

RUSSIAN OBLIGATORY WH-FRONTING, PRONOUNS AND THE WH-PARAMETER

Russian belongs to the class of so-called multiple wh-fronting languages, which differ from wh-movement languages (e.g. English) in that a wh-object in the former consistently undergoes fronting, including in request-for-repetition echo-questions, as in (1).

- (1) a. (Tak) Ivan čto₁ kupil t₁? (echo-question)
so Ivan what bought
'(So) Ivan bought what?'
b. ??/* (Tak) Ivan kupil čto? [Stepanov \(1998:9\)](#)

The general belief is that Russian wh-categories obligatorily move due to their lexically specified formal feature such as [Focus] or Op ([Stepanov 1998](#), [Bošković 2002](#), [Bailyn 2012](#)). However, the data in (2) challenges these assumptions.

- (2) (Tak) Ivan kupil čto v Moskve? (echo-question)
so Ivan bought what in Moscow
'(So) Ivan bought what in Moscow?'

In (2), the wh-object occupies the same syntactic position as in (1b), i.e., the thematic object position, but (2) is well-formed on the request-for-repetition reading. Since the objects in (1) and (2) are endowed with the same features, the feature-driven approach is unable to explain why obligatory movement of Russian wh-objects in request-for-repetition echo-questions takes place iff the launching position aligns with the right edge of an intonation phrase (ι-phrase). Hence an alternative approach is needed.

This talk explores an interface-based approach that links inherent properties of wh-categories to their prosodic realisation in specific PF positions, which in turn has an effect at the IS interface. The relevant inherent property of wh-categories is that they are variables, i.e., place-holders that stand for an unspecified value. This property holds of any pronoun (interrogative or not). Plausibly, this property is responsible for (3), which is universal but violable, as languages generally have weak and strong forms of pronouns, but strong forms are IS-marked.

(3) ***Stress Rejection Constraint***

Pronouns reject post-lexical (phrasal, sentential) stress

I propose that the prosodic realisation of a pronoun and the resulting IS-interpretation are both sensitive to the nature of the PF-position it occupies within an ι-phrase – left-aligned, non-aligned or right-aligned. In some such positions, (3) is obligatorily violated, resulting in prosodic markedness which must be licensed at the IS-interface. Thus, violations of (3) by (4) must be licensed by (5), as in (1a) and (2).

(4) ***Left-Alignment Rule***

Wh-pronouns in positions not aligned with the left edge of an ι-phrase attract sentence stress

(5) ***Echoic Licence***

Obligatory stress-attraction to a wh-pronoun requires strong presupposition of existence (i.e., knowledge on behalf of both interlocutors that an answer exists)

As (4) does not apply in (6), no licence by (5) is needed.

- (6) Čto₁ kupil IVAN t₁?
'What did Ivan buy?'

I further propose that the right-aligned position is special in that it is subject to (7).

(7) ***Nuclear Stress Rule***

Strengthen post-lexical stress on the rightmost XP in the ι -phrase

The result of (7) is that stress on a wh-pronoun forced by (4) undergoes further strengthening, as in (8), which results in an emphatic surprise reading of the echo-question i.e., the value the wh-variable receives is perceived as surprising/unexpected ([Boškovič 2002](#)). In other words, it occupies the lowest scalar position with respect to potential alternatives in its set. I follow Titov 2020 in assuming that emphatic reading is akin to contrastive reading in that both trigger an activation of a discourse-salient set of alternatives. This is captured by (9).

(8) Ivan kupil ČTO?! (emphatic surprise echo-question)

(9) ***Discourse-Salient-Set Licence***

Application of the Nuclear Stress Rule to a pronoun requires activation of a discourse-salient set of alternatives

As (7) is not restricted to wh-pronouns, violations of (3) by (7) requires activation of a discourse-salient set for all types of pronouns. This is shown in (10a) for indefinite and personal pronouns (which must be interpreted either as contrastive or emphatic).

(10) a. Petr uvidel ČTO-TO/EĚ
Peter saw something/her
'Peter saw something/her.'

b. Petr čto-to/eë₁ UVIDEL t₁

(11) Petr uvidel čto-to/eë vo VTORNIK
Peter saw something/her on Tuesday
'Peter saw something/her on Tuesday.'

Just as wh-fronting in (1a) avoids application of (7) to the pronoun and the licence in (9), so does the movement of a non-interrogative pronoun in (10b). Crucially, in (2) and (11), no movement is needed to avoid (9), because (7) does not apply to the pronouns. This explains why Russian wh-objects obligatorily move in request-for-repetition echo-questions iff the launching position aligns with the right edge of an ι -phrase.

I will extend this analysis to English (a wh-movement language) and argue that the difference between Russian and English is that the latter does not have the syntactic operation that moves the pronominal object from the right-aligned to a non-aligned position (resulting in the SOV order). By hypothesis, this forces optional violation of (7) in order to avoid the licence in (9), as in (12b). When (7) is obeyed, as in (12a), the discourse-salient set is activated.

(12) a. Peter saw SOMETHING/HER
b. Peter SAW something/her

Similarly, when (7) is obeyed in (13b), the sentence is interpreted as an emphatic echo-question. When it is violated, it is a request-for-repetition echo-question.

(13) a. What₁ did John SEE t₁?
b. John saw WHAT? (echo-question)

In other aspects Russian and English are the same, i.e., both are subject to (4) and (5) (see (1a), (2), (8) and (13b)) and both escape the application of these constraints by moving the wh-object to the left-aligned position (see (6) and (13a)). I will conclude the talk with a possible extension of the proposed analysis to wh-in-situ and optional wh-fronting languages.