

On a special prosodic pattern of polar questions in Romanian*

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Summary

- Most of the previous literature on the intonation of Romanian polar questions claimed that the neutral pattern has the main prominence (nuclear accent) on the finite verb, and a final contour characteristic of questions with early focus
- I argue that this pattern is not neutral, at least in information-seeking questions, but indicates *verum* focus; the neutral pattern has the nuclear accent on the last prosodic word, as expected given the general prosodic properties of Romanian
- The data will also shed some light on the conditions of use of *verum* focus in questions

1. Previous research on the intonation of polar questions in Romanian

Polar questions in standard Romanian have two distinct intonational patterns according to whether the nuclear accent (sentence accent) is on the last prosodic word or not (Avram 1973, Dascălu 1979a,b, Dascălu-Jinga 2001); I will call the two patterns ‘early focus’ (EF) and ‘final focus’ (FF):

- (1) (i) **Early focus-pattern (EF)**: the nuclear accent is low (L*), followed by a low plateau until the last lexical accent; then:
- (a) The last lexical accent falls on the last syllable → high tone on the last syllable;
 - (b) Otherwise → high tone on the last accented syllable
low tone on postaccentual syllables

Interpretation (Grice et al. 2000, Ladd 2008): a high-low boundary tone (HL%) realized by *secondary association* of the H-part with the last accented syllable:

→ b) (L+)H* L%

If the accented syllable is sentence-final, the L part is *truncated*:

→ a) (L+)H* H%

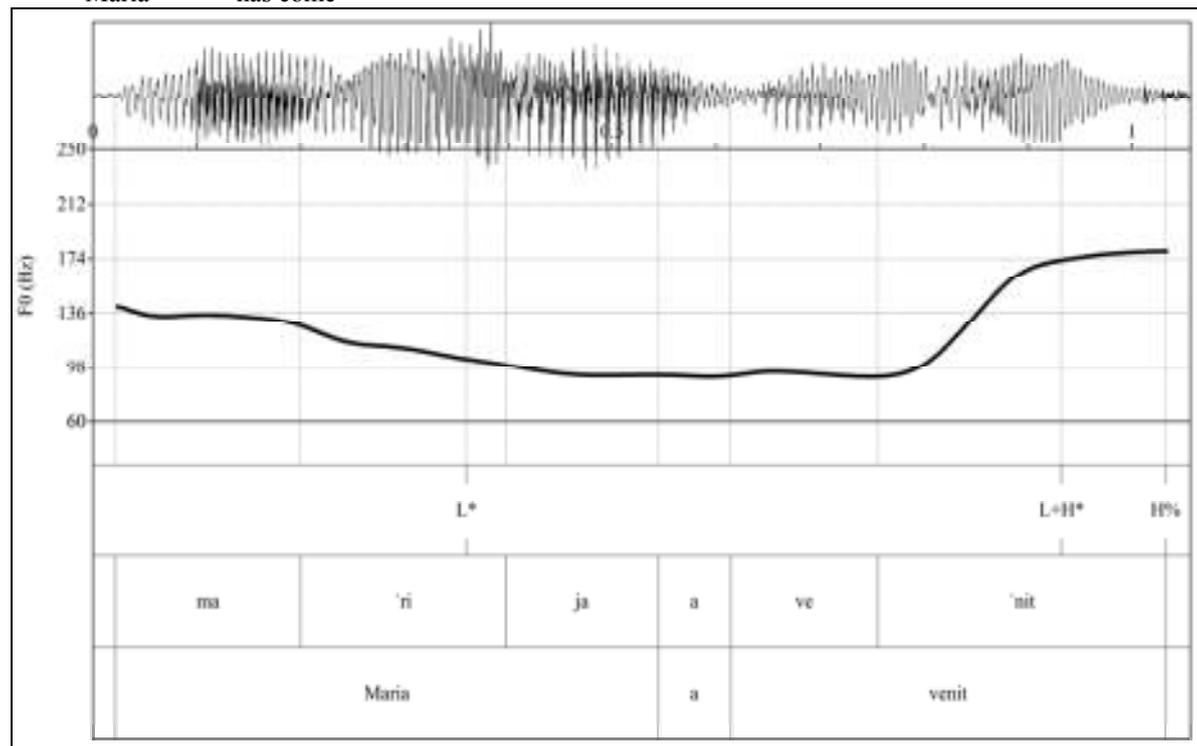
- (ii) **Final focus-pattern (FF)**: last accented syllable has L*, followed by a H% boundary tone:
- (a) The last syllable bears lexical accent → the final rising takes place during this syllable (→ L+H* H%)
 - (b) Otherwise → the pitch rises after the accented syllable

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(i) EF pattern

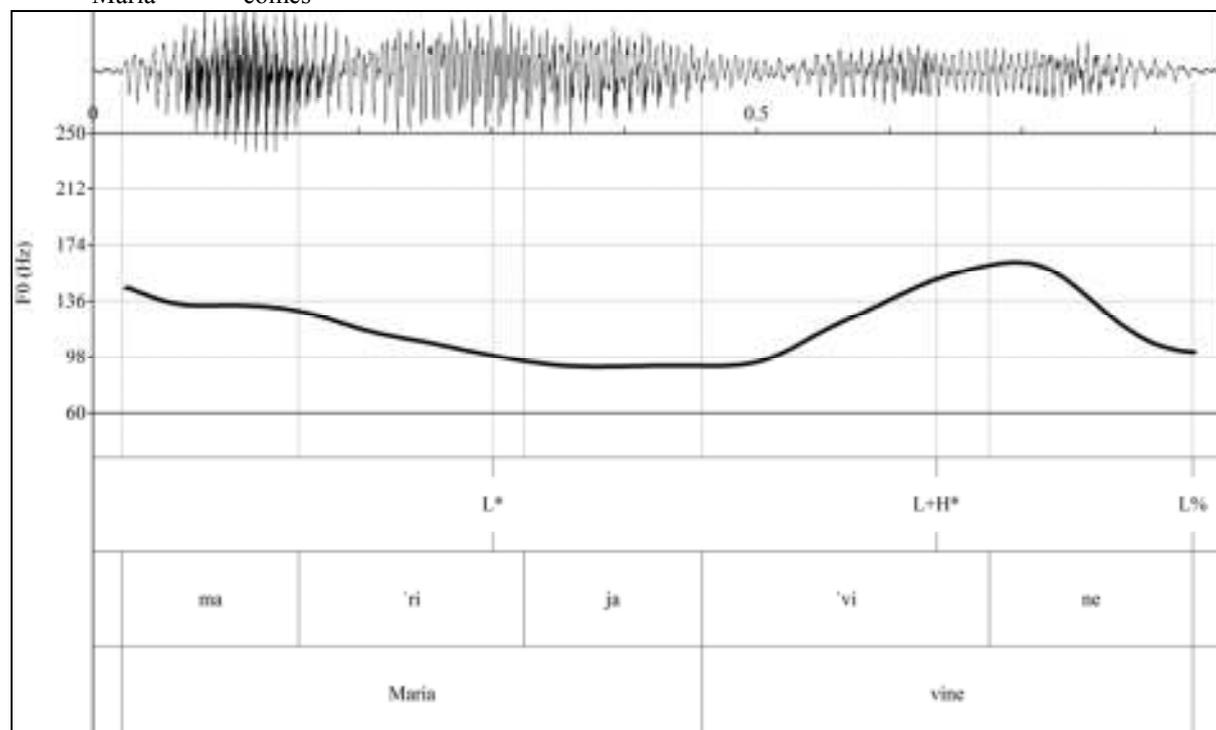
Type (a):

- (2) [MA'RIA]_{Foc} a ve'nit? 'Is it Maria who has come?'
Maria has come



Type (b):

- (3) [MA'RIA]_{Foc} 'vine? 'Is it Maria who's coming?'
Maria comes



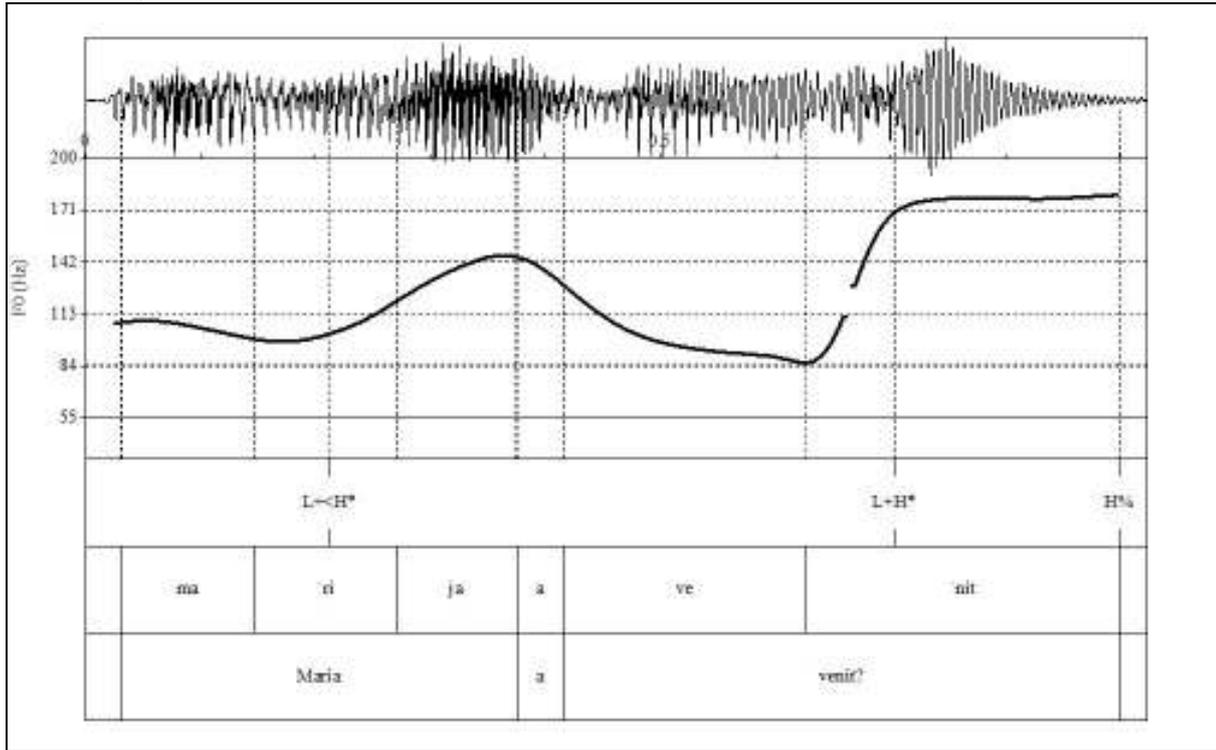
(ii) The FF pattern:

Type (a):

(4) Ma'ria [a VE'NIT]_{Foc?}

Maria has come

'Maria, did she come?' / 'Did Maria come?'

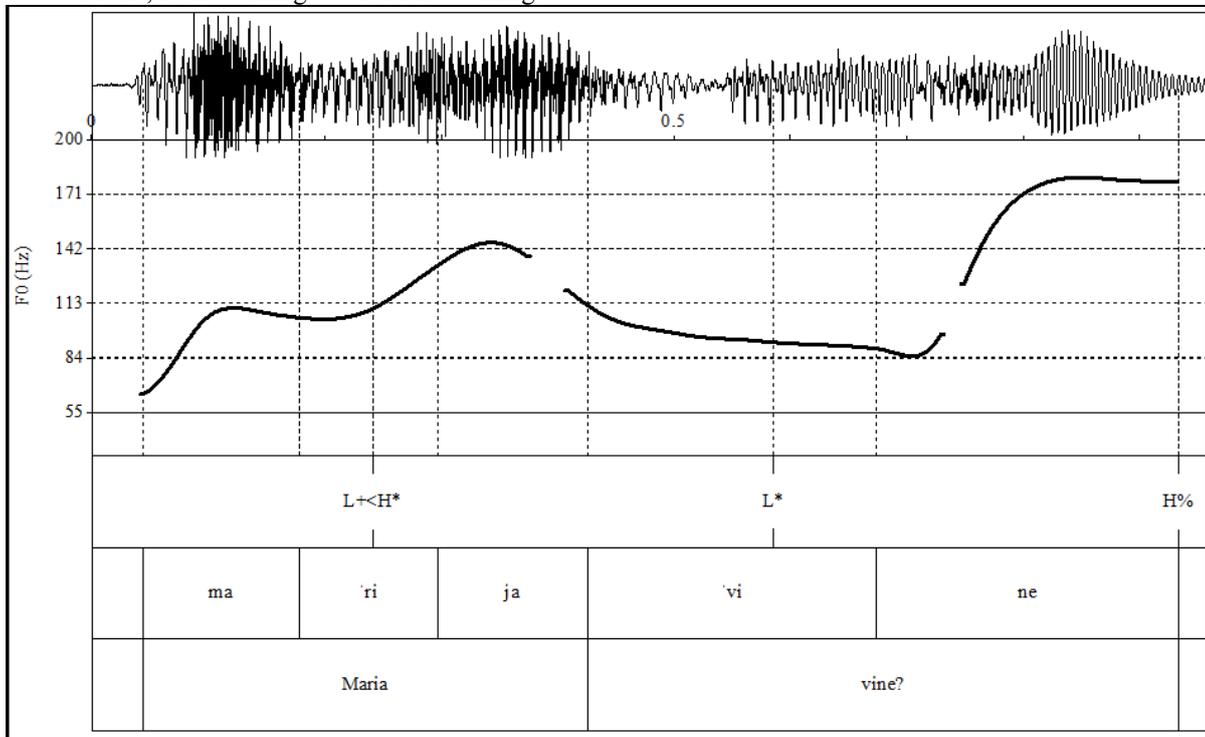


Type (b):

(5) Ma'ria ['VINE]_{Foc?}

Maria comes

'Maria, is she coming?' / 'Is Maria coming?'



• Avram (1973) didn't identify an unmarked pattern. His interest was to compare the intonations of the standard language with the Muscel variety, where the patterns are totally different (the main prominence is high rather than low and the final contour is always rising; as a result, the early focus pattern has H* on the nucleus and a final rising –

which, in short sentences, may look exactly like the final focus pattern of the standard language – and the FF pattern has rise-fall-rise or has a high lexical accent followed by an extra rise on the postaccentual syllable)

- Further studies (Dascălu 1979a,b, Dascălu-Jinga 2001: 33, GALR II: 33, 957-958) claimed that polar questions always contain an ‘emphasized element’, and this element is, by default, the verb.

Grice et al. 2000, Ladd 2008: the unmarked intonation of polar question in Romanian (and also Hungarian and Greek) is an early-focus pattern with main stress on the verb

- Jitcă et al. (2015) find both the EF pattern with focus on the verb and the FF pattern as neutral; their example is

- (6) [Context: somebody enters a shop]
 A. 'veți mar.me.'la.dă? ‘Do you have marmalade?’
 a. L* L+;H* L% (EF pattern)
 b. L* L* H% (FF pattern)

I will argue that **the neutral pattern is identical to the final-focus pattern**, as expected given the general prosodic properties of Romanian, where **default prominence is on the right** (the general pattern of well-described European languages).

For the EF pattern is (6)a, 2 possible explanations:

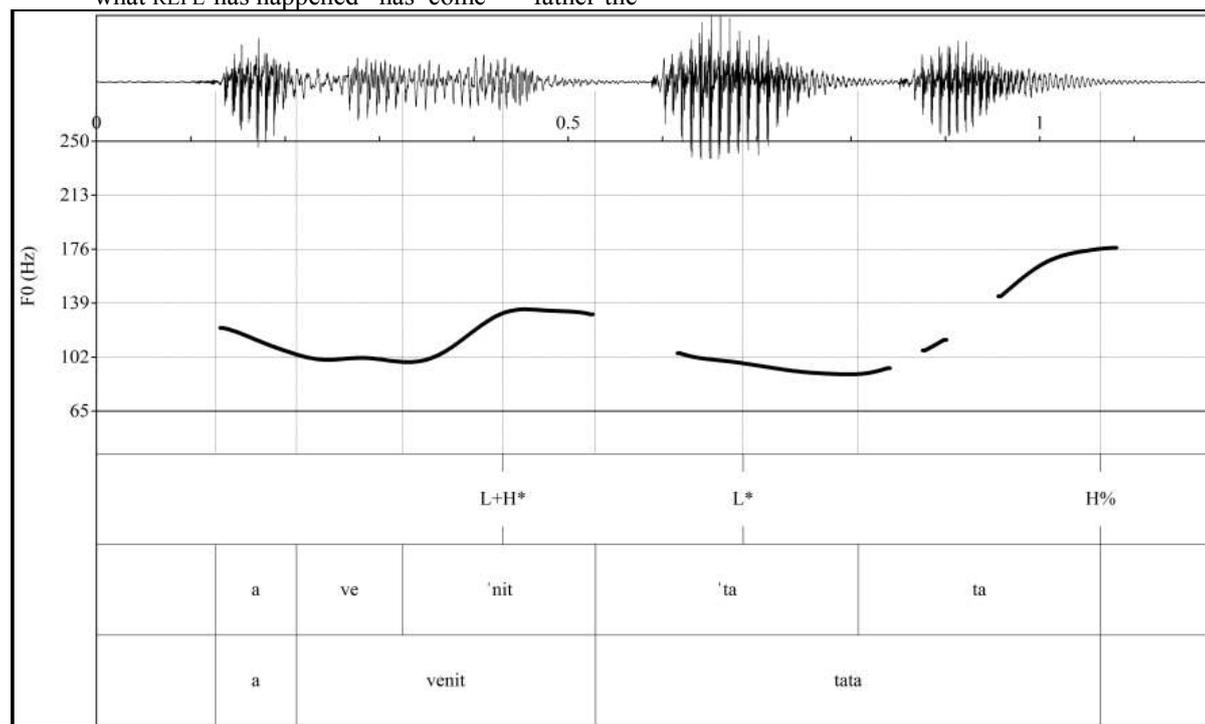
(i) the existence of expectations: even if there is no previous discourse, between a customer and a salesman certain issues are expected to be raised: whether the shop has a number of items – which the customer wants to buy – and at what price; maybe these questions can be treated as activated in the context, which would allow the verum focus intonation

(ii) this is a special pattern used for requests (cf. section 6 below)

2. The neuter pattern and the *verum* pattern

- Out-of-the-blue context, information-seeking question → only the FF pattern:

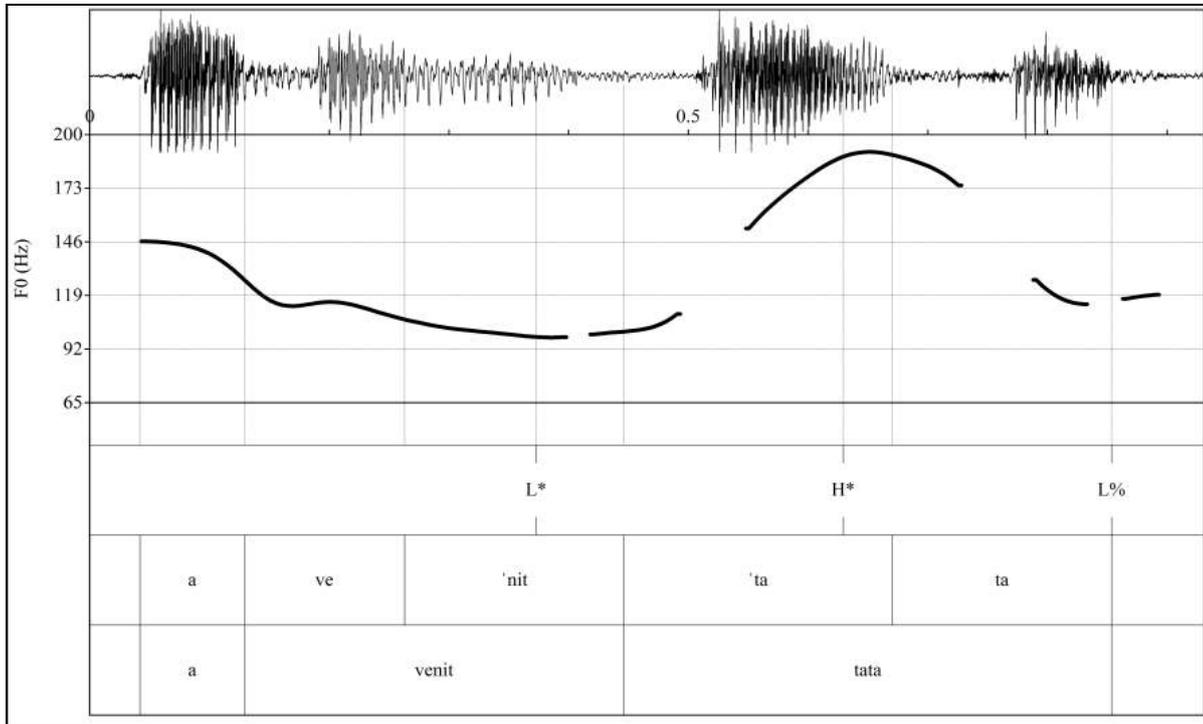
- (7) [Ce s-a întâmplat,] a ve.'nit 'ta.ta? ‘What happened? Has dad come?’
 what REFL-has happened has come father-the



The EF pattern is possible in the beginning of a conversation, but requires that the issue *whether p* has *previously occurred between the conversation participants*, in previous conversations:

- (8) [Context: father’s arrival has occurred as an issue in the communicative exchanges between the conversation participants at some point before, e.g. three hours before somebody said that we have to wait for father to get home in order to watch a DVD]

A ve.'nit 'ta.ta?
 has come father-the
 L* H* L%



Generalization:

- (9) In genuine requests for information, the early focus pattern with nuclear stress on the verb occurs if the issue whether *p* has already occurred in the linguistic exchanges between the conversation participants

This recalls the characterization of *verum* in polar questions given by Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró (2011).

- (10) *verum* is only used if ?*p* is present among the questions under discussion (QUD)

=>

- (11) The early focus pattern with nuclear stress on the verb, in polar questions that are genuine requests for information, indicates *verum focus*

3. On 'Verum Focus'

'Verum focus' (Höhle 1988, 1992) = a type of focalization manifested by sentence stress on an element that fills a (dedicated) clausal functional head position, C or Infl (which extends to the Spec of a null C, for German¹), which, for declaratives, can be roughly characterized as emphasizing the assertion:

- (12) a. But I DID take care
 b. Dar am AVUT grijă (Ro.)
 but have.1sg had care
 c. Ich HABE doch aufgepasst (Ge.)
 I have.1SG but taken-care

Obs.: the distinction between *verum focus* and focus on the predicate is conspicuous in sentences with auxiliaries, in English:

- (13) a. A: What did he do to the book? B: He LOST the book. (Predicate Focus)
 b. A: I wonder whether he lost the book. B: He DID lose the book. (*Verum Focus*)

Romanian: as auxiliaries are clitics, which arguably form a complex head with the verb (see Dobrovie-Sorin 1994, Barbu 1999, Dobrovie-Sorin & Galves 2000, Giurgea 2011), it is the lexical V which bears the stress in comparable situations, see (12)b. But we can replicate the contrast using light verb /copular constructions (see also (12)):

- (14) a. are DREPTATE Maria (nuclear stress on the predicate)
 has right Maria 'Maria is right.'
 b. ARE dreptate Maria (verum focus)
 has right Maria 'Maria IS right.'

¹ In German embedded interrogatives, *verum focus* can be realized by stress on the *wh*-pronoun that occupies SpecCP.

- (15) [Context: people are wondering whether the competition has been announced.]
 ESTE anunțat concursul
 is announced competition-the
 ‘The competition IS announced.’

A typical context for *verum* focus on a sentence expressing the proposition *p*: the issue whether *p* is present in the context (cf. Büring 2006, Gutzmann & Castroviejo-Miró 2011):

- (16) [Context: people are debating on whether somebody’s actions were legal or not]
 AVEA voie
 had permission
 ‘He WAS allowed to do that.’
- (17) [A: *Ne așteptam toți să fie supărată* ‘We all expected her to be upset.’]
 B: Și, ERA supărată?
 and was.3SG upset
 ‘So, WAS she upset?’
- (18) [Context: X said he was unsure whether he should allow his daughter to play outside; addressed to X:]
 DĂ-i voie!
 give.IMPV-3SG.DAT permission
 ‘DO allow her!’

In declaratives, the focus can be treated as focus on assertion (Höhle 1992) or on polarity (cf. the notion of ‘polarity focus’, used by Halliday 1967, Dik et al. 1981, Gussenhoven 1984, for English, and Watters 1979, for the Bantu language Aghem), but this analysis cannot extend to interrogatives (see (17)) or directives (see (18)).

=> Lohnstein (2012, 2016): *verum* focus = focus on the force component of the clause – what makes a sentence assertive, interrogative or imperative – which he calls ‘sentence mood’ (he does not refer to illocutionary force because *verum* focus can also be found in embedded clauses)

- Romero & Han (2004), Romero (2005), Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró (2011), Repp (2013), Gutzmann et al. (2017): ‘*verum*’ prosody signals the presence of a special operator *verum*, rather than marking focus on an independently existing element. → Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró (2011): *verum* is divorced from focus completely:

- (19) *Verum* is a conversational operator (with ‘use-conditional meaning’) which takes as input a proposition *p* and conveys that ?*p* should be downdated from the Question Under Discussion. (Gutzmann & Castroviejo Miró (2011): 144)

My suggestion: the ‘*verum* focus’ prosody may cover more than a single phenomenon:

In some examples found in the literature, we may indeed be dealing with focus on polarity. See the following ex. of *verum* focus in an embedded clause, modeled after Höhle’s (1992: 134):

- (20) Mi-ai spus doar ce n-am voie. Acum aș vrea să
 me-have.2SG told only what not-have.1SG permission now would.1SG want SBJV
 știu ce AM voie să fac
 know.1SG what have.1SG permission SBJV do.1SG
 ‘You only told me what I’m not allowed to. Now I’d like to know what I AM allowed to do.’

But there is evidence that a focus on polarity analysis cannot cover all the cases:

Take an interrogative such as (17); if *verum* focus had been focus on polarity, we should be able to build a negative version of (17), with the same meaning associated with focus on negation – i.e., in a context where the antecedent of (17) is negative, we should build a version of (17) with focus on negation. But this is not what we obtain; the focus must occur *above* negation:

- (21) [A: ‘We all expected her not to be upset.’ – Ro.: *Ne așteptam toți să nu fie supărată*]
 a. B: ‘So, WAS she not upset?’
 b. # Și, NU era supărată? (Ro.) (possible, but with an incredulity meaning)
 and not was.3SG upset.FSG
 c. # Și, nu ERA supărată?
 and not was.3SG upset.FSG

In English this is possible because Neg can stay below Infl. In Romanian Neg is always above Mood and Tense, as an element of the verbal complex => *verum* focus cannot be realized as in (21)b,c. → we would maybe use

- d. Și, așa era? Într-adevăr nu era supărată?
 and so was really not was upset.FSG

4. Verum Focus in polar questions

Giurgea & Remberger (2012, 2014): two types of interpretation taken to represent ‘verum focus’ (VF) in polar questions.

Their claim:

- (22) Verum focus (manifested by nuclear stress on the verbal complex) may license VSX orders with predicates which require SVX in neutral order (= predicates which do not normally allow a stage topic and therefore have the subject as the default topic: typically I-level predicates, generics, statives which involve a long-lasting, non-localized situation)

Ex.

- (23) (Fratele tău) are (#fratele tău) mașină (#fratele tău) (with neutral intonation:
brother-the your has brother-the your car brother-the your no narrow focus)

(i) VF licensed by a context in which the issue whether *p* has already been raised and left unsolved – ‘neutral VF’:

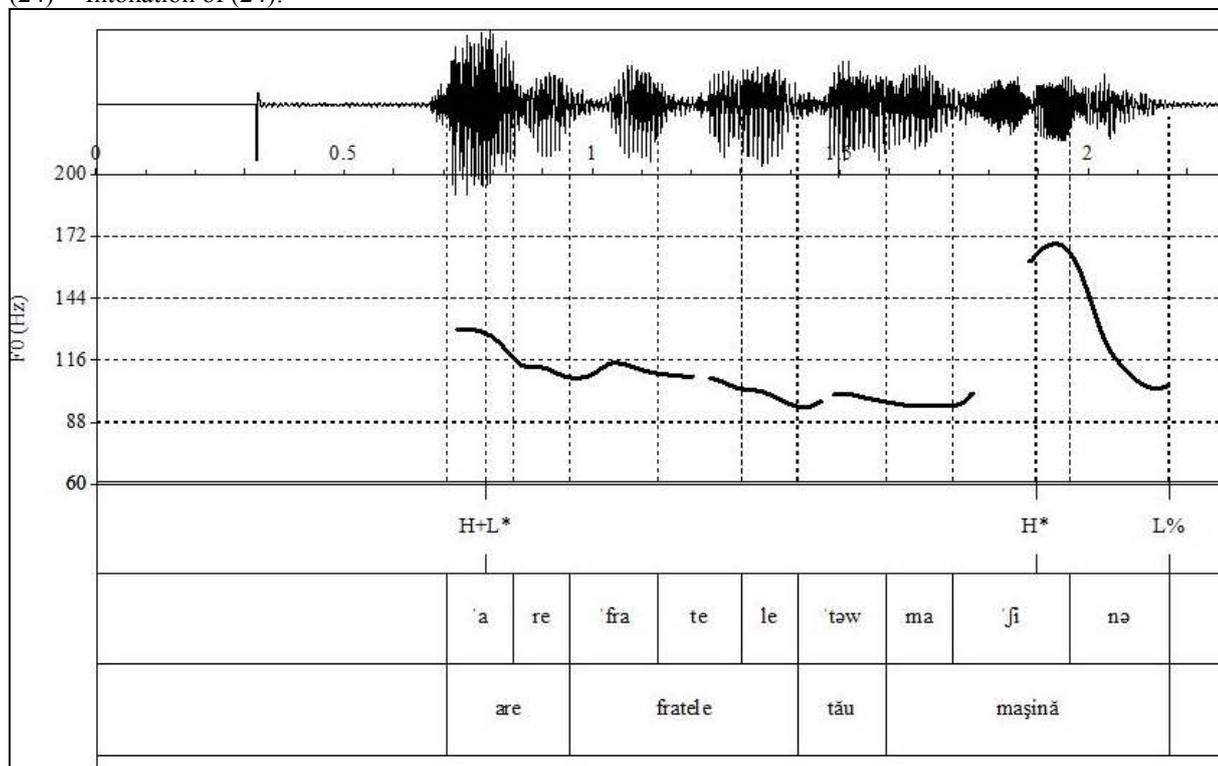
- (24) N-am înțeles până la urmă: ARE fratele tău mașină?
not-have.1SG understood in-the-end has brother-the your car

(ii) ‘Mirative VF’: the focus (on polarity) conveys unexpectedness: the proposition at hand is less expected than other focal alternatives. As here we have {*p*, $\neg p$ } as focal alternatives, this results in a negatively biased question (the speaker expresses doubts wrt a positive answer to the question):

- (25) E nu zău. ARE fratele tău mașină?
really has brother-the your car

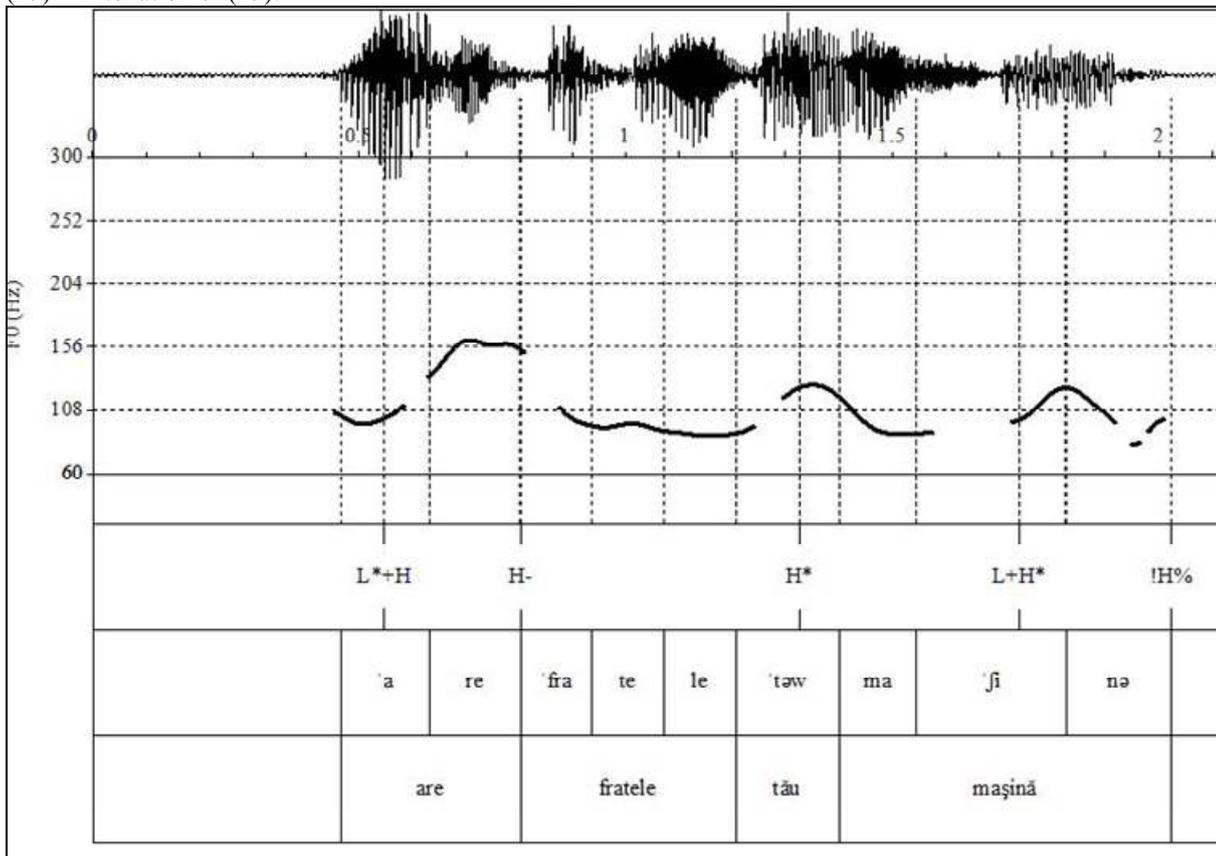
Claim of the present paper: these two interpretations are intonationally distinct. Actually, the last word seems to carry a nuclear accent in this case (cf. the stress on *fratele tău*, which appears to be a prenuclear accent).² It is type (i) which illustrates the EF pattern with Foc=V.

(24) Intonation of (24):



² A distinct intonation for mirative focus in general has been reported for Italian (cf. Bianchi et al. 2016)

(25)' Intonation of (25):



Jitca et al. (2015) also noticed that questions expressing surprise have a special pattern with repeated L*+H accents:

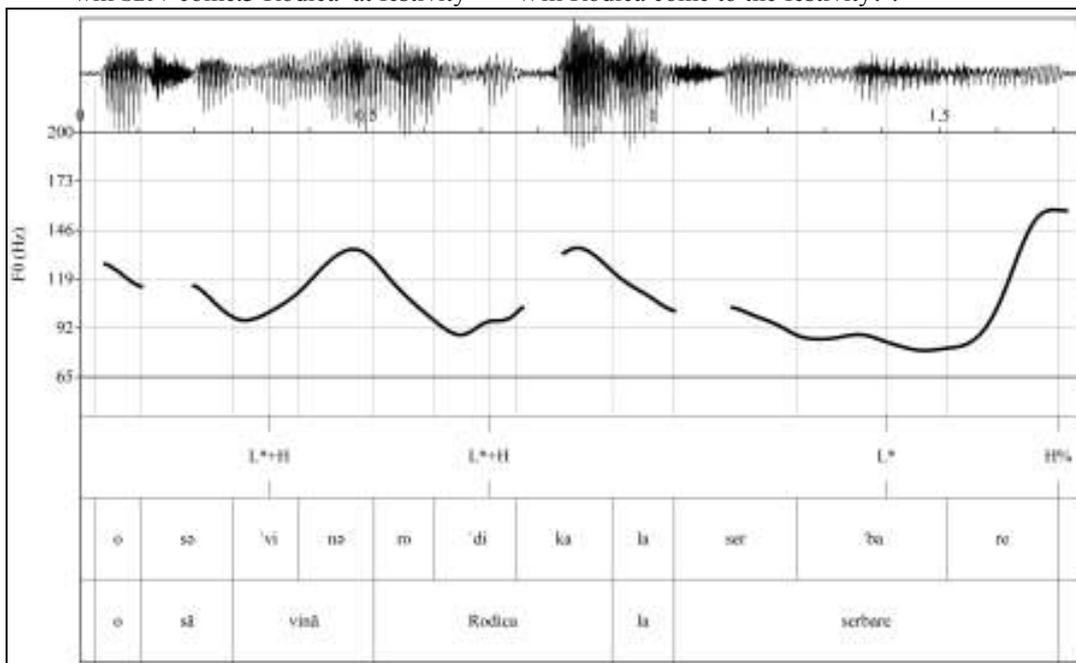
(26) 'Spui ca 'Mario candi'deaza ca pri'mar? 'Are you saying that Mario is running for mayor?'

L+<H* L*+H H- L*+H H- L* H% (Jitca et al. 2015:304, fig. 8.18)

The surprise pattern in (26) differs from the incredulity pattern in (25)' by the boundary tone: in (26) it is rising (as in the FF pattern), in (25)' it is high-falling, resembling the EF pattern; the difference is very clear in examples where the last accent is not sentence-final:

(27) O sa vina Rodica la serbare? !

will SBJV come.3 Rodica at festivity 'Will Rodica come to the festivity? !'



Here, I'm interested in pattern (i) – we may call it *plain verum* – which does not involve any bias towards a positive or negative answer.

5. Experiment: contrasting *verum* and neuter polar questions

I tested the claims in section 2 above on pairs of examples which contain the same polar question in different (imagined) contexts, one that allows *verum* focus and one that does not:

- (28) [Context: you meet some acquaintances on the street by chance]
 Ce faceți? Ați 'fost la cum.pă.ră.'turi?
 what do.2PL have.2PL been at shoppings
 'What's up? Have you been shopping?'
 Prediction: FF pattern (rising on the last syllable)
- (29) [Context: some people were supposed to do the shopping; you check whether they fulfilled their commitment]
 Gata? Ați 'fost la cum.pă.ră.'turi?
 ready have.2PL been at shoppings
 'Ready? Have you been shopping?'
 Prediction: EF pattern, *verum* focus (L* on the verb, (L)H* on the last syllable, from HL% with truncation, see section 1 above)
- (30) [Context: you enter a room where somebody has just finished a phone conversation]
 Ce faci? Ai vor. 'bit cu co.'pi.ii?
 what do.2SG have.2SG talked with children-the
 'What's up? Have you spoken with the children?'
 Prediction: FF pattern (L* H%)
- (31) [Context: somebody told you a few hours ago that she would try to phone her children, who are abroad]
 E, ai reușit? Ai vor. 'bit cu co.'pi.ii?
 hey have.2SG succeeded have.2SG talked with children-the
 'Well now, have you succeeded? Have you spoken with the children?'
 Prediction: EF pattern *verum* focus (L* on the verb, H* on the last accented syllable, L on the last syllable, from HL% with secondary association, see above)

I used 13 informants, all living in Bucharest, aged between 29 and 69. They were asked to read aloud the sentence, as they would pronounce it in the indicated context. The experiment contained six other sentences, as fillers. The recordings have been analyzed with Praat (Boersma and Weenink 2012).

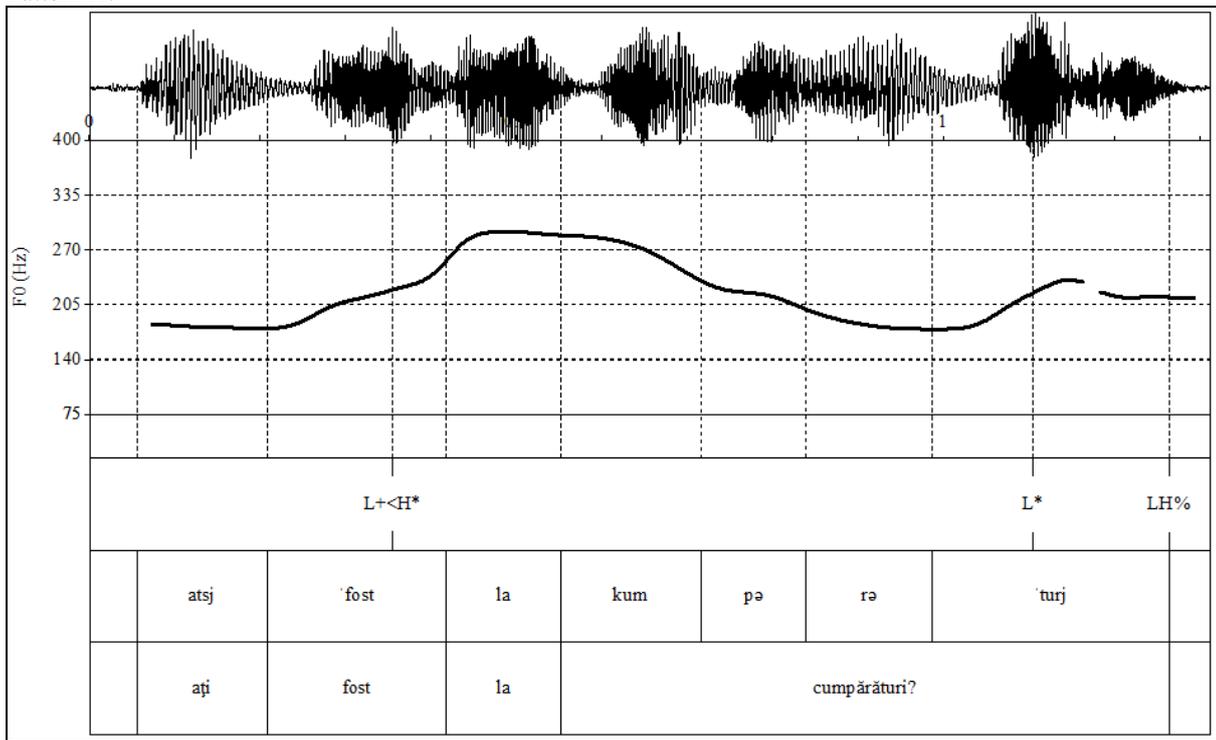
Results:

- (32) Ați 'fost la cum.pă.ră.'turi?

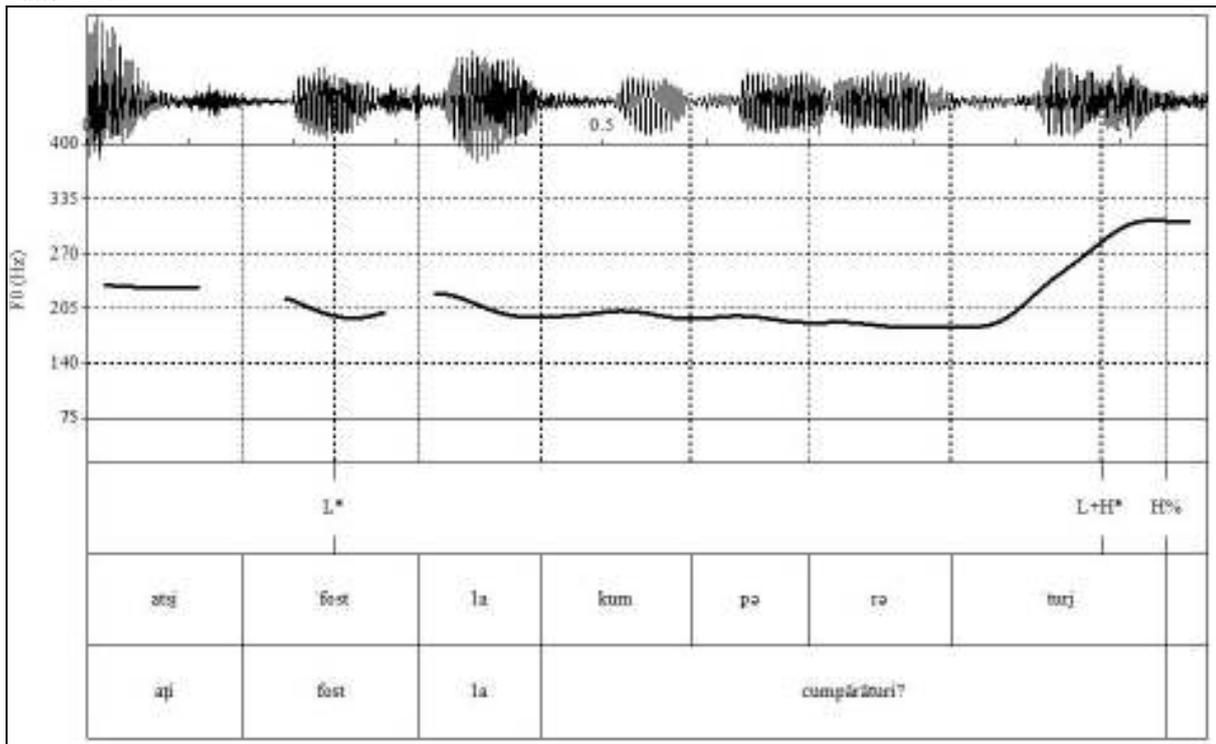
L+<H*	L* LH%	Pattern A
L+H*	L* LH%	Pattern A'
L*	L+H* H%	Pattern B

N.B. here, the most conspicuous difference concerns the first accent in the sentence: prenuclear accent are rising, the nuclear accent in polar questions is L*, followed by a low plateau.

Pattern A:

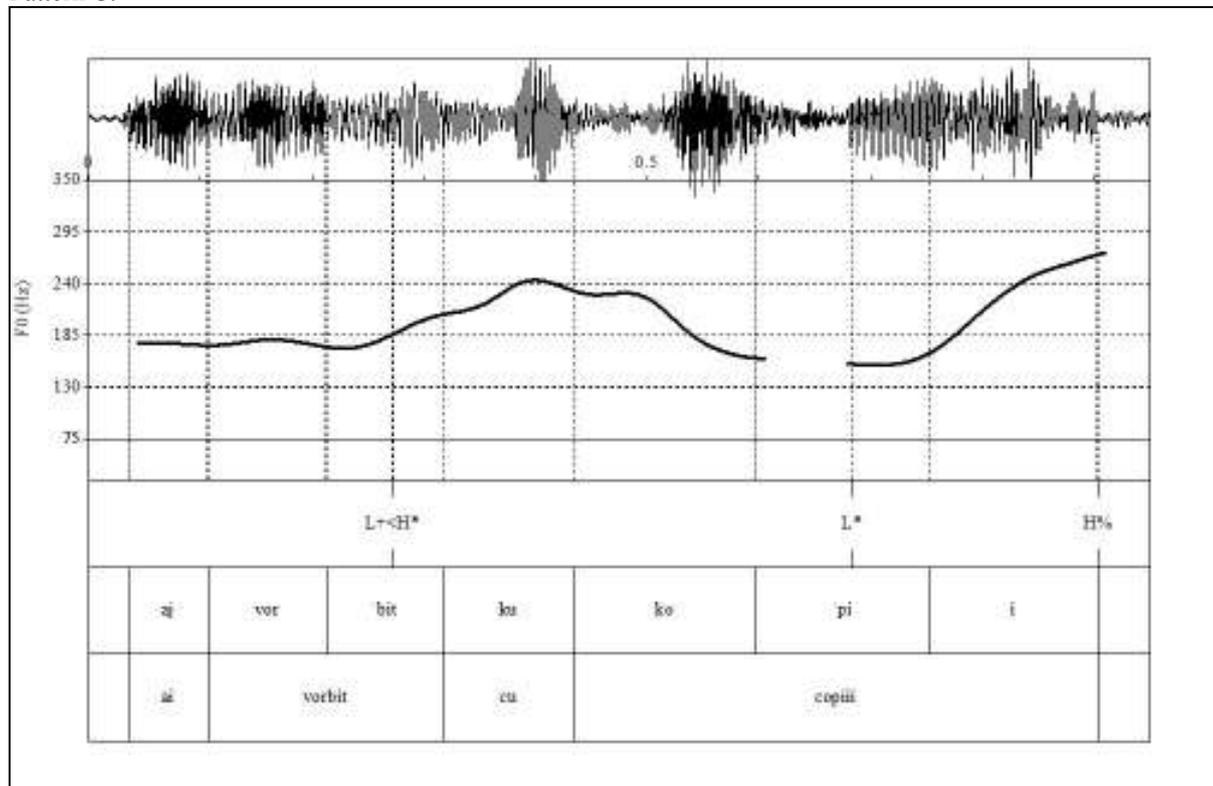


Pattern B:

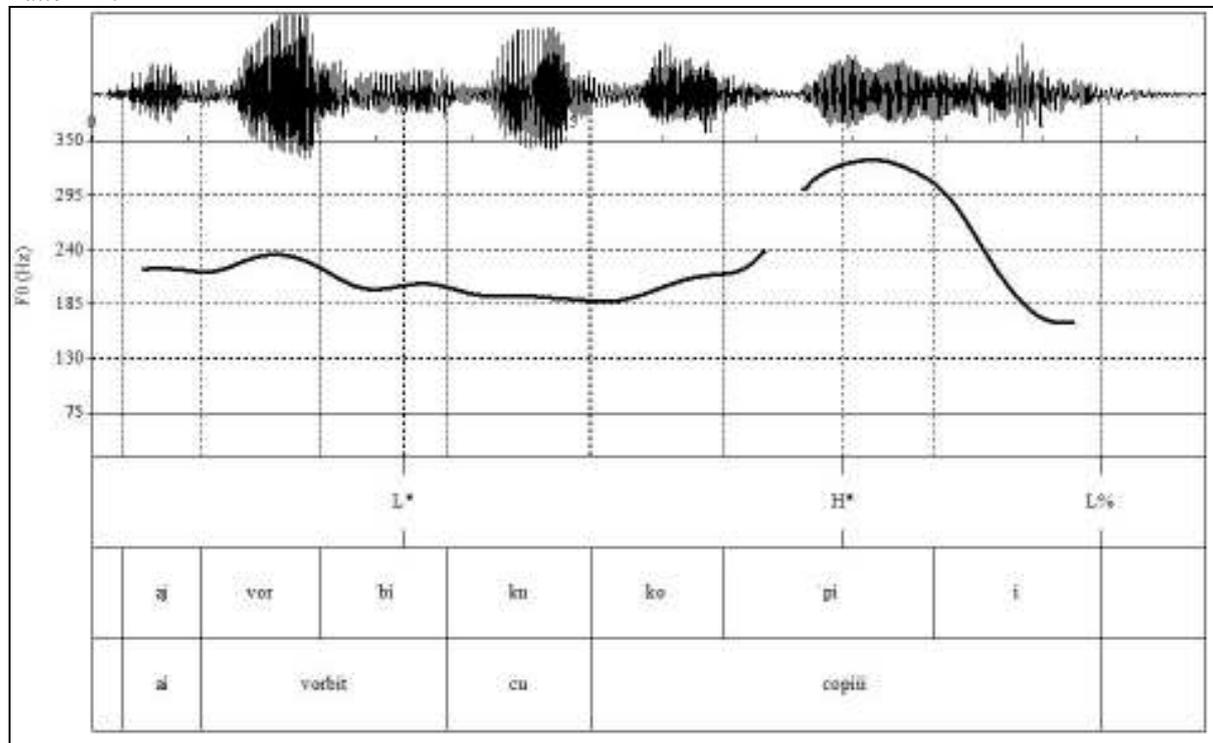


- (33) Ai vor.'bit cu co.'pi.ii?
- | | | |
|-------|----------|---------------------------------------|
| L+<H* | L* LH% | Pattern C |
| L+<H* | H+L* LH% | Pattern C' |
| L* | H* L% | Pattern D |
| L+<H* | L+H* L% | Pattern E (unexpected; isolated case) |

Pattern C:



Pattern D:



Results (those which contradict the predictions are shaded):

Informant:	(28):	(29):	(30):	(31):
1	A	B	E	D
2	A	B	C	D
3	A	B	D	D
4	A	A	C	D
5	A	A	C'	D
6	A	A'	C'	D
7	A	A	C	D
8	A	B	C	C
9	A	B	C	D
10	A	A	C	C
11	A	B	D	D
12	A	A	C	C
13	A	A	C	D

Discussion:

- for the pair (28)-(29), the results support the idea that the end-focus pattern represents the neutral intonation: all the unexpected results were found in the verum focus condition; we can conclude that some informants did not consider that the issue whether *p* was so much activated in the proposed context as to trigger the verum intonation (maybe they didn't pay sufficient attention to the suggested context), so they chose the unmarked pattern

- for the pair (30)-(31):

- those who chose the verum pattern in (30) may have imagined a context similar to the one described in (31) (note that all of them also used the verum pattern in (31));

- pattern E (isolated, just 1 occurrence) does not correspond to either of the two patterns, it seems to reflect a slip from the all-focus pattern (see the rising, prenuclear accent on the verb) to the verum pattern (see the final configuration)

- among those who chose the neutral pattern in the verum condition, two (speakers 10 and 12) made the same choice in the first pair, so apparently they do not succeed in imagining the right contexts and use the neutral pattern throughout

6. Other uses of the EF pattern

(i) Nuclear stress on the verb can also result from **deaccenting the postverbal material** ((34)a shows that in the described context, deaccentuation is also found in declaratives, so it follows from Givenness, irrespective of the sentence type):

(34) [Context: Enescu's music is on the radio]

a. Îmi 'PLA.ce E.'nes.cu
L+H* L- L%

'I like Enescu'

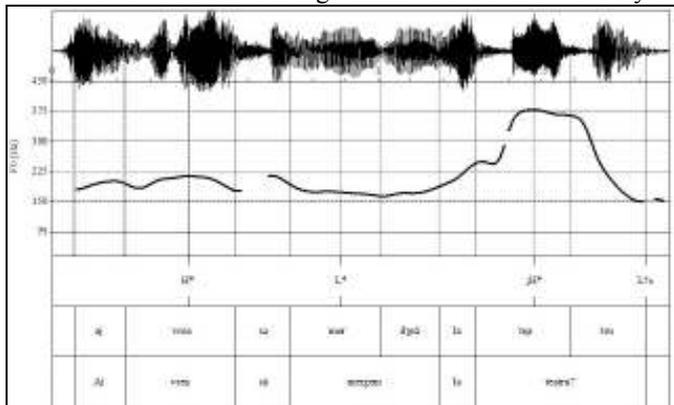
b. Îți 'PLA.ce E.'nes.cu?
L* L+H* L%

'Do you like Enescu?'

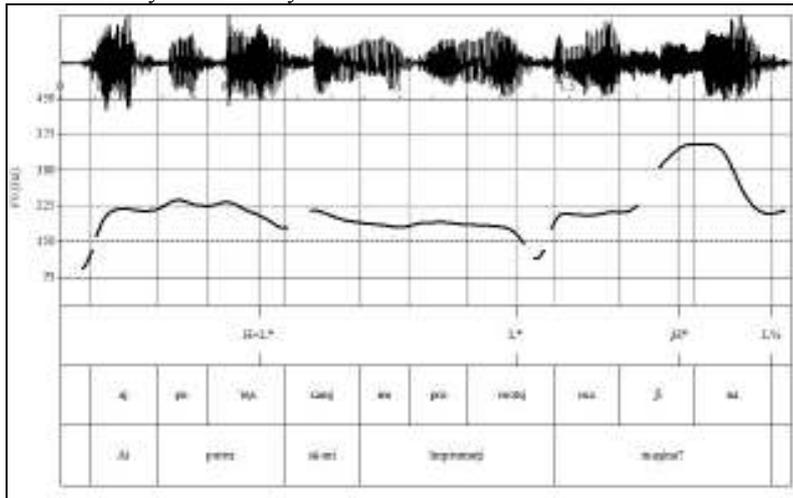
(ii) The final HL% contour of EF correlated with a low tone on the verb also has a usage where it is not easily justifiable as reflecting verum focus or deaccenting: in **questions used to make proposals or requests**.

There is however a difference wrt the verum pattern: the L* accent is not always on the main verb, but may occur on its subjunctive complement (see (35)):

(35) Ai vrea să mergem la teatru? (out-of-the-blue proposal)
would.2SG want SBJV go.1PL to theatre 'Would you like to go to the theatre?'



- (36) Ai putea să-mi împrumuți mașina? (out-of-the-blue polite request)
 would.2SG can SBJV-me.DAT lend.2SG car-the
 ‘Could you lend me your car?’



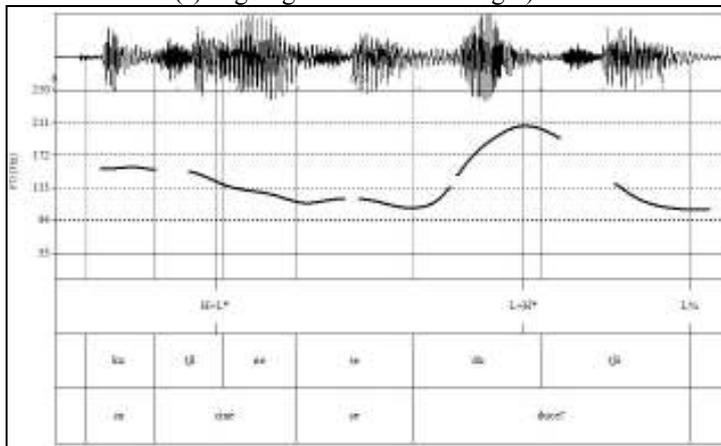
The use of the FF pattern would turn these sentences into genuine information-seeking questions about a preexisting intention of the hearer (instead of proposals or requests).

As here this EF pattern seems to be neutral, we may have an explanation for the fact that this pattern has been considered *the* neutral pattern of polar questions in Romanian: the authors may have considered questions used as requests or proposals rather than information-seeking questions.

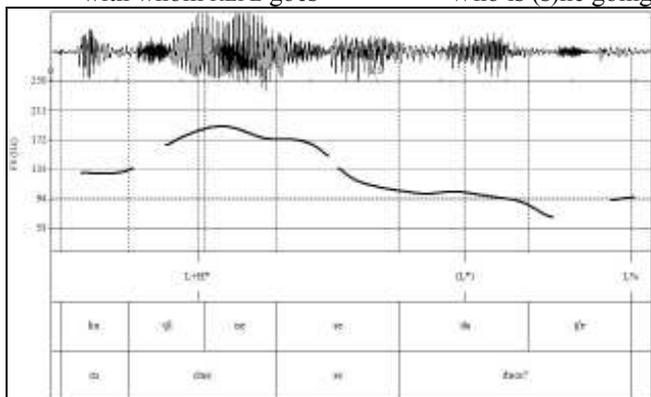
iii) Echo questions

Echo wh-questions with a non-interrogative antecedent have the same type of HL% boundary tone, and low nuclear tone on the wh-word (see (37)). Main prominence on the wh-word also characterizes the pattern of standard wh-questions in Romanian, see (38):

- (37) Cu cine se duce? (Context: the Speaker was expected to know the
 with whom REFL goes answer, but (s)he didn't hear well what was said or
 'Who is (s)he going with?' forgot)



- (38) Cu cine se duce? (standard question, no special context)
 with whom REFL goes 'Who is (s)he going with?'



Possible explanation for the similarity between the pattern in (37) and EF pattern in verum polar questions: in both cases the propositional content is old (has an accessible antecedent).

Finally, note that echo questions which have a *question* as an antecedent have the intonation of *neuter* polar questions (the FF pattern). This is not unexpected, as these are not genuine wh-questions, but rather polar questions with a covert *Are you asking me...* (e.g. A: *Cu cine se duce?* B: *Cu cine se duce?* ‘(Are you asking me) who is (s)he going with?’)

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