

## Existential wh-words are still a question in Russian.

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**Outline:** The talk offers a new account of Quexistentials (Hengeveld et al., 2023), which are wh-words that can have both the interrogative (“the qu of quex”) and the indefinite (“the ex of quex”) uses without additional marking, in Russian. We develop a unified semantics for both uses, and explain the difference between them by attributing different structures to the set of alternatives. The alternatives associated with the ex of quex are assumed to be non-contrastive, which makes them inherently defective for establishing a partition of the context set. The resulting object can sometimes be rescued, but we argue this is only possible in the presence of an operator that can operate on a set of propositions.

**Background on Quexistentials.** Russian belongs to the group of languages with the so-called polarity profile of the Quexistentials. Unlike languages like German, Dutch (Postma, 1994) or Passamaquoddy (Bruening, 2008), it does not allow the ex of quex in unembedded assertive sentences. A full list of the environments that allow the ex of quex can be found in Tretiakova, 2009 and Pekelis, 2023. We focus on 3 major cases illustrated below:

- (1) *Ty s kem<sub>+/-F</sub> razgovarival?*  
you with who.QUEX talked  
+F: Who did you talk to?  
-F: Did you talk to some person or other?
- (2) {Why was Sasha fired?}  
a. *Porugalsja s kem<sub>-F</sub> ili rabotu provalil*  
quarreled with who.QUEX or job failed  
'(He) quarreled with some person or other, or failed the job'
- (3) *Esli ty s kem<sub>-F</sub> uže pogovoril, to my možem uxodit'*  
if you with who.QUEX already talked then we can leave  
'If you have already talked to someone, then we can go'

The two readings of a quexistential are disambiguated by the obligatory Focus-marking (F-marking) on the wh-expression (so-called QF-Biconditional, Haida, 2008, Hengeveld et al., 2023; see the contrast in ??). Besides the pronoun *kto* - 'who', used in the examples above, the same pattern can be observed *čto* 'what', *kakoj* 'what kind of, which', *gde* 'where'.

**Previous accounts.** All existing investigations agree that the environment must meet special requirements to license the ex of quex. For Yanovich, 2005, the quexistential is an expression introducing Hamblin alternatives, and the licenser is an alternative quantifier in the sense of Kratzer and Shimoyama, 2002, i.e. an expression that can operate on the set of alternatives. Yanovich provides a compositional mechanism to derive the semantics for the ex of quex and account for some of its properties. However, the distribution remains largely unexplained, since the class of alternative quantifiers is specified in the lexicon.

Hengeveld et al., 2019, Hengeveld et al., 2023 note that the distribution of the ex of quex is essentially the same as in languages like Mandarin in that it is restricted to contexts that do not allow inferences of existence and consider the following generalization:

- (4) **Non-Entailment of Existence (NEE):**  
The ex of quex is only felicitous iff the sentence in which it appears does not entail the existence of a witness of the existential statement associated with the quexistential (Hengeveld et al., 2019; after Lin, 1998)

However, there are contexts that satisfy NEE yet fail to license the ex of quex, e.g. indirect negation (5) as well as some other non-veridical environments. More importantly, even if NEE were correct, it would still remain unexplained.

- (5) *Vanja ne govoril, čto ty pročital \*čto / čto-libo*  
Vanya not said that you read what.QUEX / what-LIBO  
'Vanya did not say that you read anything'.

**Proposal.** We start with an explanation of the two readings and the role of F-marking on the quexistentials. Hengeveld et al., 2023 suggest the qu of quex interpretation entails obligatory F-marking on the quexistential, which signals the presence of contrasting alternatives to the sentence. The notion of contrast entails mutual incompatibility among the set of alternatives, which itself is a necessary condition for establishing a partition of the context set, i.e. of asking the question Fox, 2018.

We suggest the lack of F-marking on the ex of quex indicates the set of alternatives in (9) is non-contrastive and cannot be used to propose a wh-question. Instead, the union of this set can be used to propose a polar question or to be associated with the disjunctive or the conditional operator.

To spell out this idea, we use Alternative semantics to derive the set of propositions (Kotek, 2014, Uegaki, 2018, a.o.). The computation proceeds on two tiers, which are interpreted by the ordinary ( $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket^o$ ) and the alternative ( $\llbracket \cdot \rrbracket^{alt}$ ) Interpretation functions. The wh-words are Hamblin pronouns (Kratzer and Shimoyama, 2002, Yanovich, 2005 a.o.) and introduce alternatives. We further assume that the ordinary semantics of the wh-words is undefined (6), which predicts their uninterpretability unless they are further associated with the operator that turns their alternative semantics into the ordinary meaning (Beck, 2006). We follow Kotek, 2014 and associate this operator with the Q-particle defined in (7). Syntactically, the particle can merge as the sister to the wh-word projecting QP and triggering its fronting or be introduced at the clausal edge (Cable, 2010). We associate the first structure with the qu of quex and the second with the ex of quex (8). Note that the same set of propositions is derived in both cases (9).

- (6)  $\llbracket kto \rrbracket^o$  undefined       $\llbracket kto \rrbracket^{alt} = \{x \mid x \text{ is a person}\}$   
(7)  $\llbracket Q \alpha \rrbracket^o = \llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{alt}$        $\llbracket Q \alpha \rrbracket^{alt} = \{\llbracket \alpha \rrbracket^{alt}\}$   
(8) a. LF (qu of quex):  $Q \llbracket [QP \text{ } Q \text{ s kem}_F ]_i [TP \text{ ty razgovarival s } t_i ] \rrbracket$   
b. LF (ex of quex):  $Q [TP \text{ ty razgovarival s kem}]$   
(9)  $\llbracket (1) \rrbracket^o = \{p \mid p = \lambda w. \text{you talked to } x \text{ in } w : x \text{ is a person}\}$

We suggest that the repair strategy for Russian involves asking 'second best' available question, which is the polar question about the truth of some proposition in (9). This is achieved by the Union operator, which applies at the edge of the clause containing the ex of quex.

- (10)  $\llbracket \bigcup (9) \rrbracket^o = \{\lambda w. \exists p \in \llbracket (9) \rrbracket^o : p(w)\}$

The distribution of the ex of quex in Russian is then determined by which operators are able to associate with (10).

**Deriving the distribution.** The inavailability of the unembedded assertion use of the ex of quex in the proposed account follows from the type incompatibility, since (10) is not a proposition. On the other hand, (10) can be used to propose a polar question, which we assume to denote a singleton set of propositions (e.g. Biezma and Rawlins, 2012).

For disjunction in ((2)) we follow the idea in Uegaki, 2018 (see also Ciardelli et al., 2019) that the coordinator can operate on the set of propositions. We assume that each disjunct in (2) is associated with the Q-particle ((12), and disjunction is the operation that performs the union of the disjuncts and asserts at least one of those is true:

- (11)  $\llbracket ili \rrbracket^o = \lambda u_\sigma. \lambda q_\sigma. \exists p : p \in \llbracket u \rrbracket^o \cup \llbracket q \rrbracket^o$   
(12) LF ((2))  $\llbracket \bigcup Q \text{ Sasha porugalsja s kem} \rrbracket \llbracket ili [Q \text{ Sasha provalil rabotu}] \rrbracket$

Finally, our account of the conditional antecedent relies on the analyses that provide unified semantics for the conditional antecedents and interrogatives and account for the frequent formal similarity between the two (Bhatt and Pancheva, 2006, Williamson, 2019). For concreteness, we assume the analysis in Williamson, 2019, who adopts the restrictor analysis of the conditionals. The conditional antecedent is analyzed as the definite Free Relative clause, which is derived by the  $\iota$  operator on top of the polar question. The translation of this idea into our framework is given below.

- (13)  $\llbracket \iota(10) \rrbracket^o = \iota p [p \in \llbracket (10) \rrbracket^o]$

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