

Presuppositions, *wh*-questions, and discourse particles: Russian *že*

This paper addresses the problem of the interpretation of the colloquial Russian particle *že* at the clausal level. The “sentential” *že* (adopting the term from Parrott 1997) has only received limited attention in the literature to date (see, e.g., Yokoyama 1986, Parrott 1997, Feldman 2001, McCoy 2001). Following McCoy (2001), we propose that *že* is syntactically attached to a “kontrastive”—a set-evoking, or set-generating—element (Vallduví & Vilkkuna 1998, Rooth 1985). In sentences such as (1), *že* is felt to modify the whole proposition, rather than focusing on a single term within the proposition. In (2) the possible positions of *že* under this reading are shown. We propose to analyze *že* here as a verum focus marker, adjoined to an inflectional phrase (e.g., TP) in the syntax, and thus taking scope over the entire proposition.

Pragmatically, sentential *že* is felicitous when the speaker believes that the hearer has rejected the proposition denoted by the sentence as false; a proposition marked with *že* serves to correct the hearer’s mistaken beliefs (and can therefore be taken as impolite, as an imposition on the hearer). The verum focus evokes the kontrast set which, as shown in (3), contains the proposition and its negation (only one of which can be true), and the particle communicates the speaker’s assumption that the wrong proposition is believed to be true by the hearer. A proposition *p* marked with *že* asserts *p* and presupposes that the hearer believes $\neg p$.

Viewed this way, we can provide a natural analysis for the otherwise obscure meaning of *wh*-questions containing *že* as well; an example is given in (4). The force of such questions is rhetorical; the question is asked but presupposes that no (reasonable) answer is true, from the speaker’s point of view. In (4), the only two reasonable answers (‘I should ask mother’ and ‘I should ask father’) have been previously asserted to be false in the context of the utterance. Taking the semantic value of a *wh*-question to be the set of propositions which could serve as possible (contextually accessible) answers (Hamblin 1973), the set for (4) is given in (5). The presence of *že* in (4) causes *že* to be applied to the set in (5), resulting in (6) (via the compositional mechanism of *flexible functional application*; see Rullmann & Beck 1997, Hamblin 1973). Simply put, *že* is defined to take a single proposition and provide a presupposition; however, when *že* is provided with a set of propositions (a question), it is applied to each proposition in the set, creating a presupposition for each. The end result is that for each possible answer, there is a presupposition that the hearer has already rejected it as false; thus, the hearer is not left with any response to make in a cooperative discourse (following the maxim of Quality, Grice 1975); the speaker has provided no felicitous options for answers within this contextually determined restricted set.

This analysis provides a straightforward way to understand the meaning of *wh-že* questions in Russian, but also has implications for a general theory of questions and their interaction with discourse particles like *že*.

The analysis offered in this paper constitutes a step towards a formal description of discourse particles of colloquial speech, a topic that has been somewhat neglected in the literature to date.

- (1) Context: *Varja notices a fly on the window-sill and asks her mother to kill it.*
 *VAR: *Ona muxa, muxa.* 'It's a fly, a fly.'
 *MOT: *Muxa, muxa, da.* 'A fly, a fly, yes.'
 *VAR: *Ubit', ubit' ee!* 'Kill, kill it!'

(CHILDES, Protassova 19xx)

- *MOT: *Ona zhe uzhe ubita.* 'But it is ALREADY killed.'
she že already killed(participle) 'But it IS already killed.'

- (2) *Ona (že) uže ubita (že).*

- (3) {The fly is killed; The fly is not killed }

- (4) [Father puts away his son's library books and tells him that mother took them back to the library. The boy asks mother if she indeed took them back. She says 'no'. He then says (in the presence of both parents):]

U kogo že mne togda sprosit'?
at who(Gen) že me(Dat) then ask(infin)
 'Who (že) (in the world/the hell...) I should ask then?'

- (5) {I should ask mother, I should ask father }

- (6) *že* ({ I should ask mother, I should ask father })
 = { I should ask mother, I should ask father } and presupposes that the hearer believes
 {I should not ask mother, I should not ask father }

DATA SOURCE:

CHILDES: Other Languages—Russian—Protassova. In: MacWhinney, B. 2000. *The CHILDES Database: Tools for Analyzing Talk*. 3d Edition. Vol. 2: *The Database*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

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