**Indirect yes/no questions ellipsis in Russian**

**Shlomina Anna**

**RSUH**

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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, gap-ping, 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 (yn-question marker in Russian) is not elided.

(1) *Kto-to prišodil včera, no ja ne znaju, Petja li prišel včera.*

Somebody.NOM come.PAST yesterday

no ja ne znaju, who.poss.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 prišodil 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 prišodil včera, no ja ne znaju, kto prišel včera.*

Somebody.NOM come.PAST yesterday

no ja ne znaju, who.NOM li 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 prišodil 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 prišel / Petja li prišel.*

  LDAT interesting who.NOM come.PAST / Petja.NOM li come.PAST.

  ‘I wonder who came / whether it was Peter who came.’

- escape syntactic islands: Complex NP-constraint:
  
  (6) a. *[Kakoj jazyk], ti znai dévočku, kterora_j znaijet?*

  Which.ACC language.ACC you.NOM know.PRES girl.ACC who know.PRES

  ‘Which language do you know a girl who knows?’

b. *Onu znaijet kakoj-to jazyk.*

  She.NOM know.PRES some language.ACC

  no ja ne pomaju, 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 prišel.*

  L 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]:
  

  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 sündi ev-e gel-di ana Peter mi bis-mi-yor-um

Sbn.TOP come.PAST.TOP Peter-Ques know.NEG-PROG-3SG

(11) **Japanese**

誰が たとえ dareka-ga kita-ga

Pեתya-ka(douka) wakaranai

Sbn.TOP come.PAST.TOP Peter-Ques know.NOM

References


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