

# Answering negative questions in Russian

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## Abstract

In colloquial Russian answers “yes” and “no” to negative polar questions can either stand for confirmation or contradiction of the proposition of a question. This paper contains an experimental research of correlation between the choice of “yes” or “no” response particle and the way of expressing negation and the presence of *li* particle in a question and also of comprehension of the short “yes” answer. The results showed that there are several competing strategies for answering negative polar questions and acceptability judgments of possible answers in Russian, meanwhile the correlation with the presence of *li* particle in a question was approved.

Keywords: acceptability judgment task, negation, polar questions, yes/no answers, Russian

## Introduction

Previous researches have shown that sentences which are both interrogative and negative are the most difficult to process, analyse and interpret (Savin, Perchonock 1965). Depending on the language negative polar questions (NPQ) may differ from positive polar questions (PPQ) by the response system (Evgrafova 1984), felicity conditions (Roelofsen et al. 2012) and ambiguity (Ladd 1981; Büring, Gunglson 2000; van Rooij, Šafářová 2003; Romero, Han 2004). Katz and Postal (1964) treat negative-question as a single feature, not a combination of the negative and the question.

In papers on negative polar questions in English, starting with (Ladd 1981) two types of NPQs are distinguished: with ‘inside negation’ reading or ‘outside negation’ reading. ON-NPQs have the same meaning as PPQs, the speaker wants a confirmation of positive proposition P (*You guys might be starving. You want to get something to eat? – Yeah, isn’t there a vegetarian restaurant around here?*). These questions are relevant only when there is no evidence against P. IN-NPQs are used for confirmation of negative proposition -P and are relevant when there is a contextual evidence against P (*There’s not really any place to go in Hyde Park – Oh, really, isn’t there a vegetarian restaurant around here?*). It is possible to use the same terminology with Russian NPQs<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, only the ON-NPQs are considered.

NPQs also differ by the syntactic position of negation. Roelofsen et al. (2012) distinguishes low negation polar questions (*Did Lucy not go to Greece?*) and high negation polar questions with a negative clitic attached to the inverted

auxiliary (*Didn't Lucy go to Greece?*). In Russian, *ne*-questions (with the basic negative particle *ne* only) and *ne-li*-questions (with *ne* particle in combination with *li* particle and reversed word order) are quite similar to high and low NPQs. They slightly differ in thema-rhematic relations (Shatunovskii 2005) but often are interchangeable.

Negative polar questions might use a different response system from the positive ones. Evgrafova (1984) identifies two strategies for answering NPQs: (1) situational oriented – the *yes*-answer corresponds to a positive situation, the *no*-answer corresponds to a negative one; (2) communicative oriented – *yes*-answer corresponds to confirmation, *no*-answer corresponds to contradiction (some languages use special contradictory answers such as German *doch* or French *si*). The acceptance of short answers without the predicate repetition differs from one language to another. Languages can stick with one strategy or mix the both strategies in different ways:

3. English:

- Isn't it beautiful?
- No, it isn't. / Yes, it is.

4. Italian:

- *Non hai fame?* 'Aren't you hungry?'
- *No, non ho fame.* 'No, I'm not.' / *No, ho fame.* 'No, I am.'

5. Russian (colloquial):

- *Vy ne pomnite svoju pervuyu knigu?* 'Don't you remember your first book?'
- *Net, ne pomnyu.* 'No, I don't remember.' / *Net, pomnyu.* 'No, I remember.' / *Da, ne pomnyu.* 'Yes, I don't remember.' / *Da, pomnyu.* 'Yes, I remember.'

As you can see, colloquial Russian allows to use any strategy for confirmation and negation (while the response system of standard language is closer to Italian).

## Methodology

The aim of this paper is to analyze generation, processing and acceptability judgment of answers to negative polar questions in Russian depending on the way of expressing negation in a question (*ne*- and *ne-li* questions, negative predicatives and pronouns) with an acceptability judgment experiment.

## Participants

The experiment was performed on 100 adult native Russian speakers (mean age 20.21, range 18–36).

### Materials

Experimental materials included 20 Russian ON-NPQs, each one with 3 possible answers (response particle + predicate repetition): *yes*-agreement (negative confirmation: ‘Yes, I don’t remember’), *yes*-denial and *no*-denial (positive contradiction: ‘Yes, I do remember’ or ‘No, I do remember’).

There were four types of questions: (1) NPQs with the basic negative particle, the *ne*-questions; (2) NPQs with negative predicatives (*net*, absence predicative; *nel’zja* ‘impossible’ etc.); (3) NPQs with negative pronouns or pronominal words; (4) NPQs containing the *li* particle, *ne-li*-questions.

### Procedure

Participants were asked to evaluate each answer in terms of its grammatical acceptability using a Likert scale 1–5. Also, for each question they were asked to choose the most possible meaning of a short ‘yes’ answer (confirmation or contradiction).

### Results

The results approved the hypothesis that *ne*- and *ne-li*-questions differ in their response systems. Meanwhile, the way of expressing negation in *ne*-questions doesn’t matter. Acceptability judgments correspond with the short answer comprehension: in *ne*-questions the *yes*-agreement answer has a higher score on the acceptability and the preferred meaning is agreement, while in *ne-li*-questions the situation is reversed.

Table 1. Acceptability judgment task results.

	<i>yes</i> -agreement	<i>yes</i> -denial	<i>no</i> -denial	short <i>yes</i> meaning
<i>ne</i> -questions	3.84	3.03	3.64	agreement
negative predicatives	4.21	2.23	4.12	agreement
negative pronouns	3.85	2.49	3.4	agreement
<i>ne-li</i> -questions	2.54	4.18	2.69	denial

### Discussion

According to the results, the response system for NPQs in colloquial Russian is freer than in the standard literary Russian language: situational and communicative oriented strategies are equally possible to use. It is interesting to compare response systems in colloquial and standart variants of other languages; for example, in English the situation seems very common, but it needs an experimental approval.

## Notes

1. In Russian works these two types of NPQs have different names: questions with inherent or non-inherent thema (Baranov, Kobozeva 1983), interpretive or non-interpretive questions (Stepanova 1992, Dobrushina 2014), “negative” or “positive” negative polar questions (Shatunovskii 1980). These terms are equal to IN- and ON-NPQs.

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