

It's not contrast *zhe*, it's anaphoricity

Intro. Particles—and especially discourse particles—are a bane of a linguist's existence. You make your analysis of a given particle too specific, and you're inevitably cutting out some of its uses. You make it too general, trying to account for all of the uses, and your analysis is no longer informative. This paper is an exercise in trying to reconcile the general and the specific by looking at a particularly obnoxious Russian particle *zhe*. I will go over its many uses (likely not even exhausting all of those), looking for the unifying core meaning component. I will focus on two options for the latter. The first one is that *zhe* marks contrast (hf. the “contrast hypothesis”), as was proposed in McCoy 2003. McCoy specifically claimed that *zhe* marks Kontrast, i.e., grammatically evoked contrast, but I will be using the notion of contrast more informally and descriptively (also, McCoy's empirical discussion of *zhe* is very incomplete, and her analytical discussion is just a sketch, so it's unclear how it should be applied formally to all the use cases anyway). The other option, which I will ultimately find superior, is that the core meaning component of *zhe* is anaphoricity (hf. the “anaphoricity hypothesis”)—a loose label, by which I don't just mean anaphoric reference to linguistic antecedents, but, e.g., reactivation of some element from a prior discourse state. I will then propose that this core meaning component gets further conventionalized into more specific semantic contributions when *zhe* is combined with different utterance types. I will exemplify this by formulating such a contribution for *zhe* in assertions and polar questions.

The many uses of *zhe*: in search of the common core.

1. *Zhe*-marked assertions are reminders. Initiating assertions with *zhe*, like (1), assert information that should already be known to the addressee, but the context necessitates a reminder. *Zhe* in response assertions then adds the passive-aggressive ‘you should know the answer to your question already’.

(1) *It's 11pm. We have to wake up early tomorrow, but my partner suggests watching a movie.*

Nam že zavtra rano vstavat'.

we.DAT ZHE tomorrow early wake-up.INF

≈‘[I am reminding you that] we have to wake up early tomorrow.’

Under the contrast hypothesis, we could say, e.g., that *zhe* in assertions then marks the contrast between the addressee's assumed doxastic state (or the assumed common ground, etc.) vs. their current behavior. Under the anaphoricity hypothesis, we could then say, e.g., that *zhe* signals that the propositional content of its host utterance was already part of the common ground in the prior conversational state.

2. *Zhe* in wh-questions can signal that this question was assumed to have been resolved before—either to a specific positive answer, as in (2), or to a negative one—but now needs to be raised again. Alternatively, *zhe* in wh-questions can signal that this question has been raised before, but was not resolved.

(2) *Someone came in 5min ago. I was sure it was Nina, but she just texted me that she's stuck in traffic.*

Kto že togda prišel?

who ZHE then came

≈‘Who came then?’ [I thought I knew the answer, but it now seems wrong.]

(3) *Someone has been drilling in my building since morning, and I've been wondering who that is the whole day. After yet another bout of drilling, I ask, exasperated:*

Da kto že èto sverlit?!

ADVERS who ZHE this drills

≈‘Who the hell is drilling?’ [a sense of repeated inquiry]

Under the anaphoric hypothesis, *zhe* would then again evoke a prior conversational state, where the issue was raised and/or resolved. Under the contrast hypothesis, in cases like (2), *zhe* could mark the contrast between the speaker's prior doxastic state and the new evidence. But it's unclear what contrast it would be marking in cases like (3), since there is no epistemic conflict of any kind, just repeated inquiry.

3. *Zhe*-marked polar questions are double-checking confirmation-seeking questions, as in (4).

(4) *Ty že idësh' na večerinku?*

you ZHE go on party

≈‘You're going to the party, right?’

Under the anaphoricity hypothesis, we can once again say that *zhe* in polar questions evokes a prior conversational state, where the issue raised by its host utterance was resolved to *p*, and the speaker is simply seeking to confirm that nothing has changed. *Zhe*-marked polar questions do not require an epistemic

conflict of any kind; they are really just double-checking questions and would not be an appropriate way to explicitly signal, e.g., a conflict between the speaker’s prior beliefs that p and the current evidence that $\neg p$ (cf. *razve* $\neg p$? questions). So it’s not clear how the contrast hypothesis would handle this case.

4. *Zhe* in exclamations can only be used in what Esipova (2024) calls Type 1 exclamations and cannot be used in Type 2 exclamations, as illustrated in (5) vs. (6). Type 1 exclamations express affect other than surprise or counter-expectation—e.g., anger or awe—about the very high degree to which a certain property holds. In contrast, Type 2 exclamations, which differ from Type 1 exclamations prosodically, express some kind of surprise-related affect about a proposition. Importantly, in Type 1 exclamations, the existence of the very high degree is presupposed, i.e., it has to be old information—while Type 2 exclamations are used in information-acquisition contexts (by the speaker or by the addressee). The fact that *zhe* is only compatible with Type 1 exclamations is then capturable by the anaphoricity hypothesis, as we’re reactivating old information. But it’s unclear how the contrast hypothesis would capture that. If anything, it should predict that *zhe* would be more natural in Type 2 exclamations, since those express a surprise-related affect, and thus, we could once again appeal to epistemic contrast.

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| (5) Kakaja že ona umnaja!
what.ADJ ZHE she smart
‘How smart she is!’ (Type 1; expressing, e.g., awe about the presupposed high degree of her smartness) | (6) Oj, kto (*že) k nam prišël!
oh who (*ZHE) to us came
≈‘[I can’t believe/you won’t believe] who came to us!’ (Type 2; expressing surprise-related affect about who came or expecting this affect from the addressee) |
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5. *Zhe* in directives has effects that are a bit harder to pinpoint, but for lack of a better word, *zhe*-marked directives appear to be more emphatic. One specific use case (although it’s not the only one), illustrated in (6), is when the addressee was supposed to do something (perhaps they already committed to doing it), but they still haven’t. At least for this use case, under the anaphoricity hypothesis, *zhe* could be evoking a prior executive commitment (in the sense of Linhares 2025), and under the contrast hypothesis, *zhe* could be marking the contrast between the addressee’s existing executive commitment and their inaction.

- (6) Otkroj že okno užè!
open.IMP ZHE window already
≈‘Open the window already!’

6. *Zhe* in coordinated constructions can be used in ‘contrastive topic + focus’ configurations, as in (7), where it attaches to the last contrastive topic only, or in disjunctions, as in (8), also attaching to the last instance of the disjunctive coordinator only. While it is not unreasonable to claim that it could be marking the contrast between the coordinated elements, contrast alone cannot explain why *zhe* has to go on the last element only. Under the anaphoricity hypothesis, we could use the anaphoric core meaning of *zhe* as the basis for formulating the relevant constraint: *zhe* requires antecedent elements that are part of the same question structure or partition—although this requirement needs to be made stronger, as *zhe* can only be used on intermediate elements if you are adding any subsequent elements as an afterthought.

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| (7) Nina _{CT} (*že) spala _F , Lena _{CT} (že) čitala _F .
Nina (*ZHE) slept, Lena (ZHE) read
≈‘Nina slept, Lena read.’ | (8) Ili (*že) Lev, ili (*že) Olja, ili (že) Anja.
or (*ZHE) Lev or (*ZHE) Olya or (ZHE) Anya
≈‘Lev, Olya, or Anya.’ |
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Taking stock: we can see that the anaphoricity hypothesis can provide the common underlying core for all the uses above, while the contrast hypothesis struggles in some instances (3, 4, and partially 2 and 6).

Zooming in on assertions and polar questions. To illustrate how we can then build the more specific conventionalized semantic contributions of *zhe*, I zoom in on *zhe* in assertions and polar questions. Adopting a version of the Table-based model of discourse (Farkas & Bruce 2010), I propose that in assertions and polar questions, *zhe* imposes an input context condition—thus, looking back at the prior conversational state K_0 —that requires that the common ground of K_0 , cg_0 , already entails the proposition p denoted by the sentence radical. We thus capture the reminder nature of *zhe*-marked assertions and the confirmation-seeking nature of polar questions with *zhe*, respectively. I omit the details of the formal implementation of this insight here for reasons of space.

Refs. Esipova. 2024. *Proceedings of WCCFL 39*. Farkas & Bruce. 2010. *Journal of Semantics*. Linhares. 2025. *Natural Language Semantics*. McCoy. 2003. *Journal of Logic, Language and Information*.