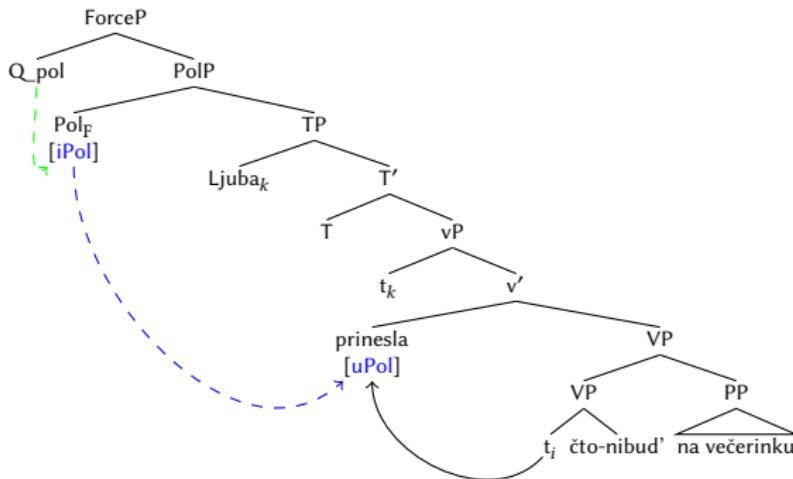
- (24) a u vas oSTA<sub>Q</sub> lis' kakie-nibud' druz'ja v Rossii<sub>L-L%</sub>? 🔈  
A at you left WHICH.NIBUD' friends in Russia  
'Do you still have any friends in Russia?'

Grišina (2015)

# Positive PQ

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

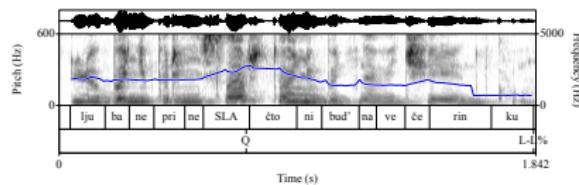
(25)



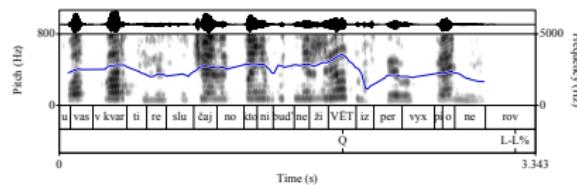
## 4. *Nibud'-indefinites*

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

- (26) Ljuba ne prineSLA<sub>Q</sub> čto-nibud' na večerinku<sub>L-L%</sub>? 🔍  
Ljuba brought WHAT.NIBUD' on party  
'Did Ljuba bring anything to the party?'



Pitch contour of (26)

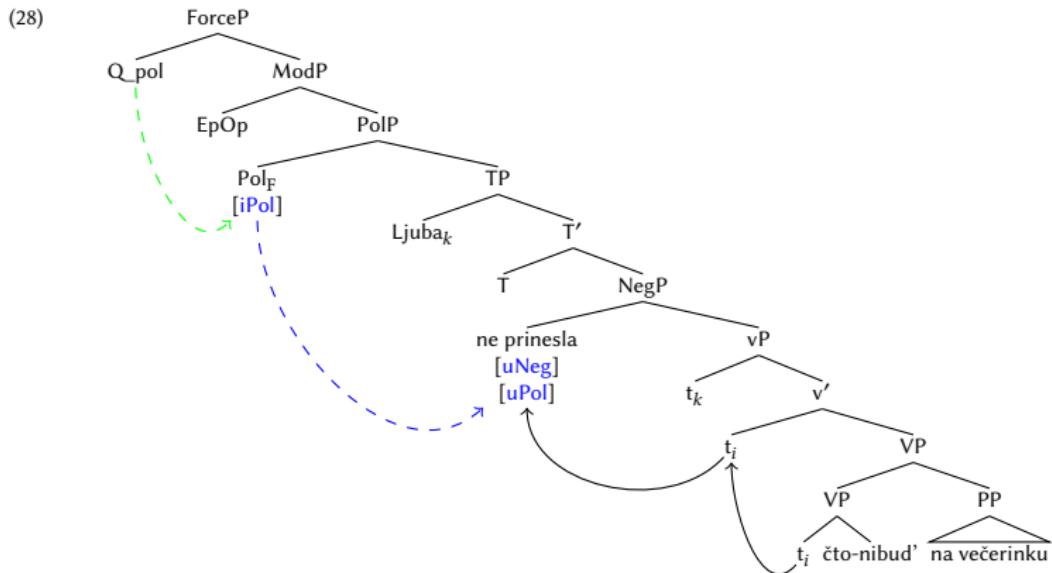


Pitch contour of (27)

- (27) A u vas v kvartire slučajno kto-nibud' ne žiVĚT<sub>Q</sub> iz pervyx  
A at you in flat SLUČAJNO WHO.NIBUD' not lives from first  
pionerov<sub>L-L%</sub>? 🔍  
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

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- (29) Ljuba ničeGO<sub>Q</sub> ne prinesla na večerinku<sub>L-L%</sub>?  
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<sub>Q</sub> podarok<sub>L-L%</sub>?  
Ljuba not brought on party      NCI.which present  
'Did Ljuba bring any gift to the party?'

# Conclusion

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- 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 Q\_pol operator.
- A step towards a unified approach to PQs with different information structure and intonation patterns in Russian.

# Outlook

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- What would be the semantic derivation of negative INTONPQs and the denotation of Q\_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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