## Narrow focus questions and answers

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In Finnish, a yes-no question is standardly answered affirmatively by echoing the finite verb of the question or else by an answer particle.

(1) Question: Haluaa-ko Marja kahvia? Answer: (a) Haluaa. (b) Kyllä. Wants -Q Marja coffee wants yes

'Does Marja want coffee?' 'Yes.'

Narrow focus in questions is marked by affixing the question particle -ko to the focused constituent and moving it to initial position. In this case the affirmative answer cannot employ the verb, but instead echoes the focused constituent. Alternatively the answer particle can be used.

(2) Q: Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa? A: (a) Kahvia. (b) #Haluaa. (c) Kyllä. Coffee -Q Marja wants coffee wants yes

'Is it coffee Marja wants?' 'Yes'

The same holds true in Hungarian. In the case of wide-focus questions the verb can be used as affirmative answer, or else the answer particle *igen* 'yes'. For narrow focus questions the verb can't be used, but instead an echo of the focused constituent, or else the affirmative particle.

It is not the case in all languages that you can answer a narrow focus question by echoing the focused constituent. In other languages, typically, you have to rely on an affirmative answer particle. This is the case in English, for example, and in Thai. What is the difference between these two systems?

I claim that there are (at least) two quite different ways of forming narrow focus questions, reflected in how they are answered. Questions universally contain a free variable which is assigned a value by the answer. In wide focus yes-no questions the variable is polarity, a sentential head in the IP-domain, which has two possible values [±Pol], assigned a value by the answer. The structure of a verb-echo answer in Finnish or Hungarian is that the verb moves to the C-domain to lexically support a focused [+Pol] feature. The focused feature assigns positive value to the polarity variable in the sentence, and the IP is typically not spelled out, leaving just the verb with the focused polarity feature spelled out.

In narrow focus questions the variable, in Finnish and Hungarian, is the focused constituent. The meaning of (2) and (4) can be paraphrased as 'Marja wants coffee or not-coffee, i.e. something other than coffee; tell me which alternative is right.' In more formal terms (but simplifying the derivation) the structure of the question is (5). The particle –ko in Finnish encodes '±', positive or negative something, depending what it is affixed to. In wide focus questions it is polarity, in narrow focus questions it is some other constituent.

(5) Q: [±coffee] C [ Marja wants <±coffee> ]

The structure of the answer is (6). The focused constituent [+coffee], spelled out *kahvia* in Finnish, assigns positive value to the question variable [±coffee], and the IP is not spelled out.

(6) [+kahvia] Foc [<sub>IP</sub> Marja haluaa [+kahvia]

The other strategy, employed in English, and also in Thai, is a cleft or pseudo-cleft question.

(7) Is coffee what Mary wants?

Here the variable isn't 'coffee or not coffee'. The two alternatives are not 'Mary wants coffee' and 'Mary wants not-coffee, i.e. something other than coffee'. Instead, the two alternatives are 'What Mary wants is coffee' and 'What Mary wants is not coffee'. The variable is not [±coffee] but [±Pol]. Why don't English and Thai make use of the seemingly simpler strategy used in Finnish and Hungarian? I speculate that there may be a variety of reasons, rather than just one parameter.