A simple *da*?: Affirming responses to polar questions in Russian conversation

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Available online 31 August 2015

Abstract

This article examines affirming answers to polar (*yes/no*) questions in Russian, that is, responses that confirm or agree with the propositional content of the question. Drawing on a corpus of telephone conversations and using the methodology of Conversation Analysis, I analyze question-answer sequences that are initiated by polar interrogatives whose focal action is to seek information or confirmation of a particular state of affairs. In Russian, a simple affirmation can be accomplished via either a response token (*da* 'yes' or *net* 'no') or a repetition of the question's focal element ("echo repeat"). The article first examines responses that simply affirm the informational content of the question. Then, I analyze three ways in which affirmative responses may resist the question: by conveying an incongruent evaluative stance, an incongruent epistemic stance, or by disattending its action implications. This article sheds light on the organization of questioning and answering in Russian conversation and advances our understanding of agreement as a social action more generally.
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1. Introduction

This paper examines affirming answers to polar (*yes/no*) questions in Russian, that is, responses that affirm or agree with the propositional content of the question. Using the methodology of Conversation Analysis (e.g., Sidnell and Stivers, 2013), I analyze question-answer sequences initiated by polar questions whose focal action is to seek information or confirmation of[1] a particular state of affairs.

Prior conversation analytic research has demonstrated that questions (and polar questions in particular) set up a number of constraints on responses, and responses either embrace or resist these constraints (e.g., Bolden, 2009; Heritage, 2003; Heritage and Raymond, 2012; Raymond, 2003, 2010a; Sacks, 1987; Sorjonen, 2001b; Stivers and Hayashi, 2010). Thus, a response to a polar question may be designed in such a way as to agree or disagree with the tilt of the question (preferred vs. dispreferred responses), conform or not to its topical and action agendas, and convey congruent or incongruent epistemic stances vis-à-vis the question (Heritage and Clayman, 2010; Heritage and Raymond, 2012; Raymond, 2003). Overall, resistant responses are typically characterized by departures from a most minimal

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[1] In CA literature, a distinction is sometimes drawn between the terms "confirm" and "affirm." A respondent may be said to "confirm" something when the information is already known to the questioner and "to affirm" something when it is not (e.g., Heritage and Raymond, 2012; Sorjonen, 2001b; Stivers, 2005). In other work, however, "confirm" and "confirmation" are used more broadly without making explicit claims about the interlocutors' states of knowledge. Here, I use "confirm" and "confirmation" in this broader vernacular sense unless otherwise specified.

form – for example, in English, the affirmative response particle *yes* (or *no* to agree with a negative assertion) (e.g., Raymond, 2003; Thompson et al., 2015).

Building on this research, this study shows that (in Russian) even simple affirming answers – such as, those conveyed through an affirmative response particle *da* 'yes' – may, in fact, be used to resist some aspect of the question or the course of action it serves to advance. The data are drawn from a corpus of recorded ordinary telephone conversations (about 60 h) between native speakers of Russian (adults, mostly living in the United States). A collection of approximately 400 instances of polar questions serves as a basis for this study. Following a brief overview of Russian polar question formats, the paper first examines responses that appear to – simply and unproblematically – agree with the informational content of the question. Then, I analyze three ways in which affirmative responses may resist the question: by conveying an incongruent *evaluative stance* toward it, by conveying an incongruent *epistemic stance*, and by disattending its *action implications*. Overall, this paper aims not only to shed light on the organization of questioning and answering in Russian conversation, but also, more generally, to advance our understanding of agreement as a social action.

2. An overview of Russian polar questions

Unlike English and some other languages (Enfield et al., 2010), Russian does not rely on morpho-syntactic resources (such as subject-auxiliary inversion or question particles) to form polar questions.[2] The most common and unmarked way of designing a polar question in Russian conversation is through intonational interrogatives. Intonational interrogatives convey a steep epistemic gradient between the speaker and the addressee, with the questioner claiming a K- (i.e., unknowing) position vis-à-vis the recipient's K+ position (Heritage and Raymond, 2012). In Russian, the questioning intonation (typically, a pitch accent in a rise-fall pattern) is carried by the word that conveys the focus of the question (Hirst and Di Cristo, 1998; Meyer, 2002; Svetozarova, 1998). Depending on the structure of the utterance, the questioning intonation may or may not be at the end of the turn constructional unit (or TCU – see Sacks et al., 1974). Most commonly, the questioning intonation is carried by the predicate. In such cases, the entire proposition is questioned, as in Excerpt 1. (For a description of the transcription conventions adopted for Russian, see the Appendix and Bolden, 2008.)

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Excerpt 1: [GM3 0:50]

1 >    DUS:   <Znachit  ty    k-ino  smatre?la  schas/
               meaning  you.SG movie  watched    now
               Did you watch the serial now?

2      RACH:  Da[:/
               yes
```

When a particular part of the proposition is questioned, then *that* word carries the questioning intonation[3]:

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Excerpt 2: [GM19 1:45]

4 >    DUS:   Paedet s      be?bi/
               go.FUT with   baby
               ((She))'ll take the baby?

5      MA:    ↑hDa:↓/
               yes
```

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Excerpt 3: [RP31 6:00]

1 >    REG:   Ata  tvaë?  detjasche/
               this your.SG  child
               ((Is)) this your brain child?3

2      DIN:   Maë:: heh
               mine
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[2] Russian has a clitic question particle –*li*. However, it is very rarely used in conversational Russian, and on rare occasions that it is used, it marks an embedded clause as a question. My corpus has no instances of –*li* marking the main clause as a question.

[3] Note that in Russian the present tense copula (such as, the English *is* or *are*) is typically omitted, as in line 1 of Excerpt 3.