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La voce della grammatica

Nuove prospettive sull'interazione tra fonetica e
morfologia, sintassi, lessico

The sound of grammar

New perspectives on the interplay of phonetics with
morphology, syntax, lexicon

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The patterns of prosodic transfer in polar questions produced by Italian learners of Russian

Zhanna Tsulimova, Pavel Duryagin

In languages lacking overt grammatical marking of polar questions, the acquisition of interrogative prosody by non-native speakers constitutes an essential part of their foreign language proficiency. Both Russian and Italian belong to this group of languages. In Standard Russian, the intonational marking of polar questions is one of the better studied elements of the prosodic system. The Russian yes-no question tune is characterized in literature as a sharp nuclear rise associated with the last prosodically prominent syllable, followed by an abrupt fall and a stretch of low pitch sustained until the phrasal boundary. All in all, several autosegmental metrical descriptions of Russian intonation (Duryagin, 2023, Igarashi, 2006, Rathcke, 2013) agree in interpreting this tune as a L^*+H $L\%$ (or L^*+H $L-L\%$, depending on the decision about the necessity to include phrase accents in the description of Russian intonation).

Italian polar questions have previously attracted scholars' interest, too. Unlike Russian polar questions that are often presupposed to be stable across modern urban varieties¹, Italian yes-no questions demonstrate a great extent of diatopic variability. Three largest overviews of this topic (Crocco, 2013, Gili Fivela, Avesani, Barone, Bocci, Crocco, D'Imperio, Giordano, Marotta, Savino, & Sorianello, P, 2015, Savino, 2012) report more than 10 different intonation patterns. Most importantly, according to these data, the distribution of tunes does not follow a clear geographical pattern; e.g., it cannot be described with reference to the distinction between Northern, Central and Southern varieties. For the aims of this paper, we will confine ourselves to briefly reviewing the data about the varieties spoken in Veneto. In Canepari (1980) the intonation of yes-no questions in the Venetian variety has been characterized by a falling-rising intonation pattern. However, recent studies (Savino, 2012) examining (semi-)spontaneous polar questions in Venice reveal a predominant occurrence of a rise-fall F_0 contour.

The present study focuses on the polar question prosody in L2 Russian. Descriptive literature on non-native Russian prosody contains indications of negative prosodic transfer from various L1s into L2 Russian; e.g., Bejenari, 2017) reports Russian polar questions being produced by Italian learners with lower pitch excursion and non-target additional rise at phrase boundaries. On the other hand, experimental data reported by Duryagin (2022) showed that even at early stages of acquisition Italian learners of Russian might become aware of particularly salient differences between their L1 and L2 and avoid prosodic

¹ Although see (Knyazev, 2024) about the phonetic variability attested in rural varieties.

transfer by adjusting accordingly their L2 production. The exact patterns of prosodic transfer or the lack of it thus remain an open question deserving further investigation.

To elicit L1 Italian and L2 Russian yes-no questions, a pilot experiment was held in which the subjects were invited to participate in pairs in a guessing game. Each participant was randomly assigned a card with a celebrity or an object on it. By asking yes-no questions, the players had to guess the contents of their cards. They first played the game in Italian and then in Russian. The recording sessions lasted about 20 minutes each and were held in a sound isolated booth at the university facilities. In this pilot study, only the data collected from seven subjects from the Veneto region will be reported (2F and 5M, mean age 024 y.o.). Three of them lived mostly in Treviso, two in Padua, one in Vicenza, and one in Treviso and Spinea. The participants had varied experiences in learning Russian, ranging from 2 to 10 years. Among them, three subjects studied Russian exclusively at university, three studied it both at university and school, and one subject learned it with the help of a tutor. Their L2 proficiency levels spanned from A1 to B2. A total of 209 tokens of production of yes-no questions (99 in Italian and 110 in Russian) were elicited and prosodically labeled by the authors.

In their L1, the subjects showed a moderate degree of variability. The dominant interrogative tunes attested in the data was L* LH% (or, less often, H+L* LH%). It was consistently produced by all speakers, except for the speaker from Vicenza who in 9 out of 16 tokens produced the tune with the nuclear rise that we preliminarily analyze as L*+H L%.

As for the L2 Russian production, out of the seven subjects, only one consistently transferred their L1 tune. Both in Italian and Russian versions of yes-no questions, this speaker (Treviso, B1 proficiency in Russian) produced the L* LH% tune characterized by a low plateau at the last prominent syllable of the phrase and a rise associated with the phrase-final syllable. Contrary to the claims in literature, six learners out of seven avoided transferring their L1 tunes into Russian production (three tokens out of the total 96) and consistently produced their versions of the Russian L*+H L%. The space restrictions of the present paper do not allow us to elaborate on the differences between L2 and target productions, most of them have to do with the *realizational* dimension of these dissimilarities (see Mennen, 2016): alignment and scaling differences, as well as target and deviating strategies of tune-text negotiation (mostly, boundary tone truncation and lack thereof). We will briefly illustrate one case of this kind. One beginner learner from Treviso consistently produced for the Russian polar question a non-transferred “rise-fall” tune, however, perceived as strikingly different from the target. The perceived differences were due to the later alignment of both low and high nuclear tonal targets (see Fig. 1). Further investigations are required to better understand the mechanism behind this dissimilarity; we hypothesize that it may be due to the initial reinterpretation of Russian L*+H L% as L* HL%.

In conclusion, our data shows the necessity of moving forward from the basic transfer hypotheses in L2 prosody research. As this case study demonstrates,

salient differences in prosodic marking of the same pragmatic categories in L2 and L1 can be partially acquired even by early learners in the absence of explicit instruction. Further experimental research is needed to better understand these processes and incorporate them into the existing theories of L2 phonetics acquisition, currently predominantly based on the segmental features.

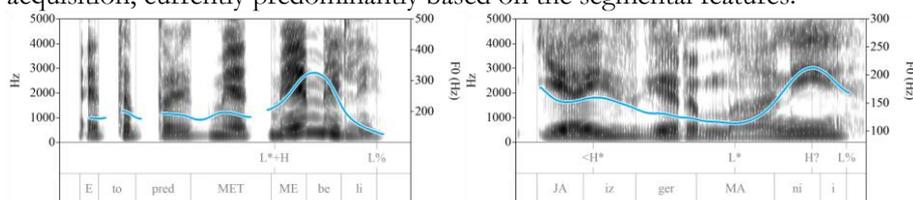


Figure 1. Spectrograms and pitch curves for two productions of Russian polar question tune: by a female native speaker (left, *transl.* ‘Am I a piece of furniture?’) and a male L2 speaker (right, *transl.* ‘Am I from Germany?’)

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