

Regular vs. inference-based questions: relevance for the grammar of polar questions in Slavic and in typology

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The present study considers the category of inference-based polar questions, which was not previously discussed in the literature (see Hölzl 2016). The study shows that the functional opposition of ordinary polar questions and inference-based polar questions is effective in explaining the use of interrogative particles and prosodic patterns in polar questions in Slavic languages.

Inference-based and regular questions have different conditions of relevance. Consider the following examples from Russian:

- (1) a. *Sosed kupi-lʹ mašin-u*
neighbour(M) buy-PST.M car(F)-ACC.SG
'Did the neighbour buy a car?'
- b. *Sosed kupil mašin-uʹ?*
neighbour(M) buy-PST.M car(F)-ACC.SG
'Is it that the neighbour buy a car?'

Questions in (1) differ in intonation pattern: in the regular question (1a), the pitch rises on the predicate *kupil* 'bought' and slowly decreases towards the end of the phrase. In the inference-based variety (1b), on the contrary, there is a gradual increase of pitch through the whole phrase, followed by the sharp pitch rise on the final constituent.

The choice of the appropriate construction depends on the cognitive state of the interlocutors. Thus, ordinary questions are asked when the question proposition (QP) is familiar to both interlocutors, which they are mutually aware of. In other words, the speaker has good reason to believe that her interlocutor has more information about the QP and can reliably clarify its truth values. So, (1a) is relevant if interlocutors have previously discussed the possibility of their neighbor buying a car. On the contrary, inference-based questions are only appropriate when the speaker has no guarantee that his interlocutor shares the QP with her. Inference-based are asked in response to an observed situation or received information and are intended to clarify a certain aspect of it. So, (1b) is relevant when the speaker and his interlocutor unexpectedly see their neighbor at a gas station, while they were previously sure he had no car.

The cognitive opposition of ordinary and inference-based explains the information structure design in questions. In ordinary questions the focus is always narrow, while in inference-based questions the focus scopes over the entire proposition, since there can be no topicalized constituents in inference-based questions.

The difference between the two types manifests itself grammatically in Slavic languages. Firstly, in the languages with particle *LI* and its cognates (Russian, Bulgarian, Macedonian, Czech), the use of the interrogative particle in inference-based questions is strongly inappropriate in the modern language. Conversely, in languages with *CI*-like particle (Polish, Ukrainian, Belarussian), the particle can appear in both question types. This difference shows that *LI*-particles, unlike its *CI*-counterparts, are strongly associated with the narrow focus.

Secondly, inference-based questions are structurally related to alternative questions. So, in Slavic languages with *LI*-particles the disjunction conjunctions often grammaticalize into the question particles, specialized for inference-based questions, as in (2) where the Russian disjunctive conjunction *libo* is used as a question particle:

- (2) *Ty libo s mater'ju prišël, v marazin?*
2SG or with mother(F).INS.SG come.PST.3M in shop(M)
'You have probably come with your mother to the store, haven't you?'

In the talk, I will present other evidence of the relevance of the opposition of regular and inference-based questions to the grammar of polar questions in Slavic languages. In addition to this I will also argue for the relevance of this opposition to the typology of polar questions.

References:

Hölzl, Andrew. 2016. Towards a new typology of questions. In Holl D., Hanna P., Sonnenhauser B., Trautmann C. (eds.) *Bavarian Working Papers in Linguistics 5. Variation und Typologie*. 17-28. München: Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München.