Acquisition of word order and prosody in polar questions with indefinite pronouns by Italian learners of Russian

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Since Russian possesses a rich system of indefinite pronouns [1], the instruction on the correct choice of a pronoun is considered an essential part of L2 Russian curricula. However, explicit teaching usually does not include information on prosody and word order in constructions with indefinites. Namely, no instruction is provided in learning books on the prominence placement constraints in Russian, such as deaccentuation of specific and non-specific indefinite pronouns (the series with affixes *-to* and *-nibud'*): *Я что-то УСЛЫШАЛ* or *Я УСЛЫШАЛ что-то* 'I heard something'. These constraints are by no means universal. For example, as pointed out in [2, pp. 237–238], the indefinites in Italian are normally accented: *Ho sentito QUALCOSA* 'I heard something'. Language learning theories predict that such cross-linguistic differences can lead to the transfer of L1 features. To test these predictions, an experiment was designed. We chose to focus on Russian information-seeking yes/no questions, since their prosody is relatively well-studied within the autosegmental metrical model [3]–[5]. Another reason for choosing yes/no questions is that they normally require the non-specific *-nibud'* series of pronouns. The segmental structure of this suffix facilitates the pitch measurements in post-accented syllables.

The experimental procedure consists of three parts. The first phase of the experiment is a hybrid discourse-completion and reading task. The participants are presented with a scenario and are asked to respond naturally to the situation with a phrase in Russian. In order to elicit comparable syntactic structures and avoid grammatical mistakes, we provide the speakers with correct forms. Each word is presented on a separate card, and the speaker must put the cards in a preferred order and read the phrase aloud naturally. In the second phase the participant is asked to read the same phrases in Russian, but with the unmarked Russian word order proposed by the experimenters. Finally, in the third phase the participants read the Italian translations of the same phrases.

A group of third-year undergraduate students, all of them native Italian speakers, takes part in the experiment. A total of 16 polar questions containing *-nibud'* pronouns are elicited from each speaker (8 in unrestricted and 8 in fixed word order conditions), as well as corresponding questions in Italian. In addition, 12 phrases with negative and specific indefinite pronouns (*ni-* and *-to* series respectively; in polar questions as well as declaratives) are used as fillers. The violations of word order, the choice and placement of pitch accents and their phonetic implementation are further analyzed in *Praat* [6].

The current abstract presents a work in progress. The data collection started in February 2020. The first results presented here are based on the preliminary analysis of a sample of first eight speakers recorded.

One of the major challenges we faced is the inter-speaker variability in L1 Italian polar question prosody. As [7], [8] and specifically [9] show, Italian polar question intonation is highly variable, and most importantly, the distribution of variants is not straightforwardly geographical. While some of these contours resemble the standard Russian ones, others present a completely different tonal sequence (Fig. 1). As our sample of participants potentially includes speakers that use both variants, it seems especially intriguing to compare their strategies in L2 prosody.

Generally, our data conform to the predictions of Mennen's L2 intonation learning theory [10]. We find evidence for deviation from native norm in the "systemic dimension" (placement of prominence on indefinites, transfer of native tone sequences), as well as in the "realizational dimension" (alignment and scaling of tonal targets; transfer of strategies used to resolve tune-text conflicts, namely, the use of tune compression instead of truncation, see Fig. 2). The exact distribution of these phenomena will further be studied systematically.

References

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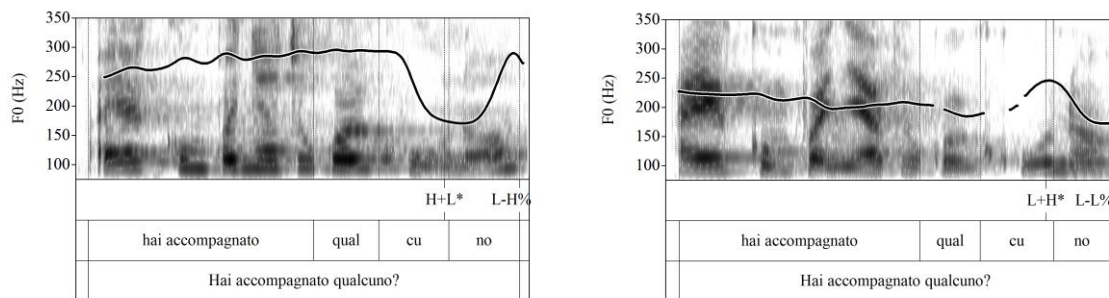
Fig. 1. Italian yes/no question *Hai accompagnato qualcuno?* 'Did you accompany anyone?' as pronounced by two native Italian speakers, participants of the experiment.
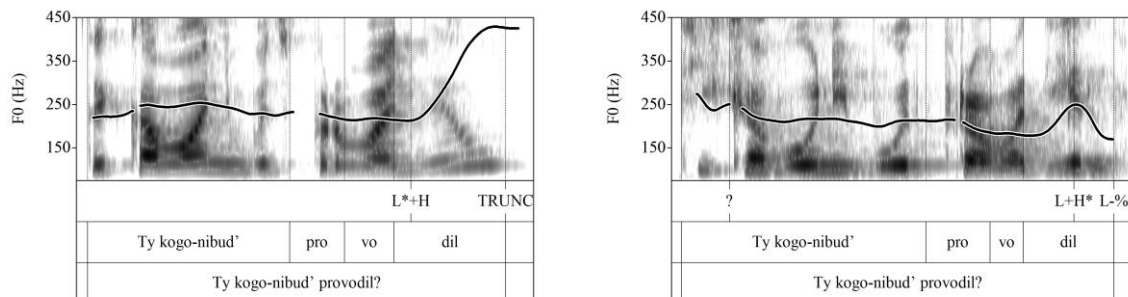

Fig. 2. Russian yes/no question *Ты кого-нибудь проводил?* 'Did you accompany anyone?' as pronounced by a control group native Russian speaker (left) and a native Italian speaker, participant of the experiment (right).