

# The Interaction between Alternative and Polar Questions in Urdu: Evidence from Prosody

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In their paper on the distribution and function of Urdu/Hindi polar *kya* 'what', Bhatt & Dayal (2020) describe an interesting interaction between polar *kya* and alternative questions (AltQs). There is no ready syntactic explanation for the interaction identified by Bhatt & Dayal and they invoke prosodic constraints as providing a potential explanation. We followed up on this suggestion and show that the prosody of AltQs and polar questions (PolQs) can be systematically distinguished and that there is no inherent prosodic reason that would provide an explanation for the observed interaction between polar *kya* and AltQs. Instead, we argue that our newly adduced prosodic evidence lends support to the proposed explanation in Biezma et al. (2025), who analyze the interaction in terms of different scoping possibilities associated with different positions of polar *kya* in the clause.

Polar *kya* is a focus sensitive particle that can be added to PolQs, see (1). Bhatt & Dayal propose that it is a Polar Question Particle, Biezma et al. (2025) instead analyze it as a marker of uncertainty, indicating that the speaker has no idea/bias as to what the answer might be.

- 1) (kya) tʃandʀa=ne kofi p-i?  
what Chandra.F=Erg coffee.F.Nom drink-Perf.F.Sg  
Did Chandra drink coffee?

Bhatt & Dayal (2020) show that polar *kya* can appear anywhere within a clause and go on to examine the interaction with AltQs. They show that while string identical clauses as in (2) are in principle ambiguous between a PolQ and an AltQ reading, the availability of readings interacts with the positioning of polar *kya*. When polar *kya* is clause initial, as in (2), both PolQ and AltQ readings are possible. However, when the polar *kya* appears clause finally, the AltQ reading is out, as shown in (3).

- 2) **kya** tʃandʀa=ne kofi ya tʃae p-i?  
what Chandra.F=Erg coffee.F.Nom or tea.F.Nom drink-Perf.F.Sg  
Did Chandra drink coffee?  
AltQ reading: 'Did Chandra drink coffee or did she drink tea?'  
PolQ reading: 'Is it the case that Chandra drank either coffee or tea?'
- 3) tʃandʀa=ne kofi ya tʃae p-i **kya**?  
Chandra.F=Erg coffee.F.Nom or tea.F.Nom drink-Perf.F.Sg what  
Did Chandra drink coffee?  
PolQ only: 'Is it the case that Chandra drank either coffee or tea?'

Bhatt & Dayal (2020) speculated that this interaction might be due to a prosody-syntax interaction by which clause-final polar *kya* becomes difficult to pronounce. At the time of their work, next to nothing was known about the prosody of AltQs in Urdu/Hindi. We therefore set out to investigate the prosodic properties of AltQs in comparison with PolQs in a series of experiments. Overall, the results showed that string-identical AltQs and PolQs could systematically be disambiguated prosodically: AltQs end on L% and show a hat pattern, while PolQs end on H% and lack this pattern. Polar *kya* is generally flat or falling (see Figure 1) so is prosodically absolutely compatible in clause-final position with the L% boundary tone of AltQs.

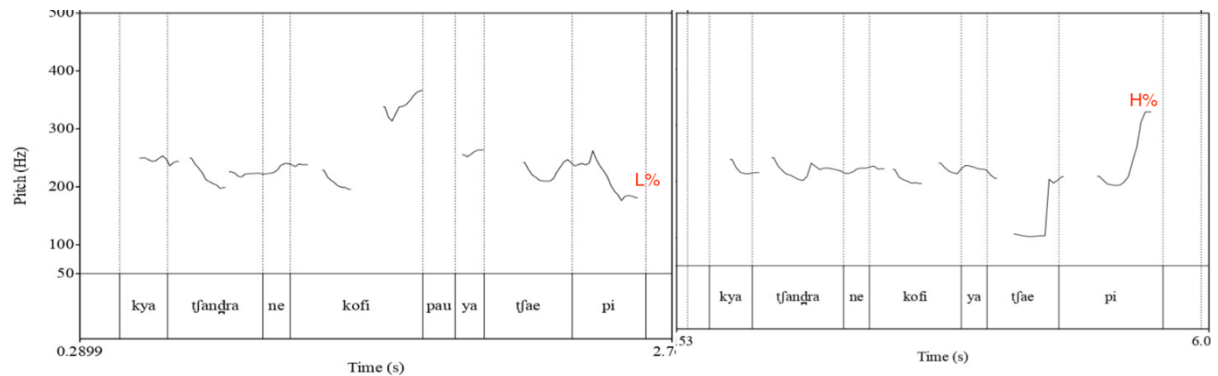


Figure 1: F0 contours of string identical AltQ (Left) vs. PolQ (Right)

There is thus no prosodic reason for the AltQ reading to become unavailable in (3). The absence of a potential prosodic explanation instead supports the alternative analysis by Biezma et al. (2025) in terms of the differing scope possibilities of polar *kya* depending on its position. They propose that when polar *kya* is clause initial it takes scope over the verb (or the item immediately to its right), allowing for a distribution over the disjunctions. In contrast, clause final *kya* can only take scope over the entire proposition. So, it cannot target individual parts of the disjunction, and therefore only the PolQ reading is available. Our paper thus shows that while prosodic information is crucial for disambiguating between string identical PolQs and AltQs, it cannot account for the interaction between Polar *kya* and AltQs. Rather, the data is accounted for by the difference in scope taken by Polar *kya*.

## References

- Bhatt, Rajesh & Veneeta Dayal. 2020. Polar question particles: Hindi-Urdu *kya*:. *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory* 38. 1115-1144.
- Biezma, María, Miriam Butt, Farhat Jabeen & Benazir Mumtaz. 2025. Urdu/hindi polar *kya* as an expression of uncertainty. *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 1-52.