

Two Rhetorical Question Strategies

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1. Introduction

■ Rhetorical questions (RheQs) are questions answers to which are assumed to be obvious by the speaker (Caponigro & Sprouse 2007, a.o.)

■ Interestingly, **yes/no questions (YNQs)** —including a.o. **polar (PolQs)** and **‘or not’ alternative questions (AltQs)**— vary in whether their prejacent is (originally) assumed to be true or false when used rhetorically:

(1) *Context: The addressee is known to be an adult, but their behavior at the moment is inconsistent with this characterization (e.g., they are making a childish request). The speaker asks them:*

- | | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| a. ✓ Are you a child? | ⇒ PolQ with prejacent assumed false |
| b. ?/% Are you an adult? | ⇒ PolQ with prejacent assumed true |
| c. ✓ Are you an adult or not? | ⇒ AltQ with prejacent assumed true |
| d. # Are you a child or not? | ⇒ AltQ with prejacent assumed false |

(2) a. Are you crazy? ⇒ Standard rhetorical **PolQ** with prejacent assumed **false**
b. Are you crazy or not? ⇒ **AltQ**, rhetorical only with prejacent assumed **true**

■ Some early wrong assumptions relevant to the issue at hand:

- Prejacent of rhetorical PolQs are presumed to be false:
 - Caponigro & Sprouse 2007: “yes/no [RheQ]s require an answer of the opposite polarity”
 - Van Rooy & Šafářová 2003: “It is commonly assumed in the literature that for a rhetorical question the negative answer is presupposed to be true”.
 - But see e.g. Rohde 2006
- AltQs cannot be used as RheQs:
 - Van Rooy & Šafářová 2003: Their analysis predicts that PolQs can, but ‘or not’ AltQs cannot, be used rhetorically.
 - But see e.g. Biezma & Rawlins 2017b

■ Steps in this talk:

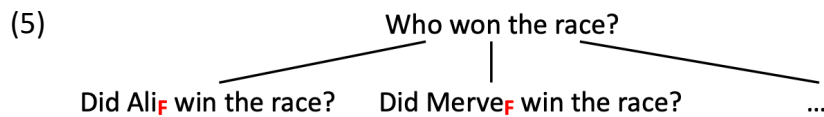
- When used as information seeking, **two QUD-types of YNQs** will be important:
 - **Polarity-seeking**: interested in the polarity and signaling no further purpose
 - **Explanation-seeking**: interested in positive answer as a way of explanation for something else (à la Bolinger 1978)
- (Small) **inventory of polarity- vs. explanation-seeking YNQ forms** in English and Russian:
- (3)
 - a. PolQs in English: ambiguous
 - b. Declarative string PolQs in Russian: prosodically disambiguated
 - c. 'What'-marked YNQs in Engl (& Ru): only explanation-seeking
 - d. 'or not' AltQs in Engl (& Ru) only polarity-seeking
- **Correlation** between QUD-based YNQ forms and presumed answer when rhetorical:
- (4) **Polarity-QUD-form** → **true** prejacent
Explanation-QUD-form → **false** prejacent
- Two **rhetorical strategies** at play in (1):
 - **Re-asking** rhetorical strategy: Using a **polarity-seeking form**, the speaker reminds the addressee that the prejacent was settled to **TRUE**, in order to elicit from the Addressee a certain behavior X.
 - **Modus Tollens** rhetorical strategy: Using an **explanation-seeking form**, the speaker suggests a preposterous/**FALSE** explanation for a preposterous situation, in order to alert the Addressee to the preposterous nature of that situation.

■ Road map:

- §2 Our basic distinction in terms of QUD
- §3 (Small) inventory of polarity- vs. explanation-seeking YNQ forms
- §4 Correlation between QUD-based form and rhetorical answer pattern
- §5 Two rhetorical strategies: Modus Tollens vs. Re-asking
- §6 Back to case (1b) in English: Some ideas
- §7 Conclusions and outlook

2. Our basic distinction in terms of QUD

- QUD structures (Roberts 2012, Büring 2003, Kamali & Krifka 2020):
Here, in terms of Focus:



- **Polarity-seeking PolQs:**

They can be used in fairly “out-of-the-blue” contexts, like in (6), or in contexts where the prejacent of the question is already salient, like in (7). Either way, they zero into a proposition p and simply signal interest on whether p or $\neg p$ is true. In particular, they signal no cause-effect relation to any other proposition q .

- (6) Polarity-seeking PolQ:

Context: Approaching a complete stranger on the street.

A: (Excuse me,) do you speak Italian? [where p = ‘you speak Italian’]

- (7) Polarity-seeking PolQ:

Context: C saw Nina this morning, but A and B didn’t.

A to B & C: Nina was supposed to take an exam this morning. If she passed, we’re partying tonight. If she didn’t pass, then I guess not.

B to C: (OK, so,) did she pass the exam? [where p = ‘she passed the exam’]

- (8) What is the truth value of ‘Nina passed’?



- **Explanation-seeking PolQs:**

These are subquestions of a larger QUD seeking an explanation for some contextual evidence q . This is illustrated in (9) and (10), where the PolQ, while still raising the issue $\{p, \neg p\}$, is understood as a strategy to answer the larger ‘Why q ?’ question.

Explanation-seeking questions are, thus, YNQs that Bolinger (1978) described as “[YNQs] that provide suggested answers to whQs”.

- (9) Explanation-seeking PolQ: [where p = ‘you speak Italian’ and q = ‘you are laughing’]

Context: Anna laughs at Italian line in a movie, suggesting that she understood it. I am wondering if she speaks Italian and that’s why she laughed.

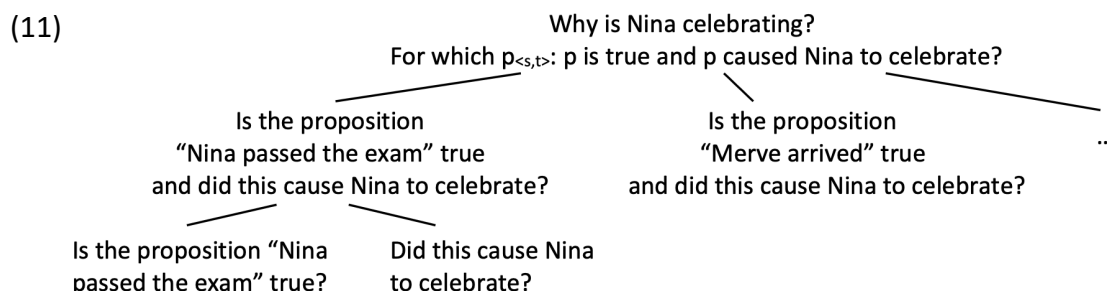
A: (Why are you laughing?) Do you speak Italian?

- (10) Explanation-seeking PolQ: [where p = ‘Nina passed the exam’ and q = ‘Nina is cheering’]

Context: Nina was supposed to take an exam. I just saw her cheering in the hallway.

I am wondering if she passed the exam and that’s why she’s cheering.

A: (Why is Nina cheering?) Did she pass the exam?



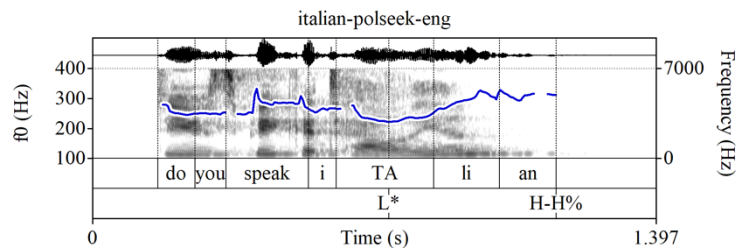
3. (Small) inventory of polarity- vs. explanation-seeking YNQ forms

3.1. Polarity- vs. explanation-seeking YNQ forms in English

- Both the polarity-seeking PolQs (6)-(7) and the explanation-seeking PolQs (9)-(10) can in principle be asked with the **same intonational contour**, most prototypically, L* H-H%.

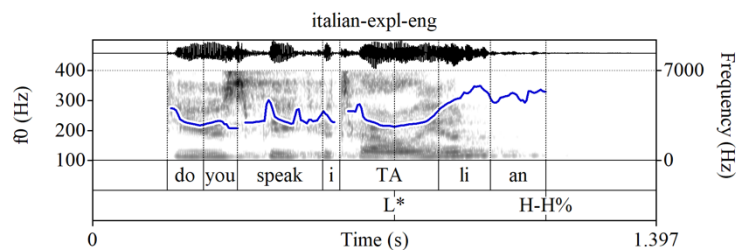
- First example: *Do you speak Italian?*

- (6') Polarity-seeking PolQ:
Context: Approaching a complete stranger on the street.
 A: (Excuse me,) do you speak Italian?



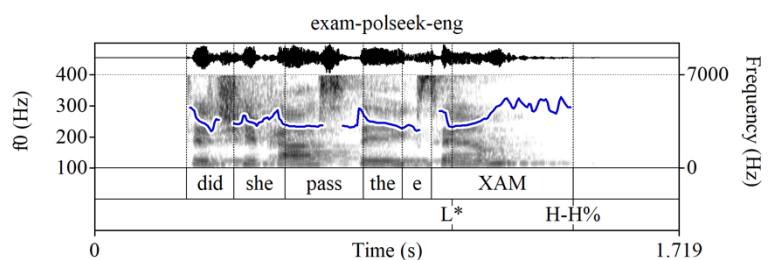
- (9') Explanation-seeking PolQ
Context: Anna laughs at an Italian line in a movie, suggesting that she understood it. I am wondering if she speaks Italian and that's why she laughed.

A: (Why are you laughing?) Do you speak Italian?



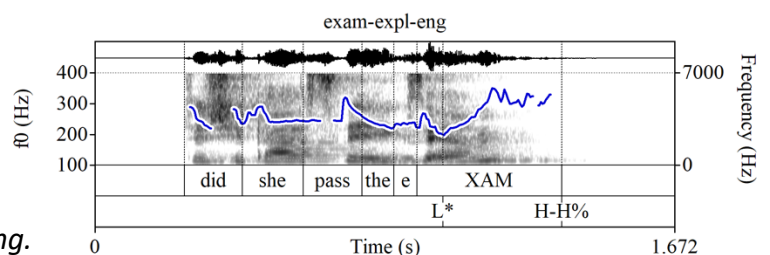
- Second example: *Did Nina pass the exam?*

- (7') Polarity-seeking PolQ:
Context: Nina was supposed to take an exam. I am interested in the outcome.
 A: Did she pass the exam?



- (10') Explanation-seeking PolQ:
Context: Nina was supposed to take an exam. I just saw her cheering in the hallway. I am wondering if she passed the exam and that's why she's cheering.

A: (Why is Nina cheering?) Did she pass the exam?

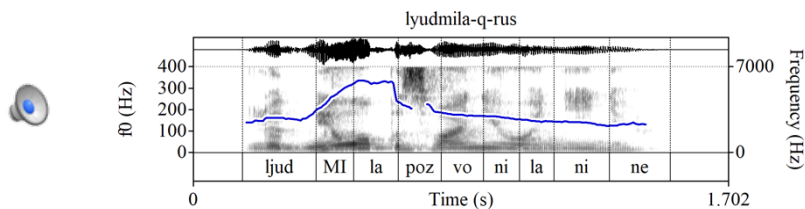


3.2. Polarity- vs. explanation-seeking YNQ forms in Russian

- Default YNQs in Russian: declarative string with a prosodic **Q-peak** on the stressed syllable of the **focused constituent** (see Meyer & Mleinek 2006).

(12) PolQ with focus on the subject:

Kto pozvonil Nine? [Ljudmila]_{FOC} pozvonila Nine?
 who.NOM call.PAST.SG.M Nina.DAT Lyudmila.NOM call.PAST.SG.F Nina.DAT?
 'Who called Nina? Did [Lyudmila]_{FOC} call Nina?'



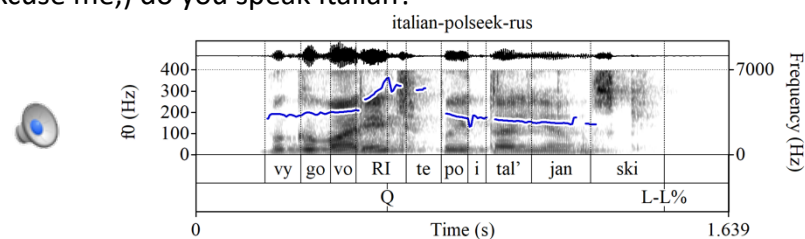
- Polarity- vs. explanation-seeking PolQs in Russian differ on the location of the Q-peak:
 - In **polarity-seeking**, Q-peak is on the locus of **polarity**, i.e., on the inflected verb or on the main predicate.
 - In **explanation-seeking**, Q-peak is on the **entire proposition**, the prosodic locus for that typically being the final lexically stressed syllable of the string.

First example: *Do you speak Italian?*

(13) Polarity-seeking PolQ:

Context: Approaching a complete stranger on the street.

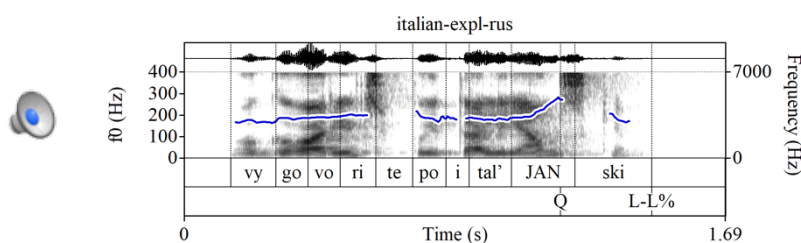
(Izvinite,) vy govori_Qte po-ital'janski_{L-L%}?
 (Excuse me,) you.PL/V.NOM speak.PRS.2PL/V by-Italian
 '(Excuse me,) do you speak Italian?'



(14) Explanation-seeking.

Context: Anna laughs at an Italian line in a movie, suggesting that she understood it. I am wondering if she speaks Italian and that's why she laughed.

(Počemu vy rassmejalis' ?) Vy govorite po-ital'jan_Qski_{L-L%}?
 (Why you.PL/V.NOM laugh.PAST.PL/V) you.PL/V.NOM speak.PRS.2PL/V by-Italian
 '(Why did you laugh?) Do you speak Italian?'



■ Second example: *Did Nina pass the exam?*

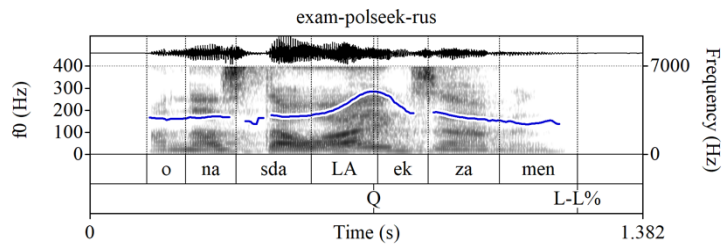
(15) Polarity-seeking PolQ:

Context: Nina was supposed to take an exam. I am interested in the outcome.

Ona sdala_Q ekzamen_{L-L%}?

she.NOM pass.PAST.SG.F exam.ACC

'Did he pass the exam?'



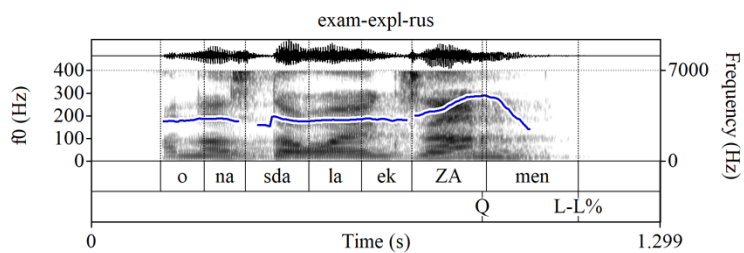
(16) Explanation-seeking PolQ:

Context: Nina was supposed to take an exam. I just saw her cheering in the hallway. I am wondering if she passed the exam and that's why she's cheering.

(Čego èto Nina veselitsja?) Ona sdala ekza_Qmen_{L-L%}?

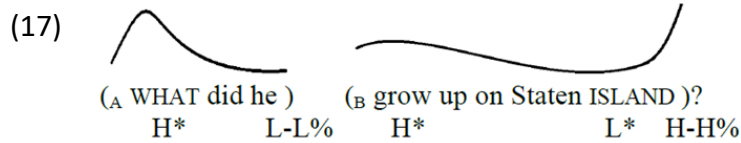
What this Nina.NOM rejoice.PRS.3SG) she.NOM pass.PAST.SG.F exam.ACC

'(Why is Nina rejoicing?) Did he pass the exam?'

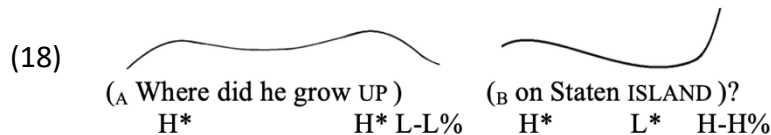


3.3. 'What'-marked YNQs

■ 'What'-marked YNQs in NYC English (Tortora & Bishop 2021):



- 'What'-marked YNQs like (17) need to be distinguished from sequences of shape [WhQ+Answer?] like (18):



- While in other varieties of English 'what'-marked YNQs feel confrontational/rude, this is not the case in NYC English: e.g. (22) can be friendly.
- While 'what'-marked YNQs seem to be mandatorily rhetorical in other English varieties, they are perfectly fine as (biased) info-seeking Qs in NYC English.

■ 'What'-marked YNQs in Russian: see (23) below

- Sometimes mirative component, but not necessarily
- Perfectly fine as info-seeking Qs

■ 'What'-marked YNQs, both in English and Russian, can only be explanation-seeking:

- Context compatibility [here shown for English; same in Russian]:

(19) Polarity-seeking context: *I open the fridge to get wine for myself and ask Anna the following question to see if she wants a glass as well.*

(20) Explanation-seeking context: *We're in a restaurant, looking at the drinks menus; Anna goes straight for the wine list. Observing this, I ask the following question.*

(21) Are you interested in a glass of wine_{L* H-H%}?
 In polarity-seeking context: ✓ In explanation-seeking context: ✓

(22) What are you, interested in a glass of wine?
 In polarity-seeking context: # In explanation-seeking context: ✓

- In Russian 'what'-marked YNQs, the Q-peak location aligns with that in explanation-seeking PolQs:

(23) Ты что, хочeš' bokal vina_Q?
 You.NOM WHAT want.PRS.2SG glass.ACC wine.GEN
 ≈ 'What do you, want a glass of wine?'

3.4. 'Or not'-AltQs cannot be explanation-seeking

- As noted by Bolinger (1978), English 'or not'-AltQs cannot be explanation-seeking: (24). The same holds for Russian 'or not' AltQs.

- (24) A: I can't sleep in the same room with that fellow.
 a. S: ✓ Why? Does he always snore?
 b. S: # Why? Does he always snore or not?

- Additionally, Russian 'or not' AltQs are on compatible with the polarity-seeking Q-peak, not with the explanation-seeking Q-peak:

- (25) a. ✓ Ona sdala_Q ekzamen ili net_{L-L%}?
 she.NOM pass.PAST.SG.F exam.ACC or no
 'Did he pass the exam or not?'
 b. # Ona sdala ekza_Qmen ili net_{L-L%}?
 she.NOM pass.PAST.SG.F exam.ACC or no
 'Did he pass the exam or not?'

3.5. Summary of forms

(26)

Polarity-seeking forms	Explanation-seeking forms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regular PolQs in English • declarative string PolQs with Q peak on verb in Russian 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regular PolQs in English • declarative string PolQs with Q peak at end in Russian • 'What'-marked YNQs in Engl (& Russian)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'or not' AltQs in Engl (& Russian) 	

4. Correlation between QUD-based form and rhetorical answer pattern

- For all the examples below, assume context (27), where the presumed answer is that the addressee is sane.

(27) *Context: The addressee is assumed to be sane, but is behaving in a weird manner.*

- English PolQs used rhetorically:

(28) Are you {✓insane / ?/%sane}?

- Russian PolQs used rhetorically:

(29) PolQs with explanation-seeking contour:

a. ✓Ty sošla s uma_{Q L-L%}?

you stepped-down from mind

'Have you lost your mind?'

b. #Ty vmenjaemyj čelovek_{Q L-L%}?

you sane person

'Are you a sane person?'

(30) PolQs with polarity-seeking contour:

a. #Ty sošla_Q s uma_{L-L%}?

you stepped-down from mind

'Have you lost your mind?'

b. ✓Ty vmenja_Qemyj čelovek_{L-L%}?

you sane person

'Are you a sane person?'

- 'What'-marked YNQs, which have to be explanation-seeking:

(31) What are you, {✓insane / #sane}?

- 'Or not'-AltQs, which cannot be explanation-seeking:

(32) Are you {#insane / ✓sane} or not?

- Correlation (leaving aside ?/% in (28) for the time being):

(33) **Correlation between QUD-structures and rhetorical answer pattern:**

a. YNQ forms interpreted as having an **explanation**-QUD-structure have **false prejacent**s when used rhetorically.

b. YNQ forms interpreted as having a **polarity**-QUD-structure have **true prejacent**s in when used rhetorically.

5. Two rhetorical strategies

- RheQs do not simply ask a question with an obvious answer for no reason. They do so in order to make an additional point in a given context (see Biezma & Rawlins 2017b, Farkas 2025).
- We argue that explanation- vs. polarity-seeking forms differ in the rhetorical strategy they use to make this additional point:
 - **Modus Tollens** rhetorical strategy: Using an **explanation-seeking form**, the speaker suggests a preposterous/**FALSE** explanation for a preposterous situation, in order to alert the Addressee to the preposterous nature of that situation.
 - **Re-asking** rhetorical strategy: Using a **polarity-seeking form**, the speaker reminds the addressee that the prejacent was settled to **TRUE**, in order to discourage/encourage a certain behavior X.

5.1. Modus Tollens rhetorical strategy

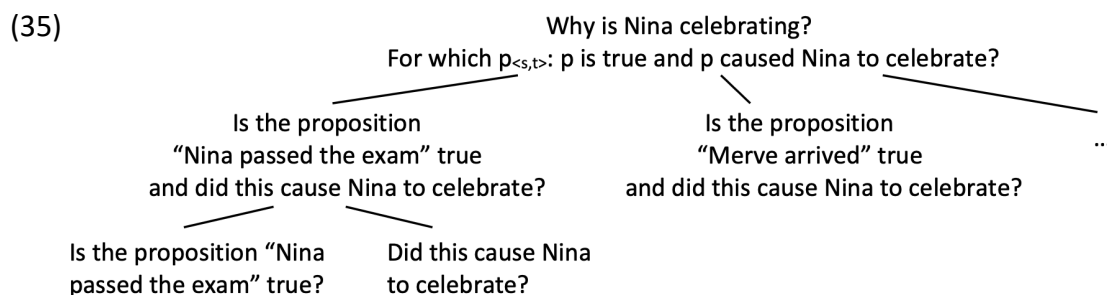
- Recap of relevant judgements:

(34) *Context: The addressee is known to be an adult, but their behavior at the moment is inconsistent with this characterization (e.g., they are making a childish request). The speaker asks them:*

- a. ✓ Explanation-seeking YNQ-form: Are you a child? False prejacent
- b. # Explanation-seeking YNQ-form: Are you an adult? True prejacent

- Ingredient ①: General explanation-QUD-tree

We assume the same tree regardless of whether we are in an information-seeking setting or in a rhetorical setting.



➔ Since, as we saw in (24)-(25), 'or not'-AltQs cannot serve as explanations-seeking Qs, they cannot be used in this strategy.

More generally, since polarity-seeking YNQ forms do not match this QUD structure, they cannot be used in this strategy.

- Ingredient ②: The shape of the prejacent in the daughter PolQ
The daughter PolQ must have a prejacent that can possibly serve as an explanation for the mother-Q (Tabatowski 2022)

- (36) A: I can't sleep in the same room with that fellow.
a. S: ✓ Why? Does he always snore?
b. S: # Why? Does he always sleep quietly?

- Ingredient ③: Making a rhetorical point via Modus Tollens

- In (34), the speaker makes their rhetorical point by offering a preposterous, i.e., obviously **false**, potential explanation p for an existing situation q to alert the addressee to the preposterous nature of q itself. For instance, the addressee being a child, while being obviously false, would explain their making a childish request. The speaker signals their disapproval towards the behavior depicted in q by reminding the addressee that $\neg p$. Rough schema:

- (37) Modus Tollens:

$q \rightarrow p$	[Backtracking conditional: 'If q, it has to be because p']
$\neg p$	[The obvious answer to p? is $\neg p$]
$\neg q$	[Thus, rhetorical point: q should not take or have taken place]

- Note that, if the potential explanation p for the existing situation q could be true, there would be no rhetorical point to be made via Modus Tollens.

⇒ Therefore, the prejacent of the rhetorical explanation-seeking YNQ is presumed to be **false**.

- Back to our examples of explanation-seeking YNQ forms:

(38) *Context: The addressee is assumed to be sane, but is behaving in a weird manner.*

- (39) PolQs with explanation-seeking contour:

- a. ✓ Ty sošla s uma_{Q L-L%}?
you stepped-down from mind
'Have you lost your mind?'
- b. # Ty vmenjaemyj čelovek_{Q L-L%}?
you sane person
'Are you a sane person?'

- (40) What are you, {✓insane / #sane}?

5.2. Re-asking rhetorical strategy

■ Recap of relevant judgements:

(41) *Context: The addressee is known to be an adult, but their behavior at the moment is inconsistent with this characterization (e.g., they are making a childish request). The speaker asks them:*

- a. # Polarity-seeking YNQ-form: Are you a child (or not)? False prejacent
- b. ✓ Polarity-seeking YNQ-form: Are you an adult (or not)? True prejacent

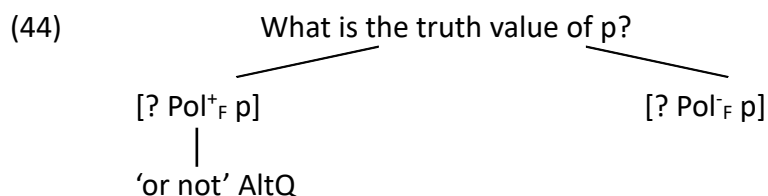
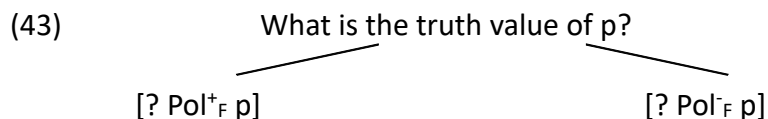
■ Additionally, note that polarity-seeking YNQ-forms used rhetorically can be aimed at stopping some behavior of the addressee, as above, or at generating it, as below.

(42) *Coach giving a pep talk to the Barça women soccer team at the beginning of the Munich semi-final last weekend:*

Are we the best fucking female soccer team in the world or not?

■ Ingredient ①: General polarity-QUD-tree and (pretense) re-asking

- We assume the same general polarity-QUD-tree regardless of whether we are in an information-seeking setting or in a rhetorical setting: (43)
- Additionally, as part of the rhetorical strategy, S pretends to be re-asking an original polarity-based PolQ: Biezma-style QUD structure (44).



(45) *Context: Nina was supposed to take an exam. I am interested in the outcome.*

S: Did Nina pass the exam?

A: [Silence]

S: a. ✓ Did Nina pass the exam?

b. # What did she, pass the exam?

A: [Silence]

S: c. ✓ Did Nina pass the exam or not?

(46) Context: *Nina was supposed to take an exam. I am interested in the outcome.*

S: Ona sdala_Q ekzamen_{L-L%}?
she.NOM pass.PAST.SG.F exam.ACC
'Did he pass the exam?'

A: [Silence]

S: a. ✓ Ona sdala_Q ekzamen_{L-L%}? b. # Ona sdala ekza_Qmen_{L-L%}?
she.NOM pass.PAST.SG.F exam.ACC she.NOM pass.PAST.SG.F exam.ACC
'Did he pass the exam?' 'Did he pass the exam?'

A: [Silence]

S: c. ✓ Ona sdala_Q ekzamen ili net_{L-L%}?
she.NOM pass.PAST.SG.F exam.ACC or no
'Did he pass the exam or not?'

- ➔ 'Or not'-AltQs are a good general re-asking strategy to close a line of inquiry (*cul de sac* feeling à la Biezma 2009), as in English (45c) (and in Russian (46c)).
- ➔ Additionally, it is infelicitous to be switching from a QUD-structure to another in the repeat sequence. In particular, starting with an original polarity-seeking YNQ, we can re-ask using a polarity-seeking YNQ but not an explanation seeking YNQ, as in English (45a,b) and Russian (46a,b).
This means that explanation-seeking YNQ forms cannot be used in this strategy.

■ Ingredient ②: The shape of the preajcent in the re-asking YNQ .

The preajcent *p* in the re-asking YNQ [*p or not?*]/ [*p?*] has to match the preajcent of the original PolQ [*p?*]

(47) Context: *John went to the store. I just want to know whether the store was open or closed.*

S: Was the store open?

A: [Silence]

S: a. ✓ Was the store open? b. # Was the store closed?
a'. ✓ Magazín byl_Q otrkryt? b'. # Magazín byl_Q zakryt?
Store was open Store was closed
'Was the store open?' 'Was the store closed?'

A: [Silence]

S: ✓ Was the store open or not? / # Was the store closed or not?

■ Ingredient ③: Making a rhetorical point via reminding the addressee of the outcome of the (pretense) original teleologically biased PolQ.

- i. The Speaker wants to remind the Addressee that the original teleologically biased PolQ $[p?]$ was already settled –in principle, to the positive answer p or to the negative answer $\neg p$ –, in order to elicit from the Addressee a behavior X consistent with this resolution: (48).

(48) Modus Ponens:

$p/\neg p \rightarrow X$	[If $p/\neg p$, then one should do X]
$p/\neg p$ _____	[The known answer to the already settled $p?$ is $p/\neg p$]
X	[Thus, rhetorical point: Do X]

⇒ Thus, the resolution of the original teleologically biased PolQ $[p?]$ must align with the Speaker’s current goal of producing behavior X . Otherwise, no point in reminding the Addressee of that resolution.

- ii. In a teleologically biased PolQ $[p?]$, the prejacent p must align with the Speaker’s goals (Tabatowski 2022):

(49) As a request for water:

- a. Do you have some water?
- b. # Do you not have water?

(50) In a medical questionnaire for early detection of heart diseases:

- a. Do you often have palpitations?
- b. # Do you rarely have palpitations?

⇒ By (i) and (ii), the resolution of the (pretense) original teleologically biased PolQ $[p?]$ is p (=the prejacent).

- iii. Given this and given ingredient ② –i.e., given that the original PolQ $[p?]$ and the re-asking YNQ must have the same prejacent–, the presumed answer to the re-asking YNQ is also its prejacent p .

⇒ In other words, the prejacent of the re-asking YNQ is presumed to be true.

■ Back to our examples of polarity-seeking YNQ forms:

(51) Context: *The addressee is assumed to be sane, but is behaving in a weird manner.*

(52) PolQs with polarity-seeking contour:

- a. # Ty sošla_Q s uma_{L-L%}?
you stepped-down from mind
'Have you lost your mind?'
- b. ✓ Ty vmenja_Qemyj čelovek_{L-L%}?
you sane person
'Are you a sane person?'

(53) Are you {#insane / ✓sane} or not?

6. Back to case (1b) in English: Some ideas

■ Back to case (1b) in English, repeated below:

(54) *Context: The addressee is known to be an adult, but their behavior at the moment is inconsistent with this characterization (e.g., they are making a childish request). The speaker asks them:*

b. **?/%** Are you an adult? ⇒ **PolQ** with prejacent assumed **true**

■ On variable judgment %:

- We saw that Russian polarity-seeking PolQs are acceptable as RheQ with a presumed true prejacent.
- The English PolQ (54b) is ambiguous between a polarity-seeking and an explanation-seeking parse. Under the polarity-seeking parse, it should be able to function as a RheQ with a presumed true prejacent, just like its Russian counterpart.
- The variability in judgment may be due to the variable ease to identify which of the two parses, and thus which of the rhetorical strategies, is intended.

■ On the suboptimal judgment ?:

- Adding emphatic stress on the tensed verb makes the string (54b) unambiguously polarity-seeking:

(55) ARE you an adult?

- This allows (55) to be quite acceptable as a RheQ with a presumed true prejacent.
- Perhaps competition with the also emphatic/insistent ‘or not’-AltQ form renders (48) slightly less optimal for the polarity-seeking strategy.

7. Conclusions and outlook

■ Summary:

(56)	Polarity-seeking forms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regular PolQs in English • declarative string PolQs with Q peak on verb in Russian • ‘or not’ AltQs in Engl (& Russian) 	Explanation-seeking forms <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • regular PolQs in English • declarative string PolQs with Q peak at end in Russian • ‘What’-marked YNQs in Engl (& Russian)
	↓	↓
	Re-asking rhetorical strategy True prejacent	Modus Tollens rhetorical strategy False prejacent

■ This, of course, does not exhaust the list of YNQ forms and potential pragmatic strategies.

■ For future research: *[p or what?]* in its RheQ use

Some preliminary judgments:

(57) <i>[p or what?]</i> as RheQ:	<u>false p</u>	<u>true p</u>	
English	*/??	✓	[See also Biezma & Rawlins 2017a]
Spanish:	✓	✓	
German	✓	*	
Russian	✓ with Q-peak on sentence	?? with Q-peak on polarity	

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