



(overseen in the Hague)

# To *li* or not to *li*

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Polar Question Meaning(s) Across Languages  
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## Agenda for today

- ▶ Empirical scope: ‘neutral’ polar questions in Russian
  - ① Li-questions (Li-Qs): formed by particle *li* + fronting
  - ② Declarative string questions (Decl-Qs): formed by intonation, Q-peak
- ▶ Overarching issues:
  - ▶ How do those strategies differ?
  - ▶ Where do those differences stem from?
  - ▶ How does it fit into the polar question typology?

# Some background I

- ▶ Research on Slavic questions
  - ▶ *wh*-questions: studied up and down
  - ▶ polar questions: comparatively less explored (though things are changing! see Šimík 2023 for an overview)
- ▶ Research on questions
  - ▶ much interest in ‘special’, non-canonical questions (stay tuned for Eckardt, Walkden, and Dehé in prep.)
  - ▶ especially: semantic & pragmatic nuances associated with non-standard polar questions (e.g., variety of biased questions; Goodhue 2022)
- ▶ This talk: two strategies for neutral polar Qs in Russian
  - ▶ Both strategies: only polar questions (not *wh*-Qs, not assertions)
  - ▶ Our focus: subtle distinctions between them

# Some background II

- ▶ Caveat
  - ▶ ‘Neutrality’ of a question: tricky to define (Farkas and Roelofsen 2017; Farkas 2022 a.o.)
- ▶ Our take for today’s purposes (cf. Searle 1969 and much later work)
  - ▶ Sp wants to have an answer (ensures sincerity)
  - ▶ Sp does not know the answer (excludes quiz & rhetorical Qs)
  - ▶ Sp has no expectations/preferences wrt the answer (excludes biased Qs)
  - ▶ Sp expect Ad to be in position to provide an answer (excludes conjectural & non-intrusive Qs)
- ▶ Both our strategies count as neutral/bias-free

- ▶ Standard declaratives, syntax (Bailyn 2011):
  - ▶ SVO word order
  - ▶ Permutations possible, including driven by information structure (see also Jasinskaja 2014)

- (1) Vy           govorite           po-russki.  
 you.NOM speak.2PL.PRS Russian  
 'You (formal) speak Russian.'
- (2) Masha       prochitala       knigu.  
 Masha.NOM read.F.SG.PST book.ACC.SG  
 'Masha read a/the book.'

(3) *Neutral context: Gérard Simon is interviewing a prospective secretary Marie and asks her about her general skills.*

a. Li-Q: fronting of the focused constituent

Govorite	li	vy	po-russki?	
speak.2PL.PRS	LI	you.NOM	Russian	
'Do you (formal) speak Russian?'				(constructed)

b. Decl-Q: special prosody ( $\neq$  'rising declarative')

Vy	govorite	po-russki?	
you.NOM	speak.2PL.PRS	Russian	
'Do you (formal) speak Russian?'			(context and (3b) are from the 1981 film <i>Teheran 43</i> )

## Two strategies II

- ▶ Known differences between Li-Qs and Decl-Qs (cf. Comrie 1984; Schwabe 2004; Shvedova et al. 1980)
  - ▶ Li-Qs: often described as more formal
  - ▶ Decl-Qs: root phenomenon
- ▶ Today: novel empirical contrasts targeting conversational dynamics
- ▶ Upshot
  - ▶ Focus: conceptual picture & empirical landscape, not formal analysis
  - ▶ Li-Qs: true neutral Q, a simple alternative operator
  - ▶ Decl-Qs: Q-peak intonation signals “please react” (typological parallel: Cantonese particle *aa* that requests a response in questions and declaratives, Law, Li, and Bhadra forth.)
- ▶ Not discussed: questions with negation (pace Onoeva and Šimík 2023; Repp and Geist forth, we suspect that negation in Russian does not contribute bias on its own, see extensive discussion in Zanon 2023)



- ▶ *Li*:
  - ▶ 2-position clitic (see Franks and King 2000:349-357 among many others)
  - ▶ placement much studied through the lens of syntax-phonology interface
- ▶ Two types of uses
  - ① Polar questions: *li*-clauses unmistakably interrogative
  - ② And some other suspiciously related environments (important in determining *li*'s syntactic status and overall semantics)
- ▶ Other Slavic languages: not always the same picture

- ▶ *Li*'s host: focus of the question or part of the focused constituent (a bit reminiscent of Turkish *mi*, Kamali and Krifka 2020)
- ▶ Focused constituent:
  - ▶ obligatory preposed
  - ▶ ordinary focus marking ( $\approx L+H^*/L^*+H$ )
- ▶ Linearization: *li* after the first phonological word ( $\neq$  1st constituent, Rudnitskaya 2000; we don't explore it here)

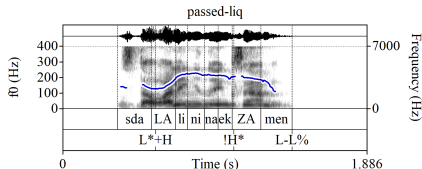
- (4)
- a. Poedesh **li** ty domoi?  
 go.2SG.PRES **LI** you.NOM home  
 'Are you going home?'
- b. Dmoi **li** ty poedesh?  
 home **LI** you.NOM go.2SG.PRES  
 'Is it home you are going to?'

- Overall prosody (cf. Yanko 2019): no final rise (standard for Russian Qs)

- (5) *Li-Q* with focus on the main predicate (no non-trivial higher QUD signalled; Esipova and Romero 2023)

*Nina was supposed to take an exam and I am interested in the outcome, though I don't have any indication as to how it went.*

SdaLA<sub>L\*+H</sub>      li      Nina  
 pass.F.SG.PST    LI      Nina.NOM  
 ekZA<sub>IH\*</sub>men<sub>L-L%</sub>?    🔊  
 exam.ACC  
 'Did Nina pass the exam?'



- NB** This is the same type of prominence we see with focus across the board, see appendix for data (focus prominence  $\neq$  Q-peak, difference in shape; Meyer and Mleinek 2006)

- ▶ A tempting view: *li* as an interrogative complementizer (Franks and King 2000; Schwabe 2004)
- ▶ Syntactic evidence for low attachment: linearization, sluicing, extraction (Rudnitskaya 2000; Shushurin 2023; see also Izvorski et al. 1997 on Bulgarian)

# *Li* outside of questions I

- ▶ Furthermore: *li*'s synchronic uses outside of questions
  - ▶ non-standard disjunctions
  - ▶ epistemic modal adverbials
- ▶ We could postulate accidental homophony, but don't want to

# Li outside of questions II

- ▶ Extreme ignorance disjunctions, often with a flavor of uncertainty (more so than the standard ignorance effects)
  - ▶ *Y li, X li*
  - ▶ *to li X, to li Y*; based off the alternating disjunction *to X, to Y* (*to* itself: non-trivial syntax & semantics; Kasenov and Paramonova 2023)

(6) *to li X, to li Y*

I	slova	ego	to	li	izumili,	to	li	uzhasnuli
and	word.NOM.PL	his	TO	LI	surprise.PL.PST	TO	LI	frighten.PL.PST
sanitarov.								
nurse.PL.ACC								

'And his words either surprised or frightened the nurses (I don't know which one)'.  
(Russian National Corpus)

- ▶ Ignorance doesn't disappear in standard environments

# Li outside of questions III

- ▶ Epistemic modal adverbials (when used as sentential modifiers; some have other uses as minimizers)
  - ▶ *chut' li* 'hardly'; based off a degree modifier
  - ▶ *edva li* 'unlikely'; based off *edva* 'barely'
  - ▶ *vriad li* 'unlikely'

(7) *edva li*

Edva	li	eto	reshenie	budet	oprotestovano.
barely	LI	this.N.NOM.SG	solution.NOM.SG	be.FUT.3SG	contest.PART.N.SG

'It is unlikely that this solution will be contested'. (Russian National Corpus)

# *Li* outside of questions IV

- ▶ *Li* is the diachronic source of
  - ▶ vanilla disjunction **ili** (< *i* 'and' + *li*) 'or'
  - ▶ vanilla conditional **esli** (< *est* 'be.3SG.PRES' + *li*) 'if'
  - ▶ disjunction & indefinite **libo** (< *li* + *bo* 'because')
- ▶ *Li* in Old Russian (≈ 7th-13th century; cursory search)
  - ▶ conditional antecedents
  - ▶ more freely used as a disjunction



# *Li* outside of questions V

- ▶ Such environments:
  - ▶ not random
  - ▶ deep connection between Polar Qs and disjunction (Mascarenhas 2009 and much work in InqSem)
- ▶ Q-particles across languages (e.g. Hungarian *vagy*, Japanese *ka*, Sinhala *hari*, extensively discussed by Szabolcsi 2015—or other Slavic, e.g., Polish *czy* and Ukrainian *chy*)
  - ▶ polar questions (matrix and embedded)
  - ▶ conditional antecedents
  - ▶ indefinite pronouns
  - ▶ disjunction

# *Li* outside of questions VI

- ▶ Unified compositional semantics for *li*
  - ▶ possible and desirable
  - ▶ suggests a non-complementizer analysis
- ▶ Is *li* a Sszabolcsi-style join operator?
  - ▶ synchronic behavior of *li*: more constrained
  - ▶ there is perhaps an interesting historical story to uncover: disjunctions often serve as a source for question particles (Walkden 2024; Walkden et al. forth.), but we don't know which way it went in Russian

# What *li* does: bottom line

- ▶ *Li*-Qs
  - ▶ ordinary polar Qs
  - ▶ ordinary focus marking on the fronted constituent
- ▶ *Li* elsewhere
  - ▶ Q-particle
  - ▶ precise semantics: matter for future research

- ▶ Declarative strings characterized by Q-peak
- ▶ Q-peak (new term; Esipova 2023; Esipova and Romero 2023)
  - ▶ special prosody of polar questions
  - ▶  $\neq$  vanilla focus marking in assertions (see Meyer and Mleinek 2006 for discussion and appendix for data)
  - ▶ also possible with suggestions and some other requests (possibly derivable from interrogatives)
- ▶  $\neq$  English-type rising declaratives
- ▶  $\neq$  Questions w/out *li*

## Li-Qs vs. Decl-Qs: a comparison

- ▶ Our two strategies: not derived from each other
  - ▶ *Li* ≠ interrogative complementizer
  - ▶ Decl-Qs ≠ interrogative clauses without *li*
- ▶ This opens up interesting possibilities for comparison
- ▶ Our main focus: level of conversational dynamics

	<i>Li</i> -Qs	<i>Decl</i> -Qs
True out-of-the blue Qs	✓	☹
Embedded polar Qs	✓	☹
Biased Qs (matrix)	☹	✓
Conjectural Qs	✓	☹

- ▶ Also (for Q&A): coordination with *wh*-questions

## True out of the blue Qs

- ▶ While we defined both strategies as neutral, there is a marked contrast between Li-Qs and Decl-Qs

(8) *Approaching a complete stranger on the street.*

a. ✓Znaete      **li**      vy, kak projti k biblioteke?      [Li-Q]  
       know.2PL.PRES    **LI**    you how go.INF to library.DAT  
       'Do you (formal) know how to get to the library?'

b. #Vy znaete,      kak projti k biblioteke?      [Decl-Q]  
       you know.2PL.PRES how go.INF to library.DAT  
       (negation vastly improves (8b); we leave it aside)

- ▶ Our explanation
  - ▶ Q-peak: conventionally encodes Sp's active desire for reaction
  - ▶ Questions across the board: don't have it
  - ▶ This accounts for the perceived politeness of Li-Qs (cf. Schwabe 2004)
- ▶ NB: Li-Qs ≠ non-intrusive questions that don't expect an answer (cf. Farkas 2022 on Romanian *oare*)

## Embedded polar Qs I

- ▶ Li-Qs: only strategy for embedded polar Qs (setting alternative questions aside; cf. Biezma and Rawlins 2012)
- ▶ Decl-Qs: banned in embedded Qs (embedding environment does not matter: true for rogative and responsive predicates alike; not the same as Hundi/Urdu *kyā*; Biezma et al. 2022)

(9) Masha sprashivaet / somnevaetsia / ne znaet, ...  
 masha.NOM ask.3SG.PRS / doubt.3SG.PRS / NEG know.3SG.PRS  
 'Masha asks / doubts / doesn't know ...'

- a. govorite li vy po-russki. [li-Q]  
 speak.2PL.PRS LI you.NOM Russian  
 '... whether you (formal) speak Russian.'
- b. \*vy govorite po-russki. [\*Decl-Q]  
 you.NOM speak.2PL.PRS Russian

## Embedded polar Qs II

- ▶ Well-known contrast: intonation-only Qs constitute a root phenomenon across languages (Armenian, Catalan, Georgian, Italian ...)
- ▶ Common explanations:
  - ▶ Syntactic size (Bhatt and Dayal 2020), much like the accounts of the Subject-Aux inversion in Germanic (McCloskey 2006)
  - ▶ Non-embeddability of certain tunes (Ladd 1981 and later work)
- ▶ Our explanation:
  - ▶ Decl-Qs: require certain conversational moves
  - ▶ Those moves: not available for embedded clauses (cf. also Nguyen 2023 on rising declaratives)



- ▶ **Question bias (epistemic):** Sp's pre-conception about the answer (see overviews in Domaneschi et al. 2017; Goodhue 2022; Romero 2020); ultimately a modal/attitudinal notion (cue Radek et al's talk on Czech)
- ▶ Russian: host of particles that convey various flavors of bias (see Korotkova in prep for an overview; Korotkova 2023 on *razve*)
- ▶ Li-Qs: incompatible with any of those particles

(10) Negative bias in belief-revision scenarios: Sp's prior ( $\neq$  current) belief that prejacent does not hold, contextual abductive evidence to the contrary

- a. (razve) vy (razve) ran'she (razve) byvali v Rime? [Decl-Q]  
 RAZVE you RAZVE earlier RAZVE be.2PL.PST in Rome.PREP  
 ≈'Have you been to Rome before? (I thought not.)'
- b. (#razve) byvali li vy ran'she v Rime? [Li-Q]  
 (# RAZVE) be.2PL.PST LI you earlier in Rome.PREP

- ▶ Biased Qs:
  - ▶ when information-seeking: aim at eliciting a reaction, and thus natural with Q-Peak
  - ▶ (a semantic alternative: they have a singleton constraint, which Li-Qs don't satisfy; Korotkova 2023)

- ▶ NB: *li* does not encode anti-bias (cf. Gyuris 2017 on Hungarian *-e*)
  - ▶ Conventional expressions of bias in Russian: not embeddable (Korotkova 2023: they have a singleton constraint, embedded Qs are never singletons)
  - ▶ Embedded *li*: compatible with bias scenarios (we thank Donka Farkas for this pointer)

- (11) *Paul is planning an outing for you, and wants to double-check his expectations. He asks me to get in touch with you.*

Pol sprashivaet, byvali li vy (#zhe/ved') ran'she  
 Pol.NOM ask.3SG.PRS be.2PL.PST LI you (#ZHE/VED') earlier  
 (#zhe/ved') v Rime.  
 (#ZHE/VED') in Rome.PREP  
 'Paul asks whether you've been to Rome before.'

- (12) *Paul thought you've never been to Rome but now, seeing city maps on your bookshelf, thinks he might have been mistaken and asks me to ask you.*

Pol sprashivaet, (#razve) byvali li vy ran'she v Rime.  
 Pol.NOM ask.3SG.PRS RAZVE be.2PL.PST LI you earlier in Rome.PREP  
 'Paul asks whether you've been to Rome before.'

- ▶ Conjectural Qs: self-addressed inquiries and strategies for thinking aloud (Eckardt 2020)
- ▶ Only Li-Qs are acceptable

(13) *Piglet, listening to Christopher Robin and Pooh's discussion of the Heffalump and wondering about its general nature and habits.*

- a. Idiot            li    slonopotam            na svist?            [Li-Q]  
 come.3SG.PRS    LI    heffalump.NOM.SG    at    whistle.ACC.SG  
 'Does the heffalump come when you whistle?'
- b. #Slonopotam            idiot            na svist?            [Decl-Q]  
 heffalump.NOM.SG    come.3SG.PRS    at    whistle.ACC.SG

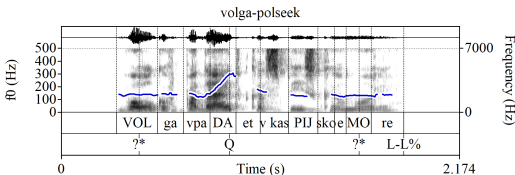
- ▶ Our explanation:
  - ▶ Decl-Qs require a move
  - ▶ Conjectural Qs decidedly don't

## Quiz questions

- ▶ Quiz questions: Sp knows the answer, but acts ignorant
- ▶ Šimík (2023): only Li-Qs are acceptable, arguing that DeclQs are inherently information-seeking
- ▶ We beg to differ
  - ▶ DeclQs: can be rhetorical, non-info-seeking (Esipova and Romero 2023)
  - ▶ Both strategies acceptable in quiz contexts, e.g. an oral exam

(14) Vpadaet li Volga v Kaspiiskoe more? [Li-Q]  
 flow.3SG.PRES LI Volga.NOM in Caspian sea.ACC.SG  
 'Does the river Volga flow into the Caspian sea?'

(15) Decl-Q  
 Volga vpadaet v  
 Volga.NOM flow.3SG.PRES in  
 Kaspiiskoe more?  
 Caspian sea.ACC.SG



	<i>Li-Qs</i>	<i>Decl-Qs</i>
True out-of-the blue Qs	✓	☹
Embedded polar Qs	✓	☹
Biased Qs (matrix)	☹	✓
Conjectural Qs	✓	☹
Quiz Qs	✓	✓

- ▶ Central claim
  - ▶ Q-peak: conventionally encodes pressure to react
- ▶ Decl-Qs
  - ▶ Convey pressure to respond
  - ▶ Much better in scenarios with a non-trivial higher QUD present (cf. English *What about?*; Bledin and Rawlins 2021)
  - ▶ ≠ Extreme ignorance Qs (such as German *bloss*-Qs; Eckardt and Yu 2020), as Russian DeclQs are compatible with epistemic bias
- ▶ *Li*-Qs
  - ▶ Simply present two alternatives (but never more than two; cf. discussion in Shushurin 2023)
  - ▶ A true neutral Q (a rare beast)

# Thank you!

And stay tuned for more.



- ▶ *Li*-Qs can be freely coordinated with *wh*-questions, but Decl-Qs sound somewhat degraded in such contexts:

- (16) a. S kem ty razgovarival, i možno li im doveriat'?
- with who.DAT you talk.PST and can.PRED LI they.DAT trust.INF
- 'Who did you talk to and can one trust them?'
- b. ?S kem ty razgovarival, i {im možno doveriat' /
- with who.DAT you talk.PST and {they.DAT can.PRED trust.INF /
- možno im doveriat'}?
- can.PRED they.DAT trust.INF}

- ▶ *Wh*-questions don't (and can't) have the Q-Peak; the fronted *wh*-item bears prominence similar to ordinary focus marking, same as *li*-Qs (see Hengeveld et al. 2023 for some discussion)

- ▶ Our take:
  - ▶ *Wh*-questions thus lack the “please react” component
  - ▶ In the absence of a competitor with a “please react” component, the pragmatic effects of this lack are typically weaker in *wh*-questions than in *li*-Qs (which compete with Decl-Qs)
  - ▶ But it’s a bit weird to coordinate two moves within the same line of inquiry, where in the first one you don’t explicitly ask for a reaction, but in the second one you do—hence the ? in (16b)

# Appendix: More focus prominence I

(17) Corrective focus on the subject

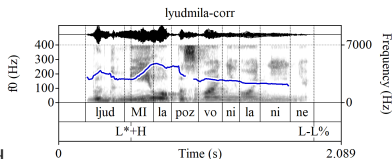
A: 'Marina called Nina.'

B: [LiudMI<sub>L\*+H</sub>la]<sub>F</sub> pozvonila  
Liudmila.NOM call.SG.F.PST

Nine<sub>L-L%</sub>! 

Nina.DAT

≈ 'It is [Lyudmila]<sub>F</sub> who called  
Nina!'



## Appendix: More focus prominence II

(18) Decl-Q with focus on the subject

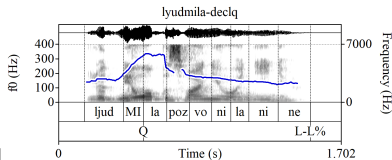
A.: 'Who called Nina?'

B.: [LiudMI<sub>Q</sub>la]<sub>F</sub> pozvonila  
Liudmila.NOM call.SG.F.PST

Nine<sub>L-L%</sub>? 

Nina.DAT

'Was it [Liudmila]<sub>F</sub> who called  
Nina?'



## Appendix: Pronoun licensing I

- ▶ Bare indefinites/quexistentials: *wh*-pronoun when fronted, indefinite otherwise (see discussion in Hengeveld et al. 2023; Tretyakova 2009; Yanovich 2005)
  - ▶ banned in bare assertions w/out modals
  - ▶ licensed in polar, but not *wh*-questions
  - ▶ not licensed in standard imperatives (unlike *nibud'*-indefinites), but seem to be ok in Q-peak requests

(19) decl-string assertion

Mne \*kto/✓kto-to zvonil.  
me someone.NOM call.SG.M.PST  
'Someone called me.'

## Appendix: Pronoun licensing II

- (20) Mne kto zvonil? [Decl-Q]  
me someone.NOM call.SG.M.PST  
'Did anyone call me?' (Tretyakova 2009:162)
- (21) Davaj sjezdim kuda. [Q-peak request]  
let go.1PL.PRS somewhere  
'Let's go somewhere.'
- (22) Pozvoni \*komu/✓komu-nibud'. [Imperative]  
call.IMP someone.DAT  
'Call someone.'

- ▶ More research needed on the exact semantics of those pronouns, but this may be tentative evidence for treating all clauses with Q-peak as interrogative

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