

Indirect yes/no questions ellipsis in Russian

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Introduction and goals

This research represents a thorough analysis of both structural and distributional properties of a previously undescribed type of ellipsis occurring in Russian indirect yes/no questions (*further – Y/N-ellipsis*).

The **methods** used are based on generative grammar and formal semantics.

The **main goal** of this paper is to classify the Y/N-ellipsis among different known types of ellipsis such as VP-ellipsis, gapping, sluicing etc.

The **main result** of this paper is the elaboration of a unified syntactic licensing condition for sluicing and Y/N-ellipsis, which also allows to predict the availability of Y/N-ellipsis in a language.

Definition of Y/N-ellipsis

Y/N-ellipsis is an ellipsis of an indirect yes/no-question where only the constituent containing the “li”-clitic (y/n-question marker in Russian) is not elided.

- (1) *Kto-to prixodil včera,*
Somebody.NOM come.PAST yesterday
no ja ne znaju, Petja li prixodil včera
but I NEG know.PRES Peter.NOM li come.PAST yesterday
‘Somebody came yesterday, but I don’t know whether it was Peter.’

Not eliding of other subordinate clause constituents leads to ungrammaticality:

- (2) **Kto-to prixodil včera, no ja ne znaju, Petja li včera.*

Definition of Sluicing

Sluicing is an ellipsis of indirect wh-questions where only the wh-word is left:

- (3) *Kto-to prixodil včera,*
Somebody.NOM come.PAST yesterday
no ja ne znaju, kto prixodil včera
but I NEG know.PRES who.NOM come.PAST yesterday
‘Somebody came yesterday, but I don’t know who.’

Not eliding of other subordinate clause constituents leads to ungrammaticality:

- (2) **Kto-to prixodil včera, no ja ne znaju, kto včera.*

- (3) **Somebody came yesterday, but I don’t know who yesterday.*

Sluicing vs. Y/N-ellipsis

Sluicing and Y/N ellipsis share several syntactic properties, for example:

❖ can occur only with verbs which s-select questions and c-select CPs:

- (4) *Mne interesno, kto prišël / Petja li prišël.*
I.DAT interesting who.NOM come.PAST / Petya.NOM li come.PAST.
‘I wonder who came / whether it was Peter who came.’

- (5) *Kto-to prišël. Mne interesno, kto / Petja li.*
Somebody.NOM come.PAST. I.DAT interesting who.NOM Petya.NOM li.
‘Somebody came. I wonder who / whether it was Peter.’

❖ escape syntactic islands: **Complex NP-constraint**:

- (6) a. *[Kakoj jazyk]_i ti znaješ devočku, kotoraja znajet?*
Which.ACC language.ACC you.NOM know.PRES girl.ACC who know.PRES
‘Which language do you know a girl who knows?’

- b. *Ona znajet kakoj-to jazyk,*
She.NOM know.PRES some language.ACC
no ja ne pomnju, kakoj / polskij li.
but I NEG remember.PRES which.ACC / Polish.ACC li
‘She knows some language, but I don’t remember which / whether it is Polish.’

“Li”, wh-words and Focus

“Li” is a focus-marker in Russian [King, 1993; Rivero 1993; Franks, King 2000]:

❖ “Li” can’t mark words incompatible with focus:

- (7) **Ja ne znaju, kto-nibud’ li prišël.*
I.NOM NEG know.PRES somebody.NOM li come.PAST.
‘I don’t know whether it was somebody who came.’

❖ Kiss test for contrastive focus [Kiss 1998; Gracheva 2013]:

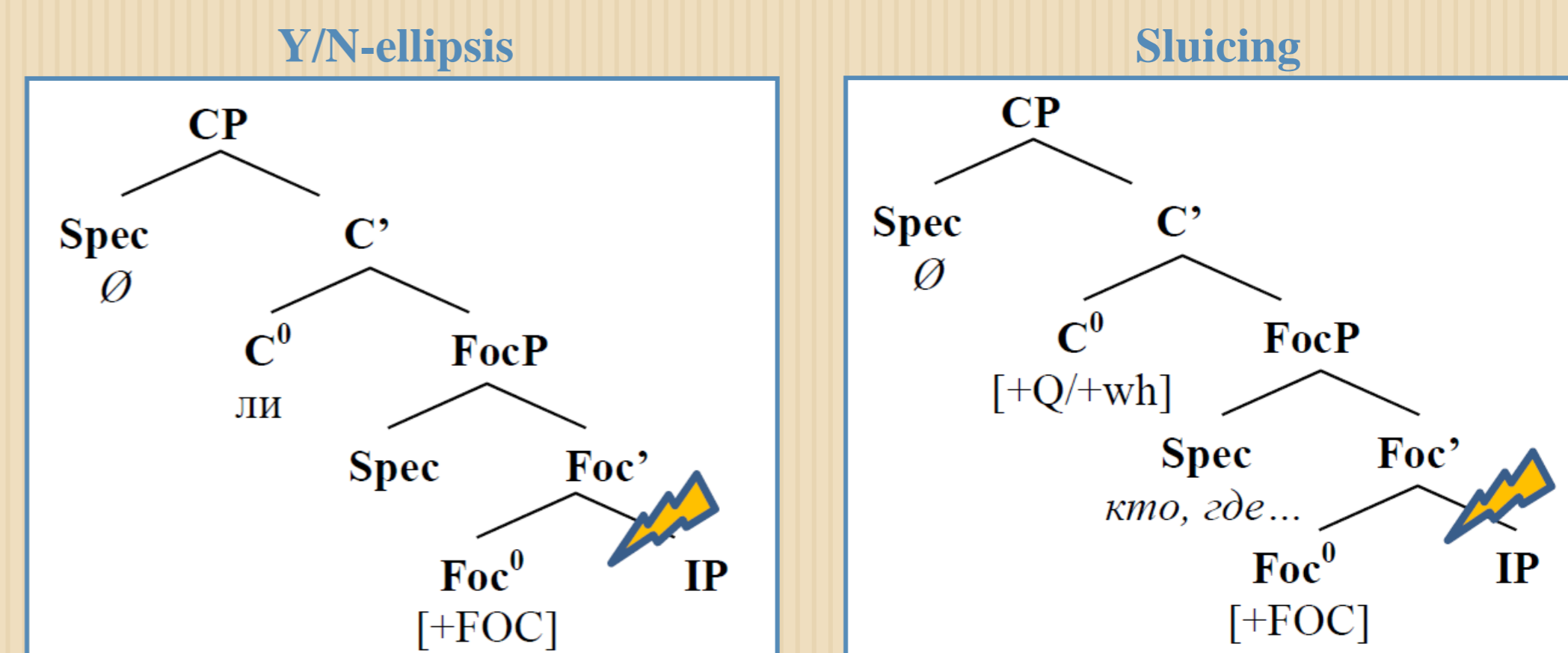
- (8) *Petja li prišël? – Net, Danila.*
Peter.NOM li come.PAST –No Danila.NOM
‘Was it Peter who came? – No, it was Danila’

Wh-words are always focused [Haida 2007]. When it is not focused, it acts like an *indefinite* (see German example below):

- (9) *Wer mag was?*
Who.NOM like.3SG.PRES what.ACC
Who wants something?

Result 1: Licensing condition

Ellipsis in indirect questions is licensed when the head of the CP (namely, the conjunction) is a focus-marker. The arrow shows ellipsis site.



Result 2: Typological prediction

If the y/n-question marker in a language is focus-sensitive, Y/N-ellipsis will be available. Examples are Japanese and Turkish:

‘Somebody came, but I don’t know whether it was Peter.’

(10) **Turkish**

Birisi şimdi ev-e gel-di ama Peter mi bil-mi-yor-um
smb now house-DAT come-PAST.3SG but Peter Ques know-NEG-PROG-1SG

(11) **Japanese**

誰かが来たが Pかどうか 分からない
dareka-ga kita-ga Petya-ka(douka) wakaranai
smb.TOP come.PAST-TOP Peter-Ques know.PRES.NEG

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