

## Prejacent truth in rhetorical questions: lessons from Russian

**Intro** Answers to rhetorical questions (RheQs) are assumed to be obvious (Caponigro & Sprouse 2007, a.o.). But RheQs with a propositional prejacent (polar questions, PolQs, and ‘or not’ alternative questions, AltQs) vary in whether the prejacent is assumed to be true or false. E.g., in (1), PolQs without ‘or not’ preferably assume the prejacent is false, while ‘or not’ AltQs necessarily assume it’s true. To explain these contrasts, we first show that there exist two relevant types of PolQs, root and explanation-seeking ones, with ‘or not’ counterparts only possible for the former, but not the latter. To do so, we adduce data from Russian, which marks the root vs. explanation-seeking distinction more clearly than English. The preferences for the prejacent truth/falsity in (1) are then explained by the divergent nature of the explanation-seeking rhetorical strategy (only available for PolQs without ‘or not’) vs. the re-asking strategy (more optimally signalled via ‘or not’).

**Root vs. explanation-seeking PolQs** Root PolQs, as in (2), only introduce  $\{p, \neg p\}$  alternatives and don’t signal any larger QUD. Explanation-seeking PolQs, as in (3), are sub-QUDs of a larger QUD seeking an explanation for some evidence. In English, both can in principle have the same prosody, but in Russian, root PolQs have an L+H\* on the main predicate and a falling boundary contour, while explanation-seeking PolQs have an L\* on the last stressed syllable and a rising boundary contour. Crucially, root PolQs can have ‘or not’ counterparts, as in (4a), but explanation-seeking PolQs can’t; instead, an appropriate alternative in explanation-seeking AltQs is ‘or what/something’, as in (4b). The same holds for English (Bolinger 1978), as shown in (4c) for *what*-marked yes/no questions (Tortora & Bishop 2021), which can only be explanation-seeking.

**Proposal: 2 rhetorical strategies** We maintain that RheQs do not raise a question with an obvious answer for no reason, they must be making an additional point in their context. But (1a) vs. (1d) differ in how they do so. **Explanation-seeking RheQs** RheQs like (1a) are explanation-seeking PolQs, with the following rhetorical strategy. 1. There is a situation *s* that the speaker finds weird/outrageous/etc. and wants to call it out as such. 2. The form of the prejacent *p* in explanation-seeking PolQs (rhetorical or not) is chosen to match the potential explanation for *s* (see also Bolinger 1978). 3. In RheQs like (1a), the speaker uses an “outrageous” (i.e., obviously false) potential explanation for *s* to alert the addressee to the outrageous nature of *s* itself. 4. If *p* was assumed to be true, there would be no additional point to be made by offering an obviously true explanation for *s*. The explanation-seeking nature of such RheQs can be easily seen in Russian, where only the explanation-seeking, but not the root contour is appropriate in such RheQs, as shown in (5a) vs. (5b).

**Re-asking RheQs** As ‘or not’ questions can’t be explanation-seeking, the strategy above is not available for them. Instead, ‘or not’ RheQs like (1d) use the following rhetorical strategy. 1. An information-seeking ‘*p* or not?’ is typically used to re-ask a PolQ ‘*p*?’, cornering the addressee into answering (Biezma 2009). 2. When asking ‘*p* or not?’ rhetorically, the speaker pretends to re-ask a PolQ ‘*p*?’, assumed to have been resolved—in principle to (i) *p* or (ii)  $\neg p$ . 3. Following Van Rooy & Šafářová 2003, the prejacent *p* of the original PolQ ‘*p*?’ must align with the speaker’s goals, e.g., their desires. Thus, the original resolution of ‘*p*?’ could in principle be: (i) *p*, in line with the speaker’s desires, or (ii)  $\neg p$ , against their desires. 4. In case of (i), an ‘or not’ RheQ signals that, in view of situation *s*, the issue ‘*p*?’, which was “happily” settled to *p*, needs to be raised again. The speaker is, thus, reminding the addressee that the answer is still *p* to make a further point with respect to *s*—e.g., to discourage the undesirable behaviour in *s* that’s in conflict with natural consequences of *p*, as in (1d). 5. In case of (ii), an ‘or not’ RheQ would then signal that, given *s*, the issue ‘*p*?’, which was “unhappily” settled to  $\neg p$ , needs to be raised again. This would be the case, e.g., if the addressee being a Republican aligns with the speaker’s goals, the original PolQ *Are you a Republican?* was *unhappily* settled to  $\neg p$ , and now the addressee is displaying Republican-like behaviour. Crucially, rhetorically reminding the addressee that  $\neg p$  is still *unhappily* true would serve no further purpose with regard to *s*: while *s* contradicts  $\neg p$ , it aligns with the desire *p*. The lack of a clear additional point, thus, leads to infelicity as a RheQ, as in (1c).

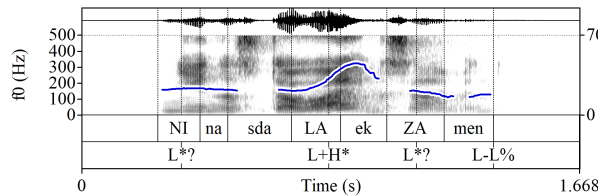
As for the marginal/variable status of (1b), PolQs without ‘or not’ can also be used to re-ask a question, but ‘or not’ AltQs are often a better way to do so unambiguously and emphatically. The contrast between marginally/variably felicitous ‘or not’-less root PolQs used as re-asking RheQs vs. infelicitous explanation-seeking RheQs with obviously true prejacent is again made clear in Russian: (5c), with the root contour, is OK in a context where the prejacent is assumed true, but (5d), with the explanation-seeking contour, is out.

- (1) *Context: The addressee is known to be a(n) adult/human/Democrat, but their behavior at the moment is inconsistent with this characterization (e.g., they make a childish request/exhibit extreme cruelty/refuse to support a progressive initiative). The speaker asks them:*
- Are you a(n) child/animal/Republican? (prejacent assumed to be false)
  - ?Are you a(n) adult/human/Democrat? (prejacent assumed to be true)
  - #Are you a(n) child/animal/Republican or not? (prejacent assumed to be false)
  - Are you a(n) adult/human/Democrat or not? (prejacent assumed to be true)

(2) **Root PolQ**

*Context: Nina was supposed to take an exam. I am interested in the outcome.*

- Did Nina pass the exam?
- Nina sdala<sub>L+H\*</sub> ekzamen<sub>L-L%</sub>? ♣  
Nina passed exam

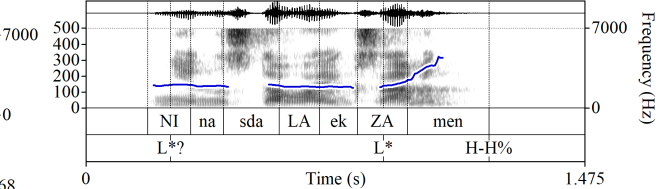


*p*: Nina passed the exam; alternatives: {*p*,  $\neg p$ }; no larger QUD signalled

(3) **Explanation-seeking PolQ**

*Context: Nina was supposed to take an exam. I just saw her cheering in the hallway and am wondering if she passed and that's why she's cheering.*

- Did Nina pass the exam?
- Nina sdala ekza<sub>L\*</sub>men<sub>H-H%</sub>? ♣



*p*: Nina passed the exam; situation *s*: Nina is cheering in the hallway; larger QUD *Q*: 'What is the explanation for *s*?'; (a/b) is both a {*p*,  $\neg p$ } question and a sub-QUD of *Q*: {*p* is the answer to *Q*,  $\neg(p$  is the answer to *Q*)}

- Nina sdala<sub>L+H\*</sub> ekzamen ili net<sub>L-L%</sub>? ♣ (root contour)  
Nina passed exam or not
- Nina sdala ekza<sub>L\*</sub>men<sub>H-H%</sub> {ili čto / \*ili net}? ♣ (explanation-seeking contour)  
Nina passed exam {or what/something / \*or not}
- What did she, pass the exam {or what / or something / \*or not}?

(5) *Context: The addressee is assumed to be sane, but is behaving in a weird manner.*

- Ty sošla s uma<sub>L\* H-H%</sub>? ♣ (explanation-seeking contour)  
you stepped-down from mind  
'Have you lost your mind?'—rhetorical explanation-seeking PolQ
- #Ty sošla<sub>L+H\*</sub> s uma<sub>L-L%</sub>? ♣ (root contour)—can only be a root PolQ (information-seeking, or rhetorical with the prejacent assumed to be true)
- Ty vmenjaemyj<sub>L+H\*</sub> človek<sub>L-L%</sub>? ♣ (root contour)  
you sane person  
'Are you a sane person?'—rhetorical re-asking root PolQ
- #Ty vmenjaemyj človek<sub>L\* H-H%</sub>? ♣ (explanation-seeking contour)—can only be an explanation-seeking PolQ (information-seeking, or rhetorical with the prejacent assumed to be false)

**References** Biezma. 2009. *SALT 19*. Bolinger. 1978. Yes/no questions are not alternative questions. Caponigro & Sprouse. 2007. *SuB 11*. Tortora & Bishop. 2021. *What*-marked Yes-No questions in New York City English. van Rooy & Šafářová. 2003. *SALT 13*.