NARROW FOCUS QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Anders Holmberg

Different forms of yes-no questions and their answers

English (no question particle)

Q: Does Mary want coffee?

A1: Yes.

A2: (Yes) she does.

Estonian (initial Q-particle)

Q: **Kas** Mari tahab kohvi?
Q Mari wants coffee

A1: Jah.
yes

A2: Tahab jah./ Jah tahab.
wants yes / yes wants

Finnish: (second-position Q-particle)

Q: Haluaa-**ko** Marja kahvia?
wants -Q Marja coffee

A1: Haluaa.
wants

A2: Kyllä./Joo.
yes yes

Hungarian: (no Q-particle)

Q: Mari kér kávét? / Kér Mari kávét?
Mari wants coffee

A1: Kér.
wants

A2: Igen.
yes

Thai: (final Q-particle)

Q: khăw rian phaa-săa-yîi-pùn **rŭu**?
he study Japanese Q
'Did he study Japanese?'

A1: rian
study

A2: chây
right
'Yes.'

Different forms of yes-no questions with narrow focus:

English:	Is it coffee that Mary wants?	(cleft)
Finnish:	Kahvia-**ko** Marja haluaa? coffee-Q Marja wants	(fronting with particle)
Hungarian:	Kávét kér Mari? coffee wants Mari	(fronting, no particle)
Estonian:	**Kas** Mari tahab KOHVI? Q Mari wants coffee	(particle, no fronting)
Turkish:	Mary kahve **mi** isti-yor? Mary coffee Q want-IMPFV	(particle, no fronting)
Thai:	phaa-săa-yîi-pùn **rŭu** thîi khăw rian? Japanese Q that he study	(cleft, with particle)

Different ways to answer a Narrow Focus Question (affirmatively):

English:

Q: Is it coffee that Mary wants.
A: Yes.

Finnish:

Q: Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa?
coffee-Q Marja wants
A1: *Haluaa.
wants
A2: Kahvia.
coffee
A3: Kyllä./Joo.
yes yes

Hungarian:

Q: Kávét kér Mari?
coffee wants Mari
A1: *Kér.
wants
A2: Kávét.
coffee
A3: Igen.
'Yes.'

Thai:

Q:	phaa-săa-yîi-pùn	**rŭ~~u~~**	thîi	khăw	rian?
	Japanese	Q	that	he	study
A1:	*rian				
	study				
A2:	*phaa-săa-yîi-pùn				
	Japanese				
A3:	chây				
	right				
	'Yes.'				

In some languages you answer a narrow focus question by echoing the focused constituent.
In other languages you can't do this.

What is the difference between them that has this effect?

The meaning of questions

Hamblin (1958, 1973): The denotation of a question is the set of propositions which constitute possible answers to the question.

A question puts a set of alternative propositions before the addressee, and asks the addressee to say which alternative proposition is true.

Does Mary speak Finnish?
= Tell me which proposition is true: Mary speaks Finnish or Mary does not speak Finnish.

How does the syntax encode (and determine) this meaning?

The syntax of questions (Holmberg 2016)

All questions contain a free variable which is assigned a value in the answer.
In wh-questions the wh-word is the variable.

(11) Q: What did she eat?
A: A sandwich.

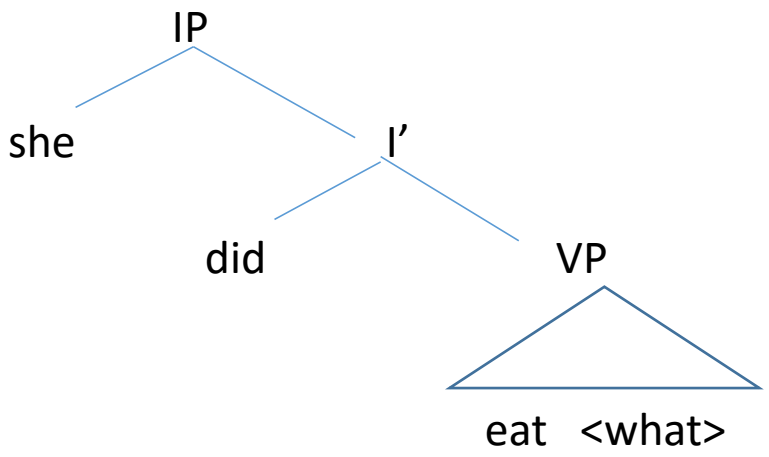
what did [$_{IP}$ she [$_{VP}$ eat <what>]]

- *What* is a variable.
- It ranges over possible values.
- What values, depends on the linguistic and extralinguistic context.
- In this case, different kinds of food: a sandwich, a hamburger, fish and chips, a cake…

The question invites the interlocutor to say which value will make a true proposition.
Answering is providing a value for the variable.

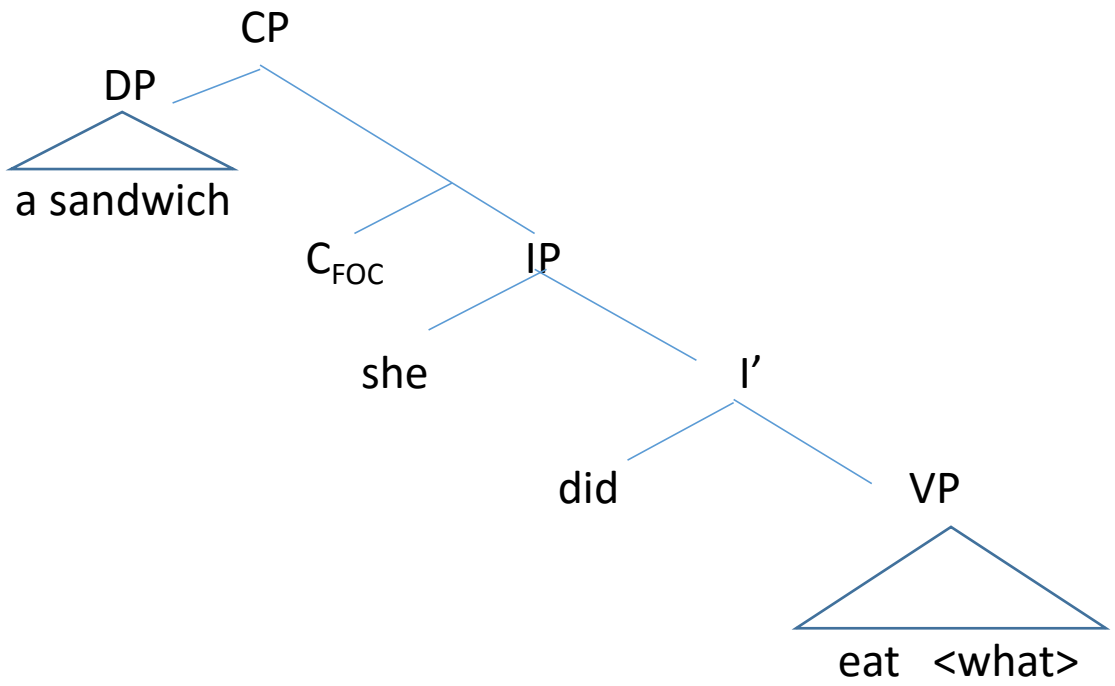
Deriving the answer of a wh-question

1. Copy the IP of the question, with the variable.



Deriving the answer of a wh-question

2. Merge a Focus head, and
3. Merge a constituent in the Focus position. This constituent will assign a value to the variable in IP.



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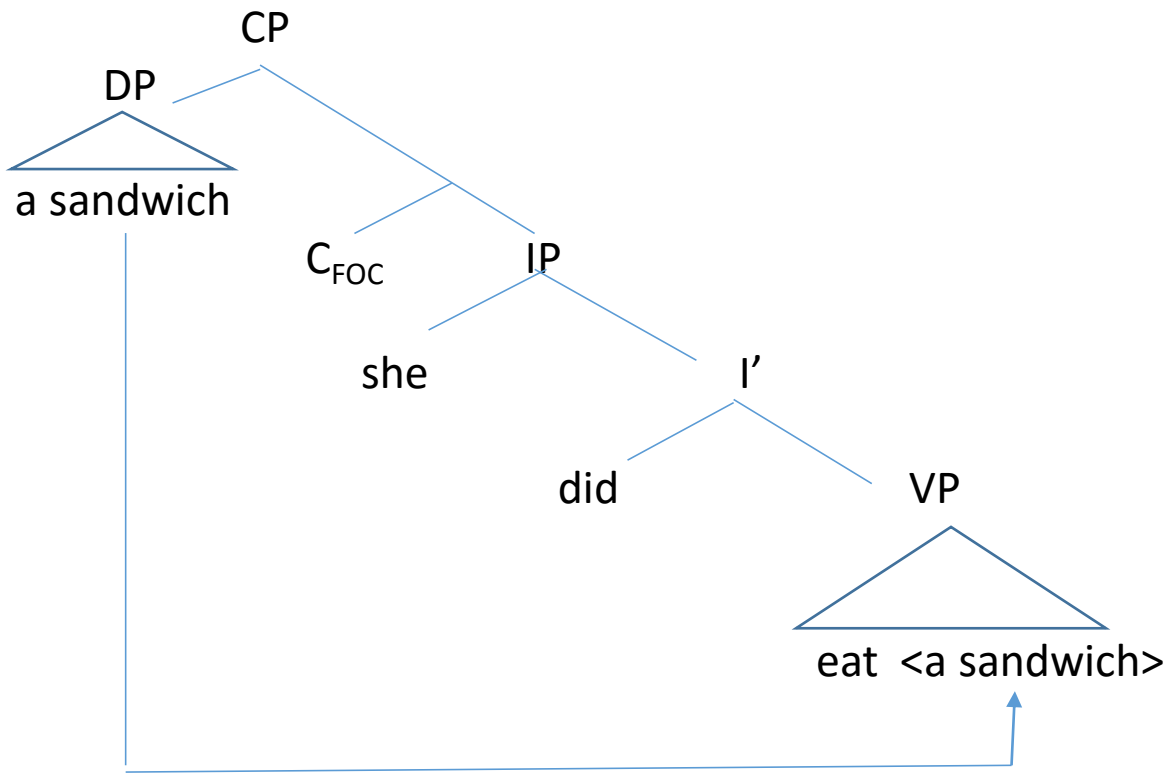

Deriving the answer of a wh-question

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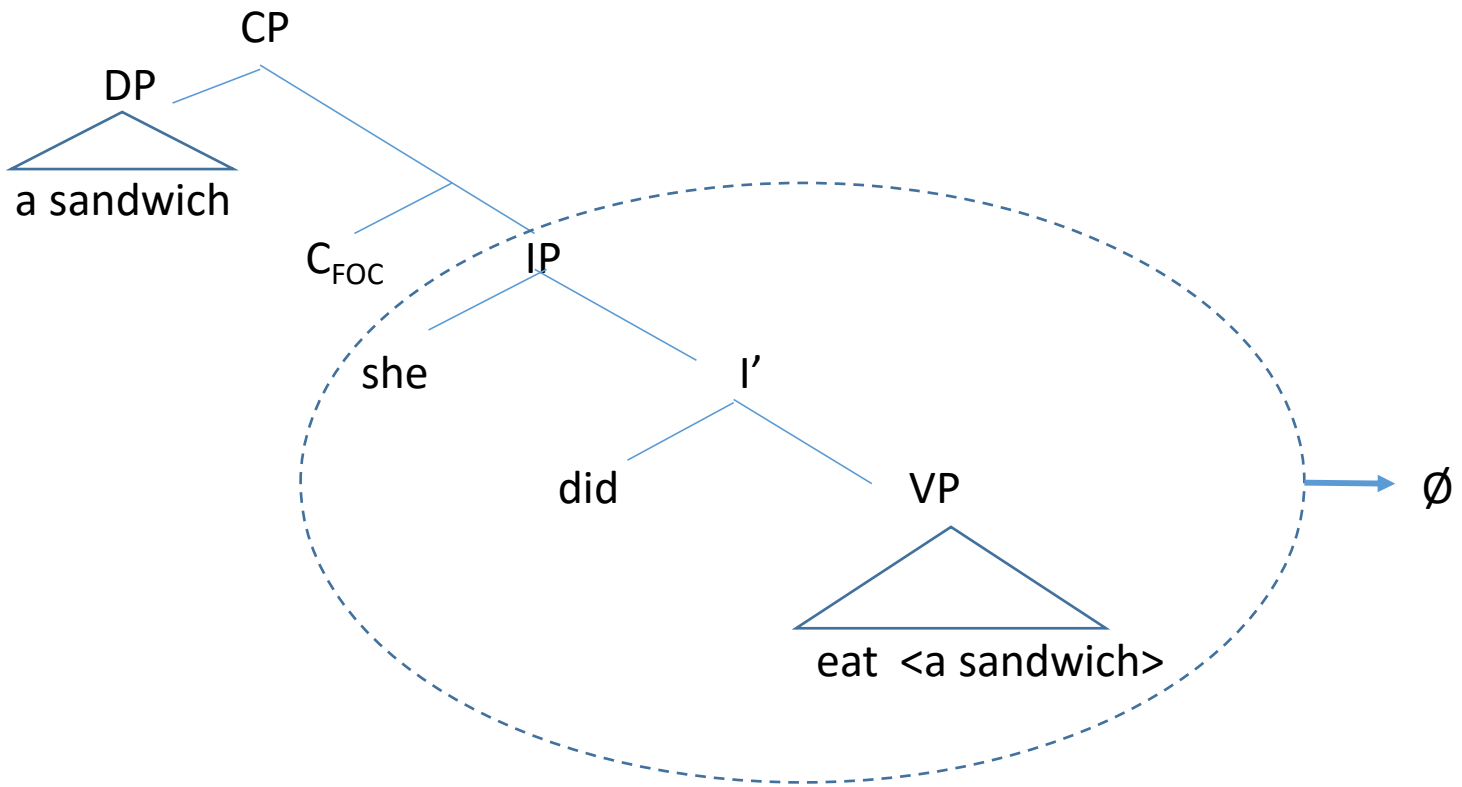


4. Delete the IP under identity with the IP of the question (Merchant 2000, Holmberg 2016: 56-57)

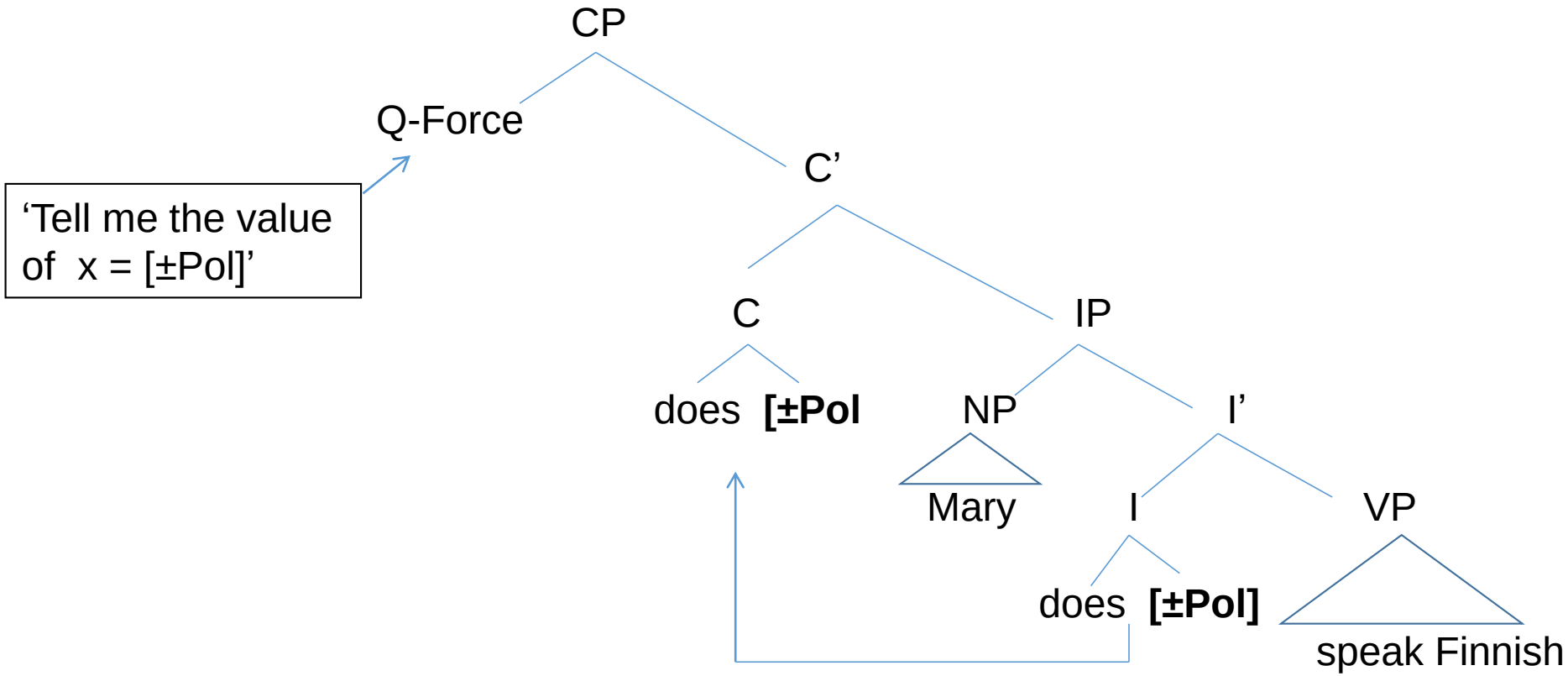
The syntax of yes-no questions

- In yes-no questions the variable is Polarity.
- It has two possible values: positive or negative, [+Pol] or [-Pol].
- In yes-no questions, its value is open, [±Pol].
- The question invites the interlocutor to say which value yields a true proposition.

Does Mary speak Finnish?

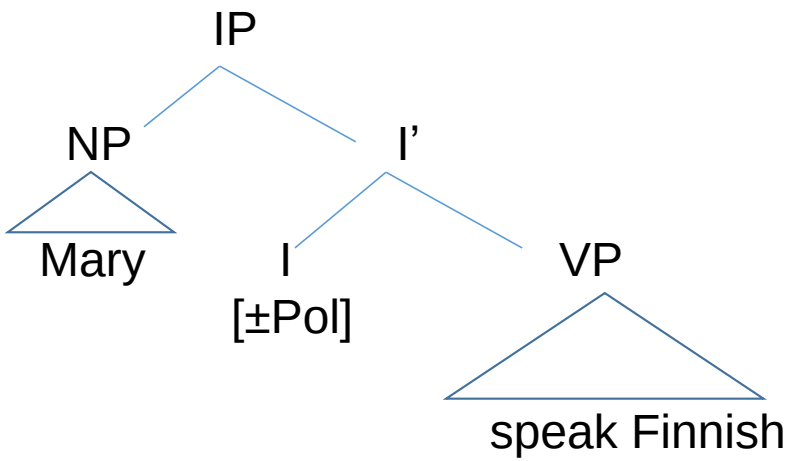
Structure: Mary [±Pol] speak Finnish

Does Mary speak Finnish?



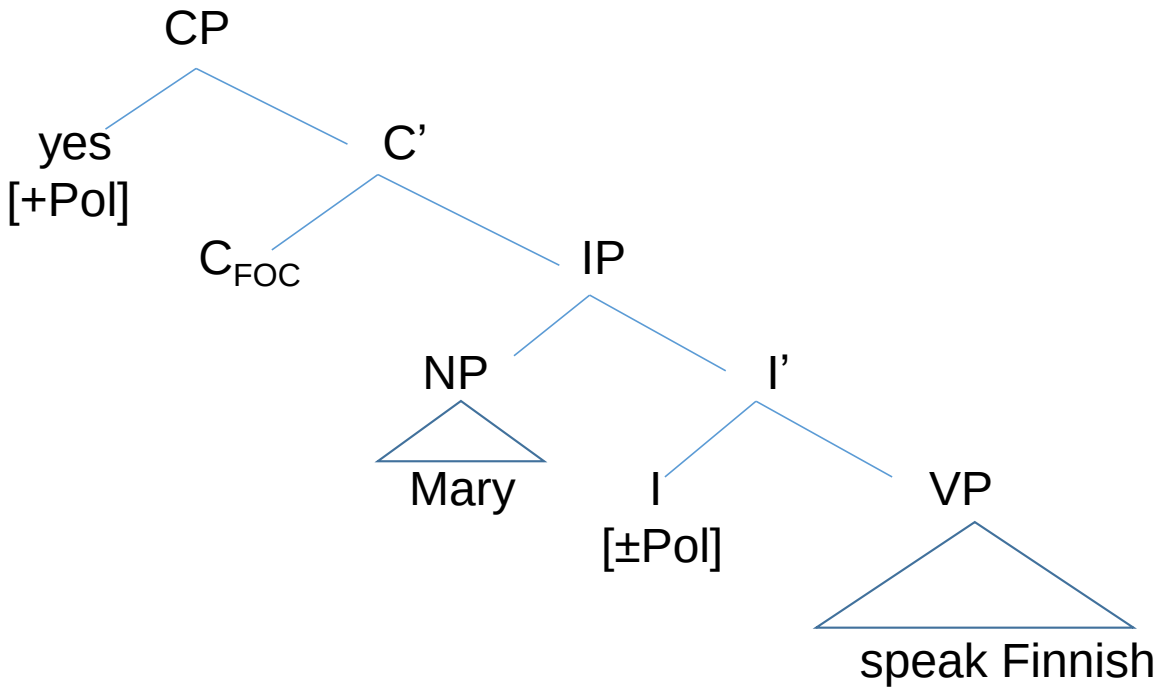
The [±Pol] variable always moves to the C-domain (like the wh-variable).
In many languages [±Pol] is spelled out as a question particle.

To derive the answer: *Yes.*



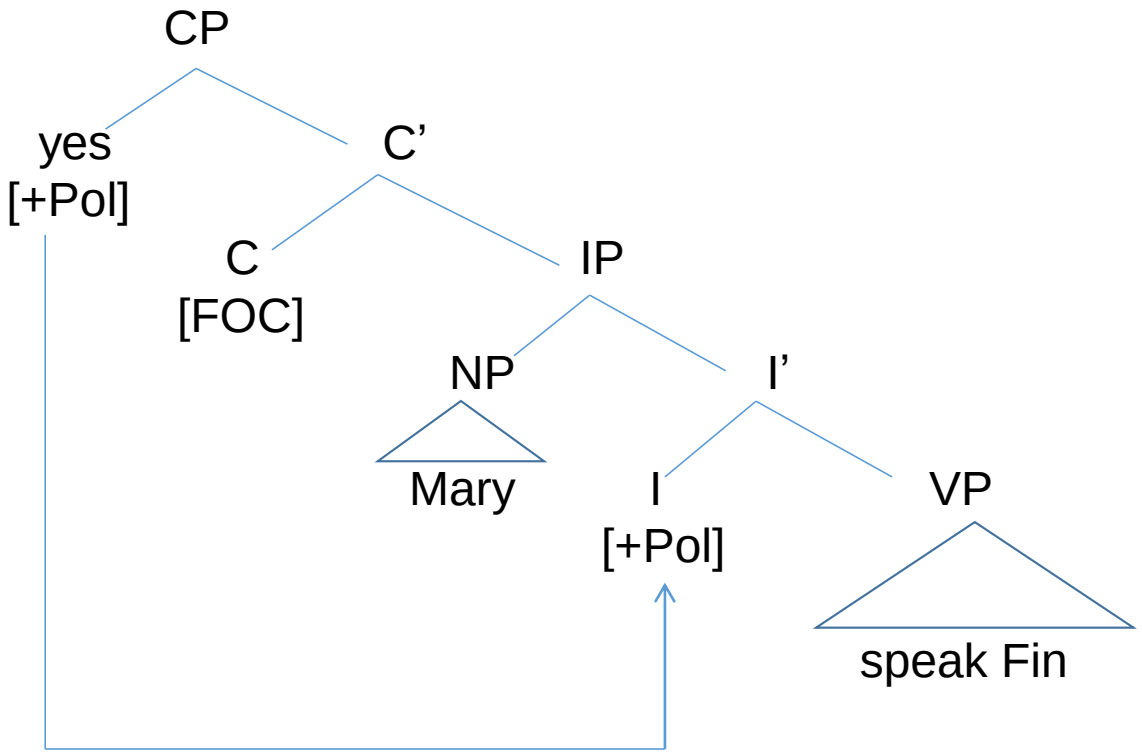
- Copy the IP of the question, containing the variable.

To derive the answer: *Yes.*



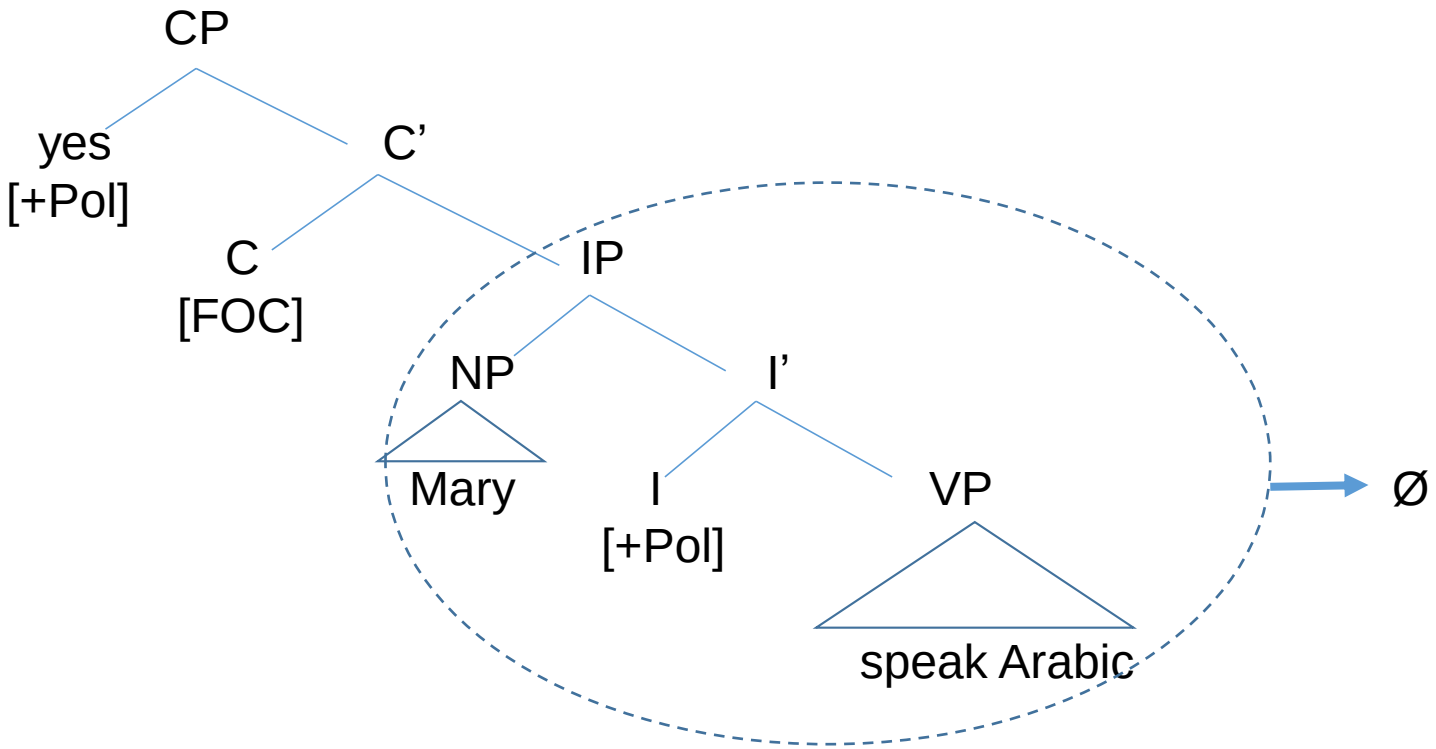
- Merge C_{FOC} and a <u>valued polarity feature</u> (spelled out *yes* or *no*)

To derive the answer: *Yes.*



- Assign the value of the focused polarity feature to the polarity variable in IP.

To derive the answer: *Yes.*



- Delete the IP, because it’s identical to the IP of the question.

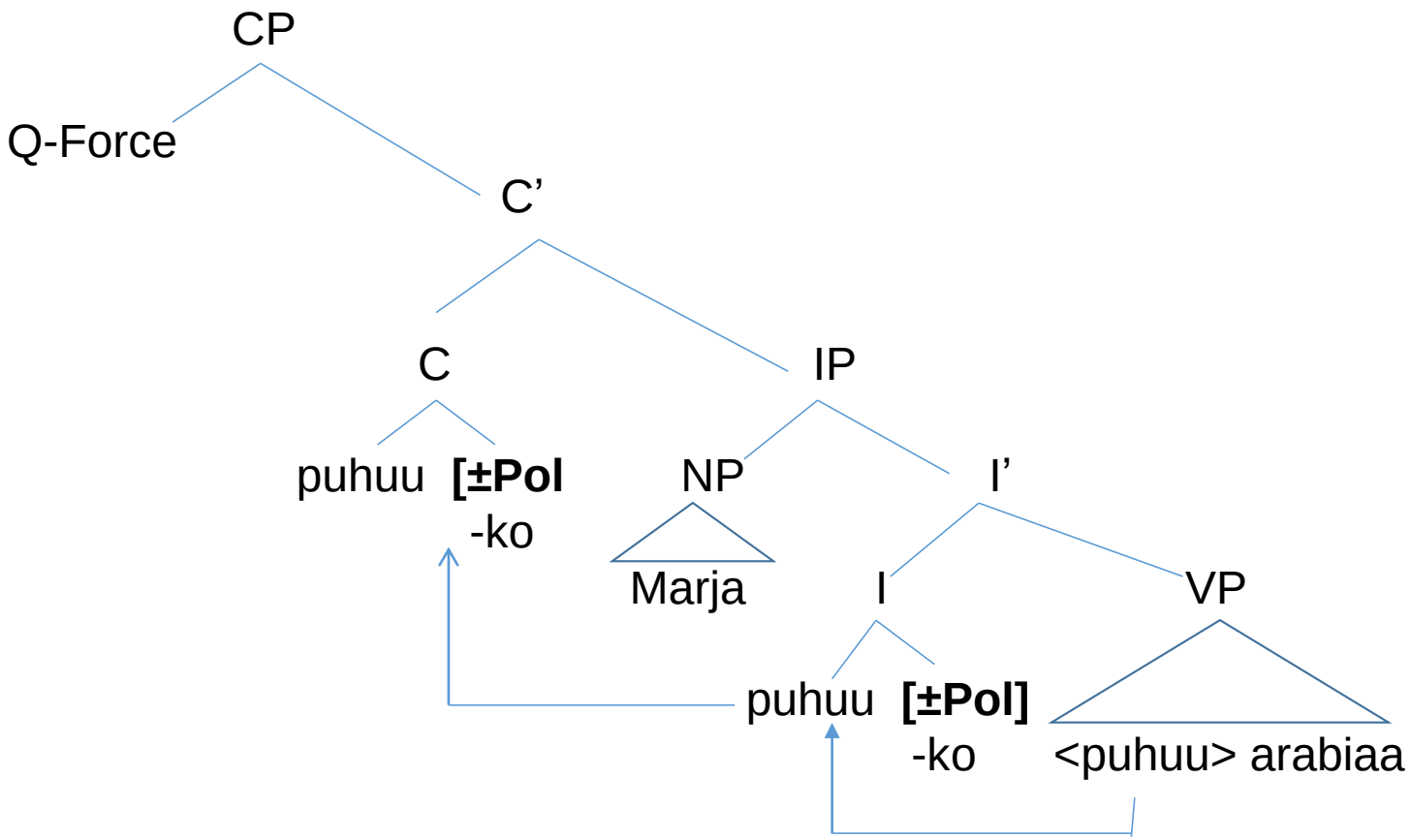
What about verb-echo answers?

Q: Puhuu-ko Marja arabiaa?
speaks-Q Marja Arabic
‘Does Marja speak Arabic?’

A: Puhuu.
speaks
‘Yes.’

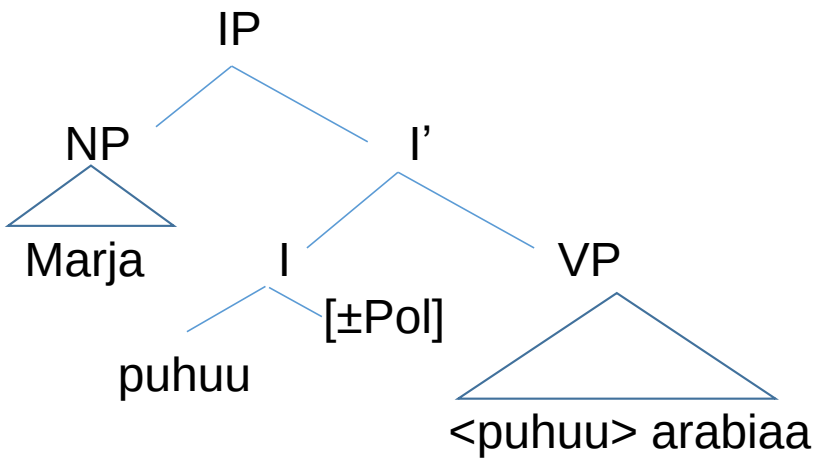
The same structure, the same features as in the English answer, but
the focused positive or negative polarity feature is lexically supported by a moved verb.

Puhuuko Marja arabiaa? ‘Does Marja speak Arabic?’

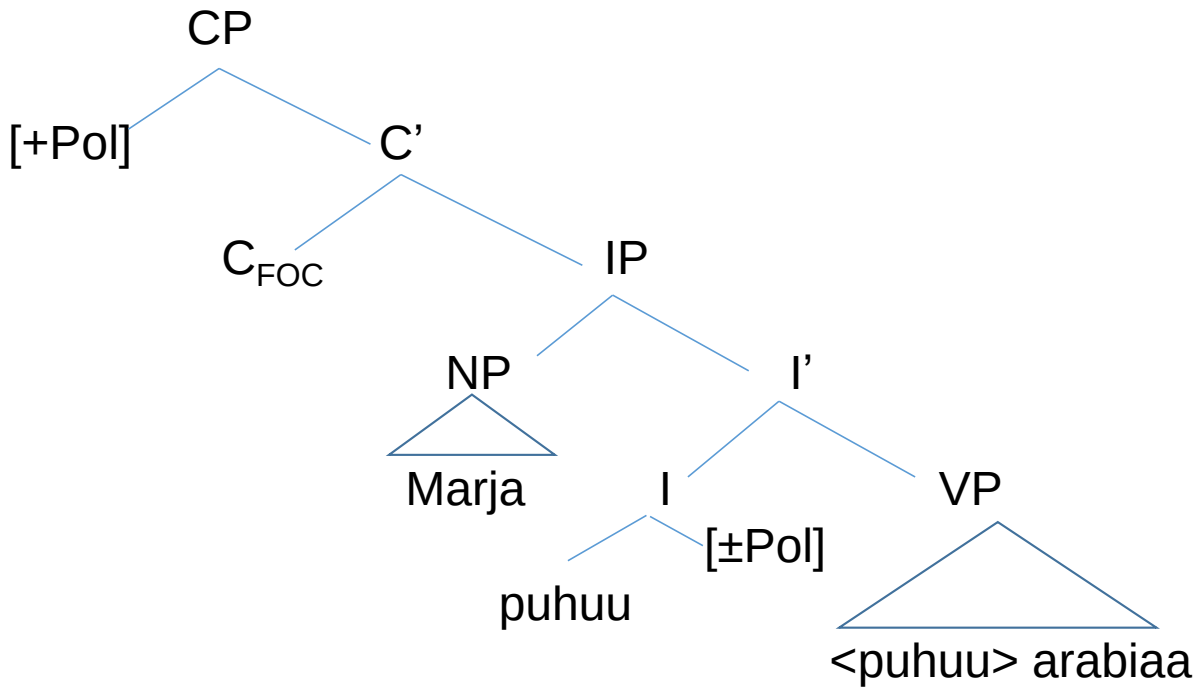


- The finite verb moves to I in Finnish (always).
- Polarity is one of I’s features. In a yes-no question it has open value, [±Pol].
- **[±Pol]is spelled out –*ko***.
- [±Pol] moves to C, with the verb.

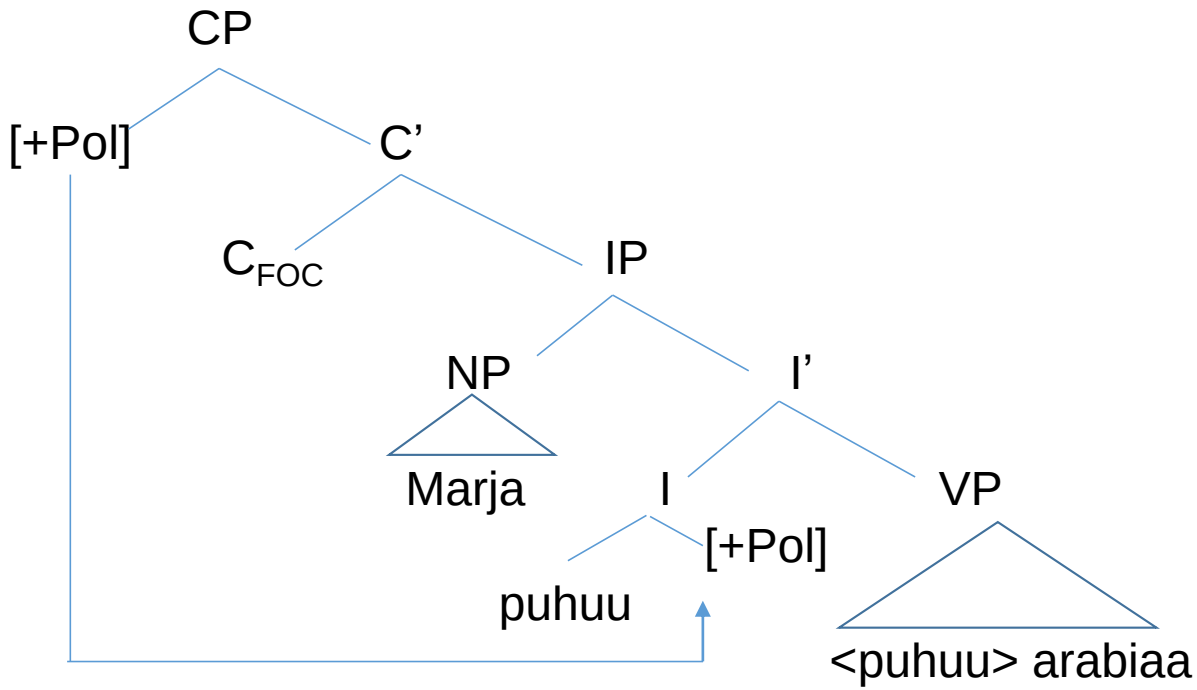
Deriving the answer *Puhuu* ‘Yes’.



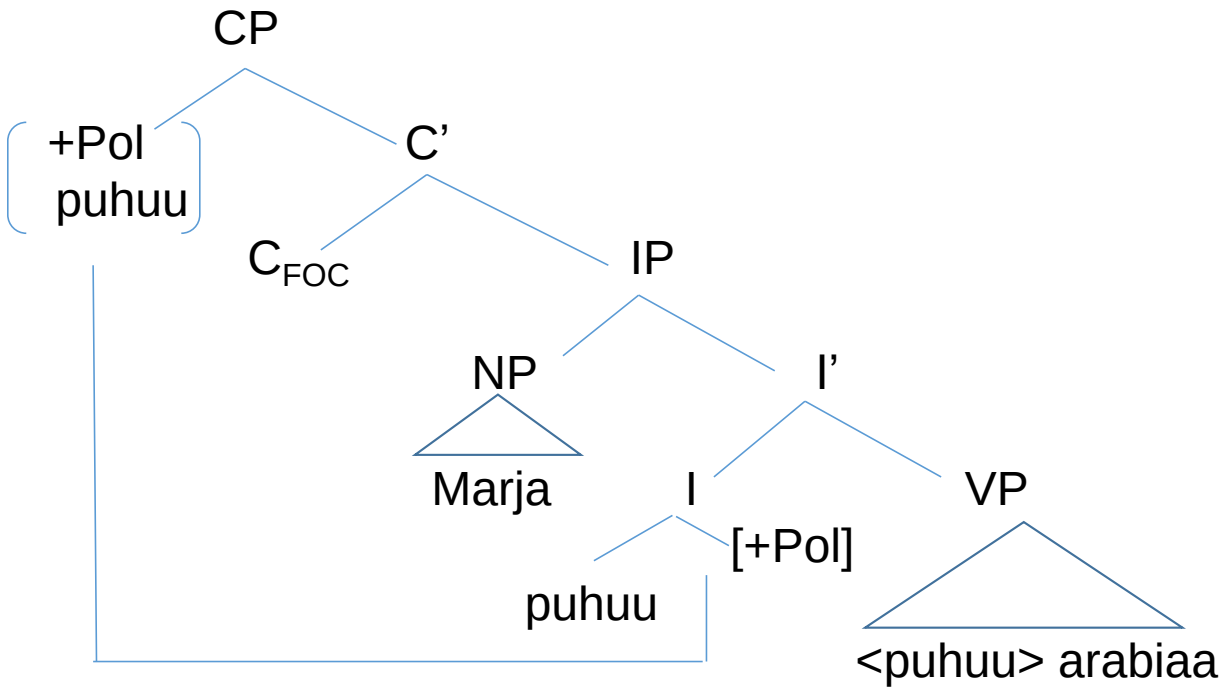
- Copy the IP of the question



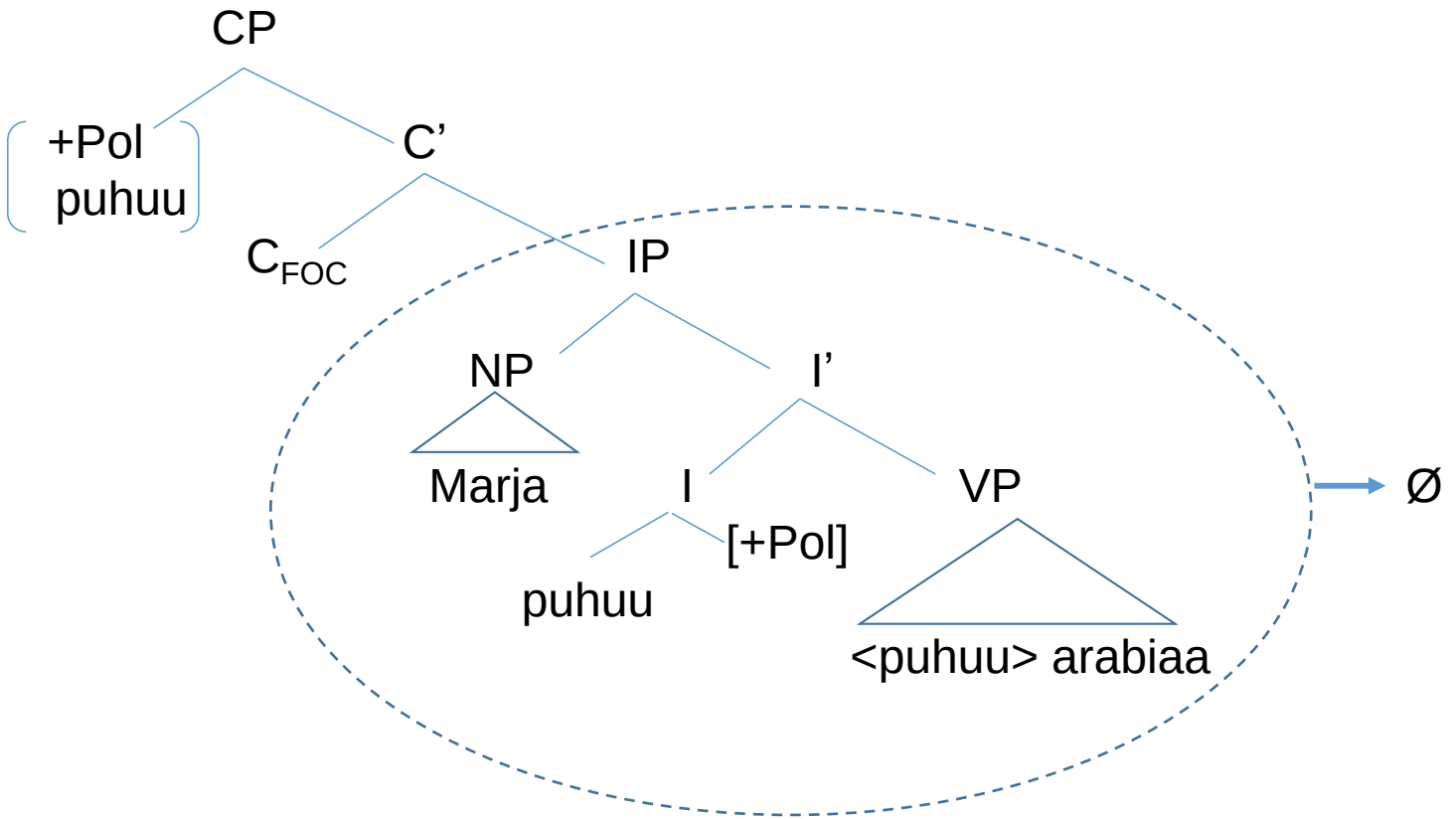
- Merge C_{FOC} and a valued polarity feature.



- The focused polarity feature assigns its value to the polarity variable in IP.



- This <u>chain</u> between the focused polarity feature and I, containing an identical polarity feature and the finite verb, is spelled out as the finite verb.



- The IP is deleted, under identity with the IP of the question → *Puhuu*.

The structure of narrow focus questions

Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa?
coffee -Q Marja wants
‘Is it coffee that Marja wants?’

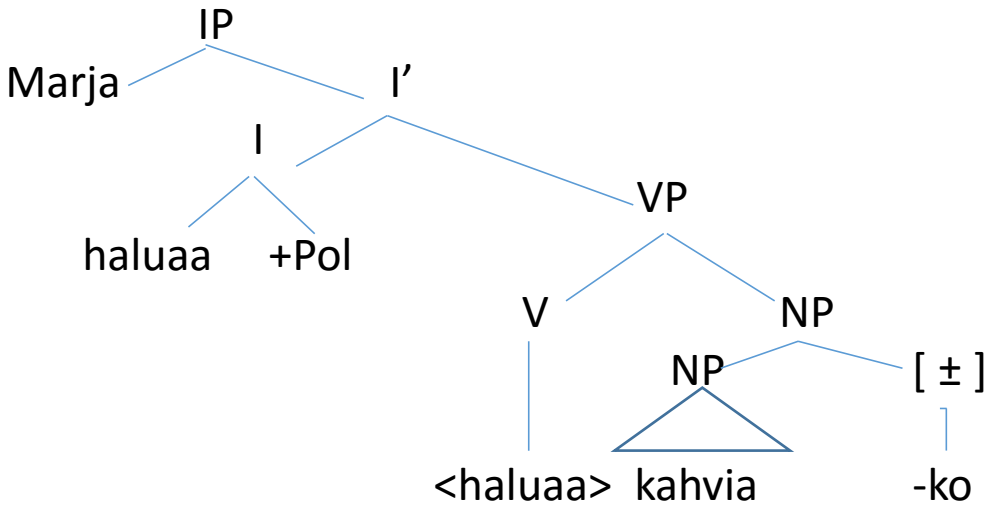
What is the variable in the Finnish narrow focus question?

The alternatives: She wants coffee or she wants something else (perhaps some other beverage).

The variable is ‘coffee or not coffee but something else’ → [±coffee]

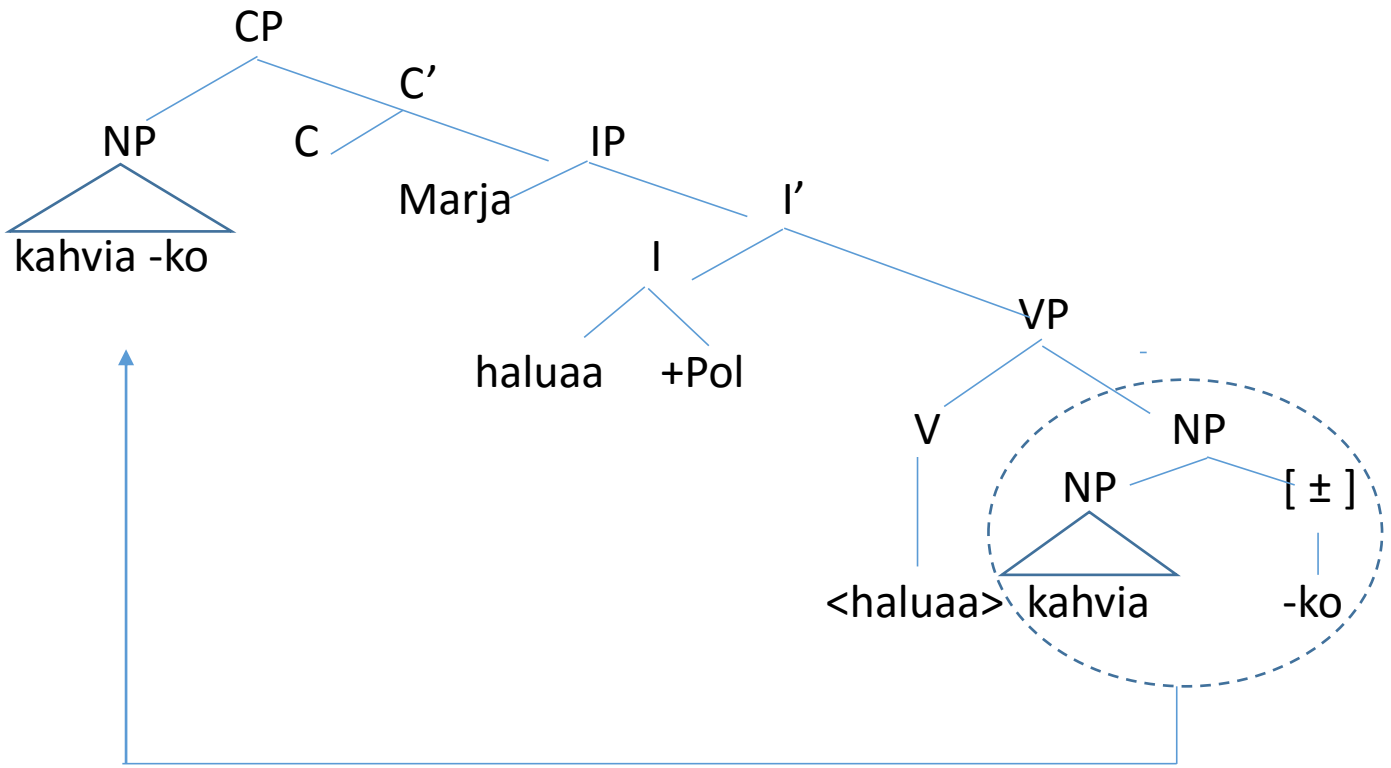
-ko = [±]

Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa?



Marja wants [coffee or not coffee] (= something other than coffee).
Polarity is fixed as positive.

Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa?



The variable moves to the C-domain, for the disjunction to take sentential scope:
Mary wants coffee, or
Mary wants something other than coffee.

I have argued in Holmberg (2014) that the question-and-focus particle –*ko* is not a C-particle which attracts a constituent from IP, but is merged with the constituent being questioned in IP, and subsequently moves to the C-domain, pied-piping the constituent it is merged with.

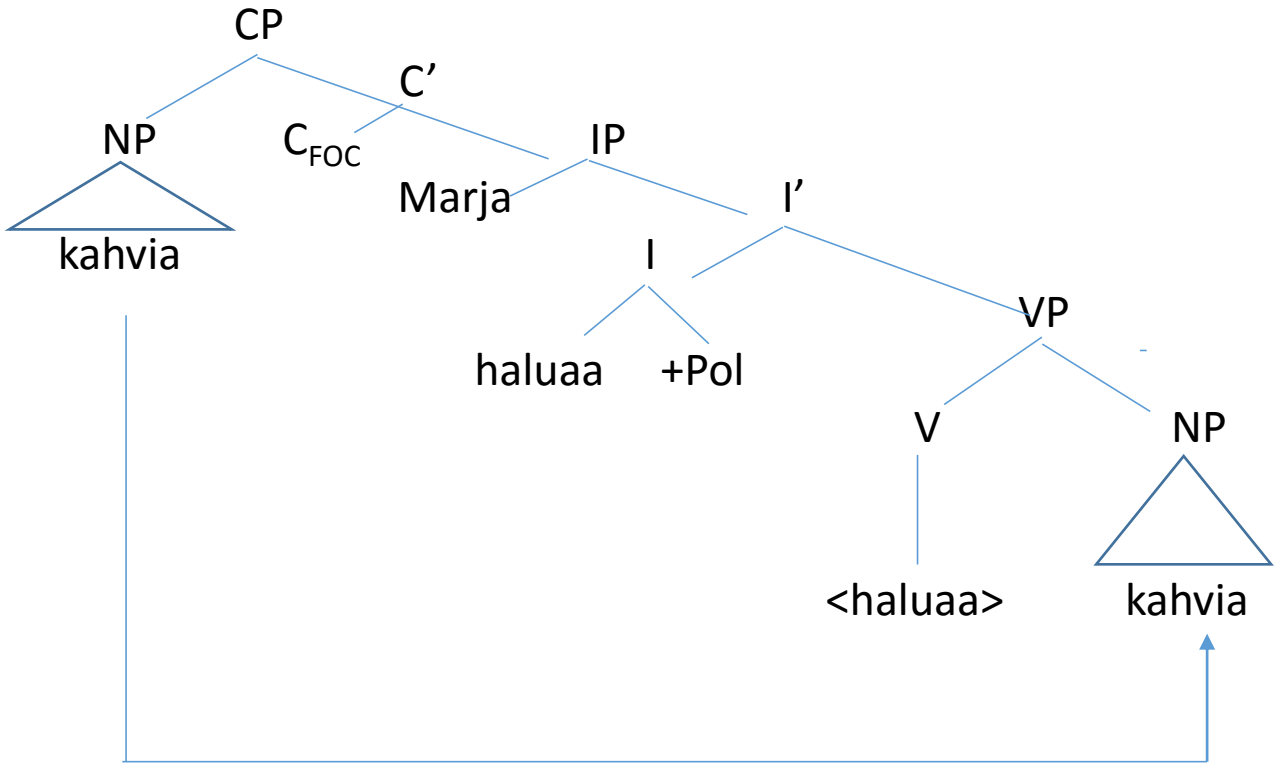
The evidence is that –*ko* can be embedded inside of a questioned constituent.

[$_{NP}$ Ollin isän -**kö** autolla] te tulitte?
Olli's father-[±] car.IN you came
'Did you come in Olli's father's car.'

-*ko*, the variable, always moves to initial position (to the C-domain), to take sentential scope.
It cannot move alone, but pied-pipes the constituent it is embedded in.

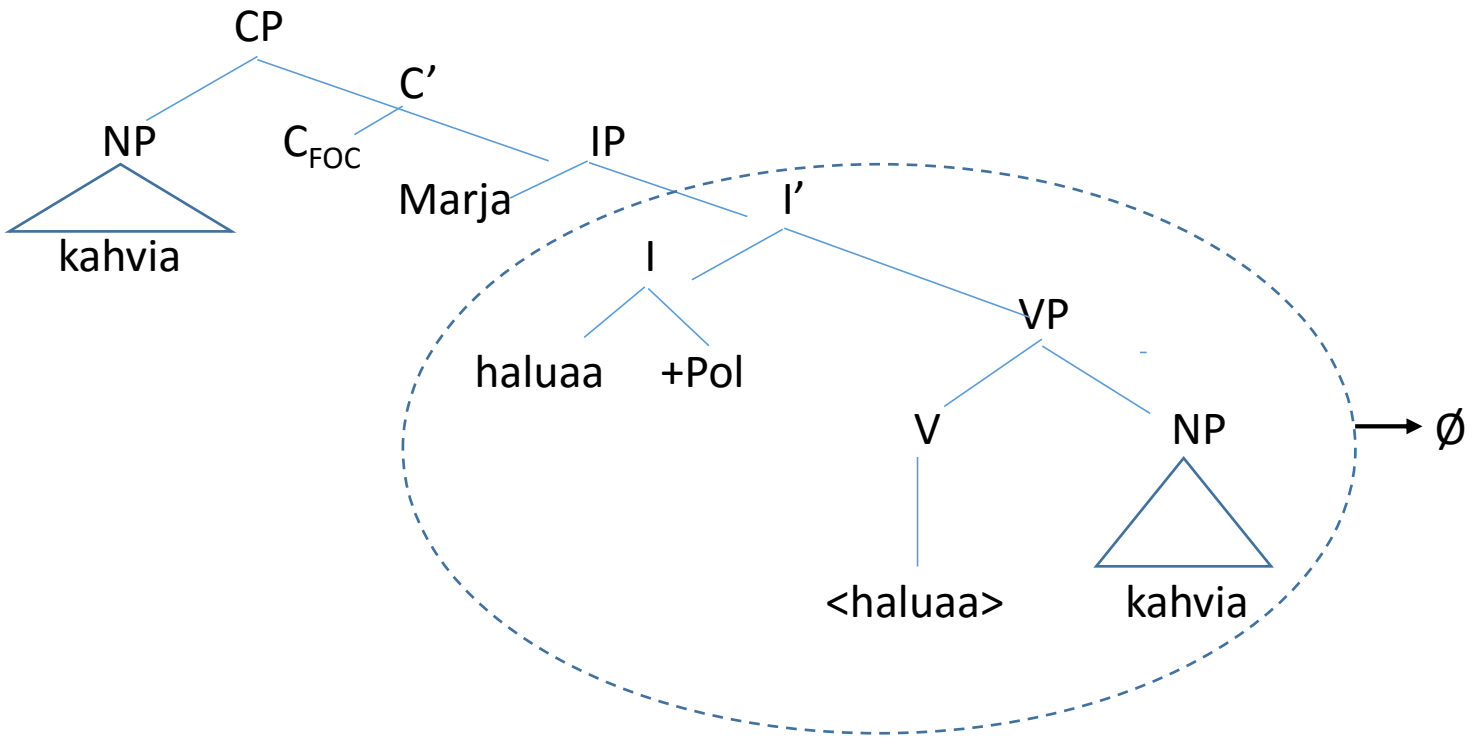
The answer

Q: Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa?
A: Kahvia. ’Yes.’



- Copy the IP of the question.
- Merge a ‘valued’ NP in focus position, matching the variable NP in the question.
- Assign the value of the focused NP to the variable in IP.

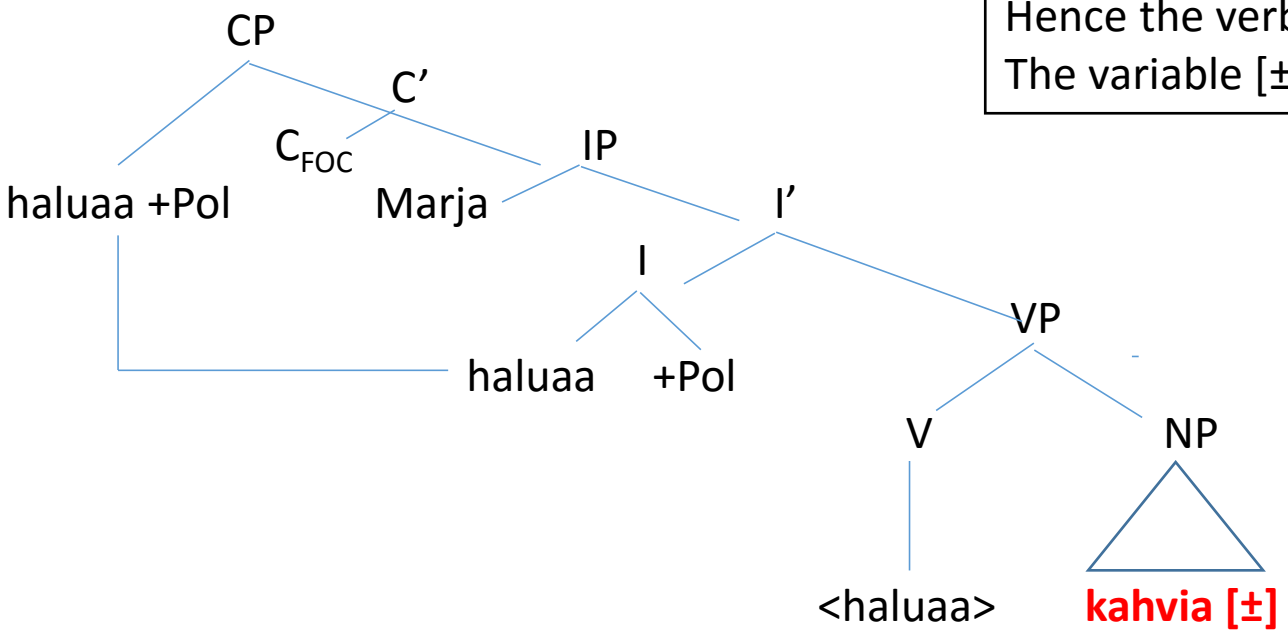
Q: Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa?
A: Kahvia. ’Yes.’



- Delete the IP, under identity with the IP of the question.

Q: Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa?

A: *Haluaa.

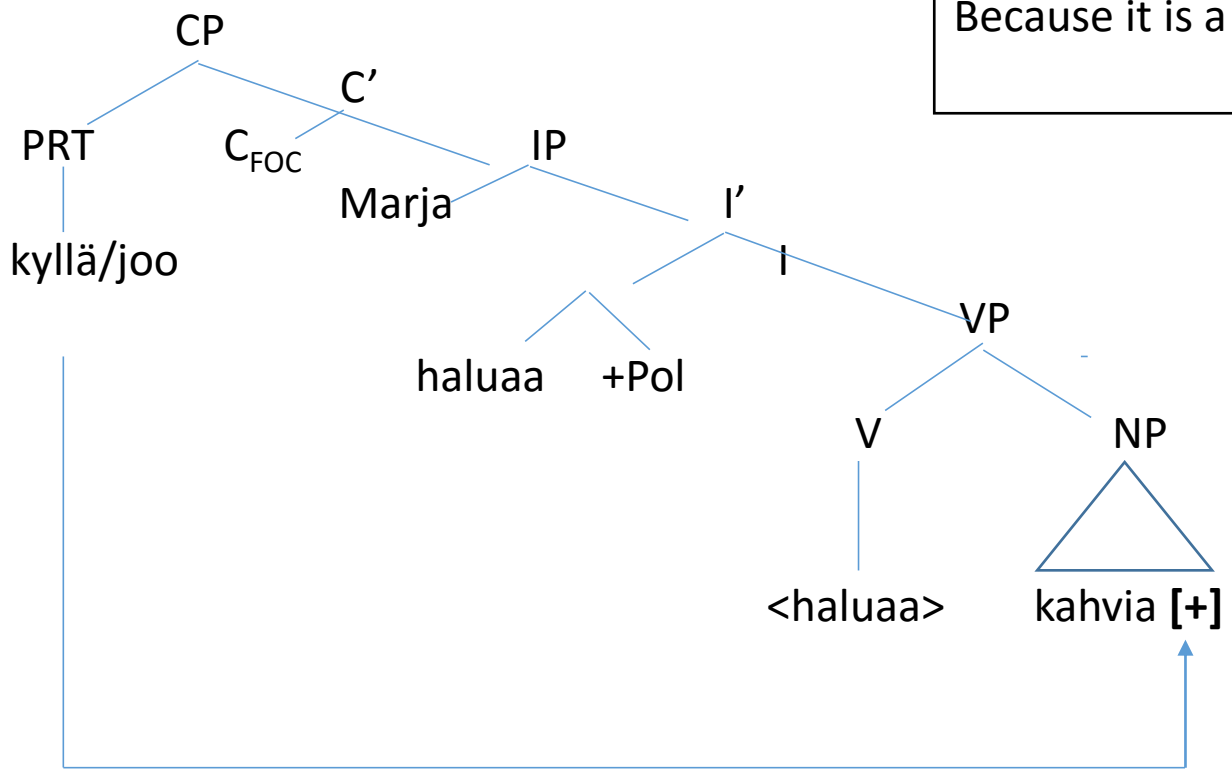


Why is the verb-echo answer not an option?
Because the question is not about sentential polarity.
Hence the verb is not involved.
The variable [±kahvia] won’t be assigned a value.

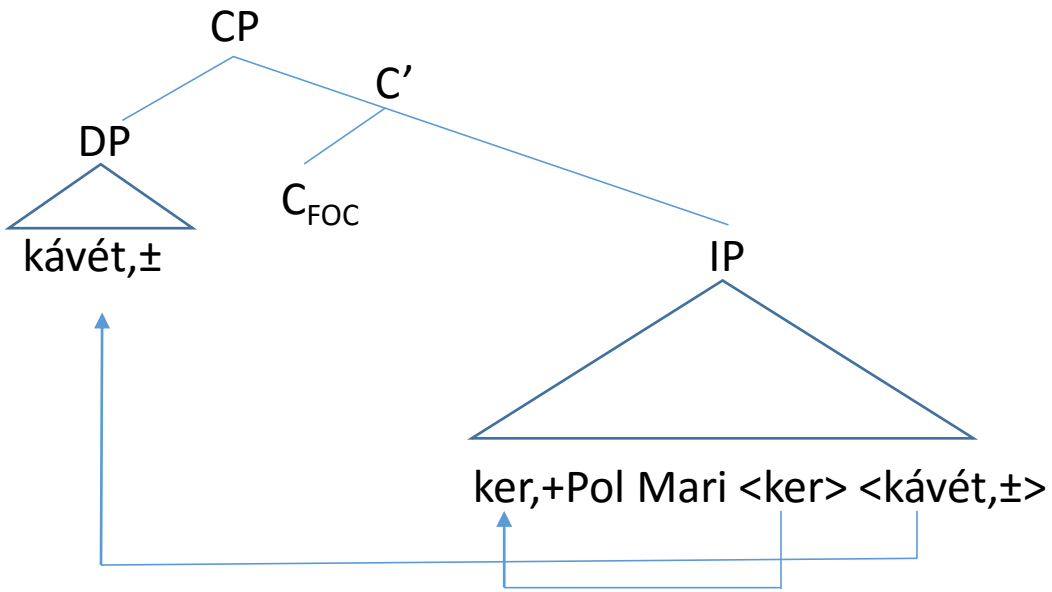
Q: Kahvia-ko Marja haluaa?
A: Kyllä./Joo. ’Yes.’

Why is the positive answer particle an option?

Because it is a <u>general plus-value assigner.</u>

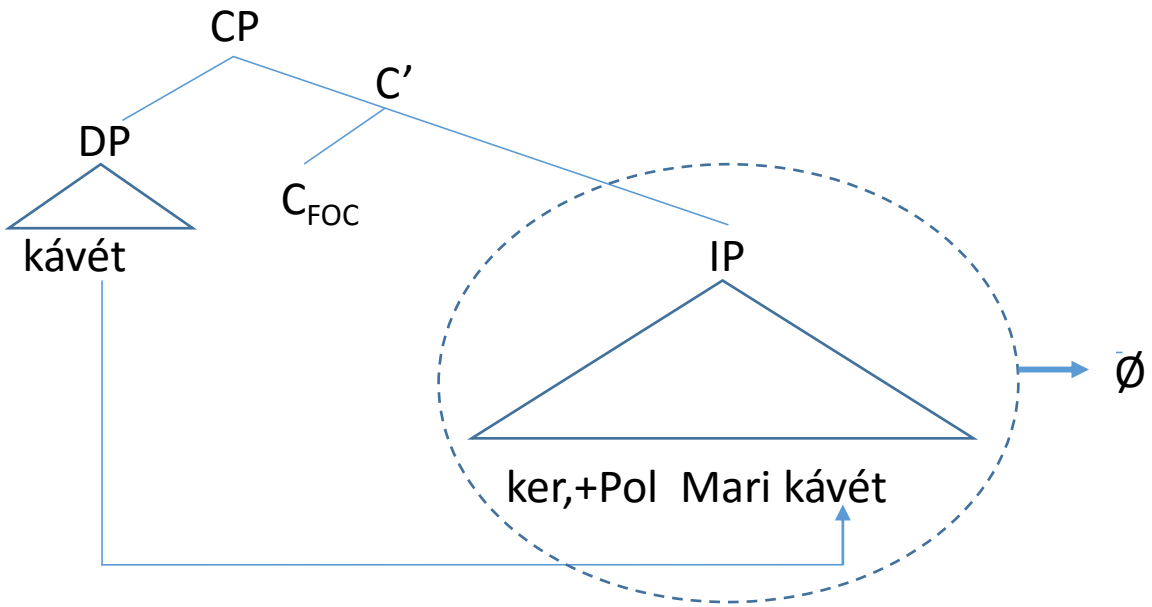


Kávét kér Mari?
‘Is it coffee Mari wants?’



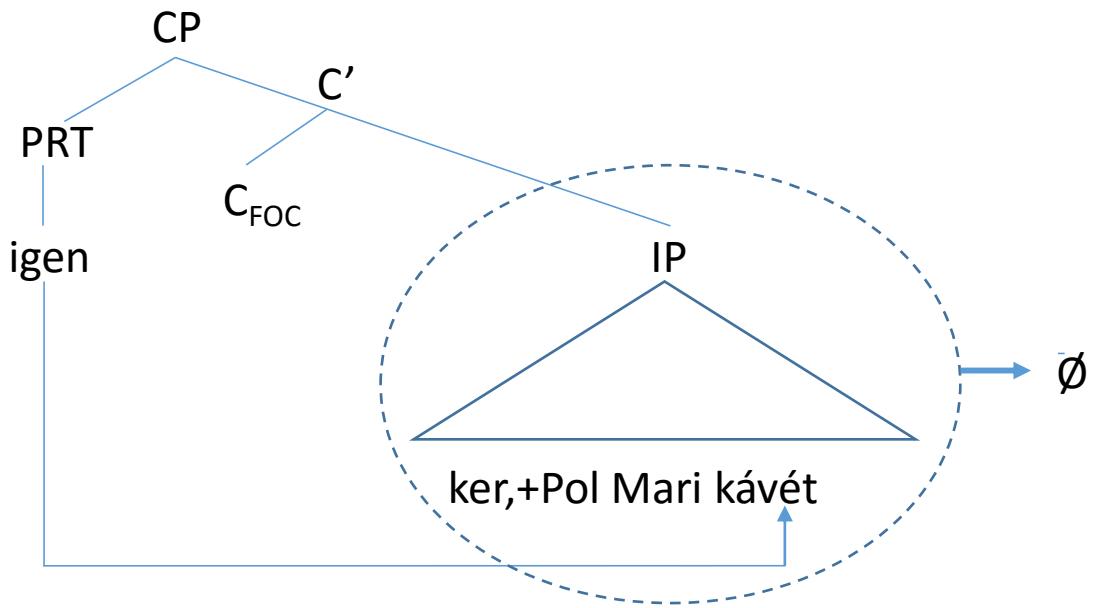
The variable moves to the C-domain, for the disjunction to take sentential scope:
Mary wants coffee, or
Mary wants ‘not coffee’, i.e. something other than coffee.

Q: Kávét kér Marì?
A: Kávét. ’Yes.’



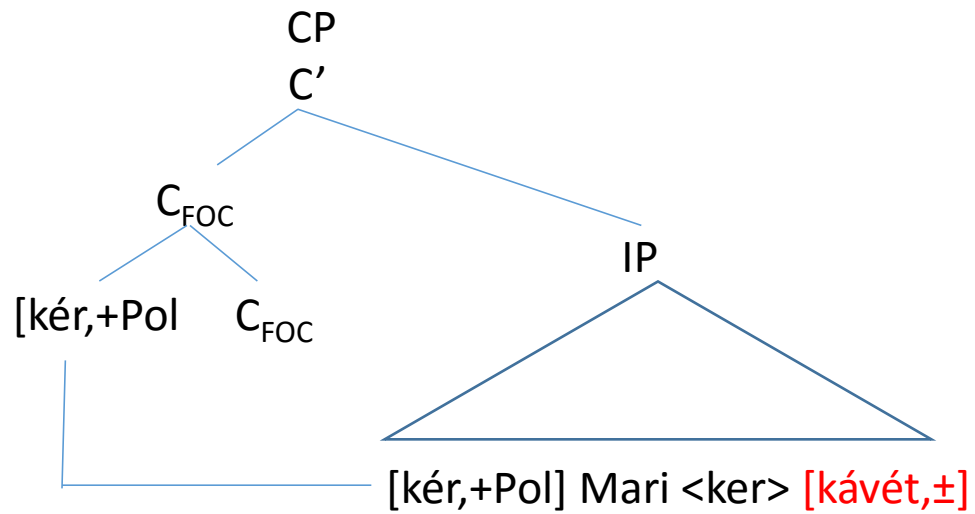
A valued DP matching the variable is merged in focus position.
It assigns a value to the variable.
The IP is deleted.

Q: Kávét kér Marì?
A: Igen. ’Yes.’



The affirmative particle *igen* is merged in focus position.
Igen is a general plus-value assigner to a [±]-variable, assigns + to [*kavet*,±].
IP is deleted.

Q: Kávét kér Marì?
A: *Kér.



Spelling out the finite verb with [+Pol] in focus position leaves the variable [*kávét*, ±] without a value → ungrammatical answer because uninterpretable.

English:

Q: Is it coffee Mary wants?

A1: *Coffee.

A2: Yes.

The question variable is not ‘coffee or not coffee’.
But ‘coffee is or is not what Mary wants’.

The alternatives in the case of Finnish (Hungarian, Turkish…) are

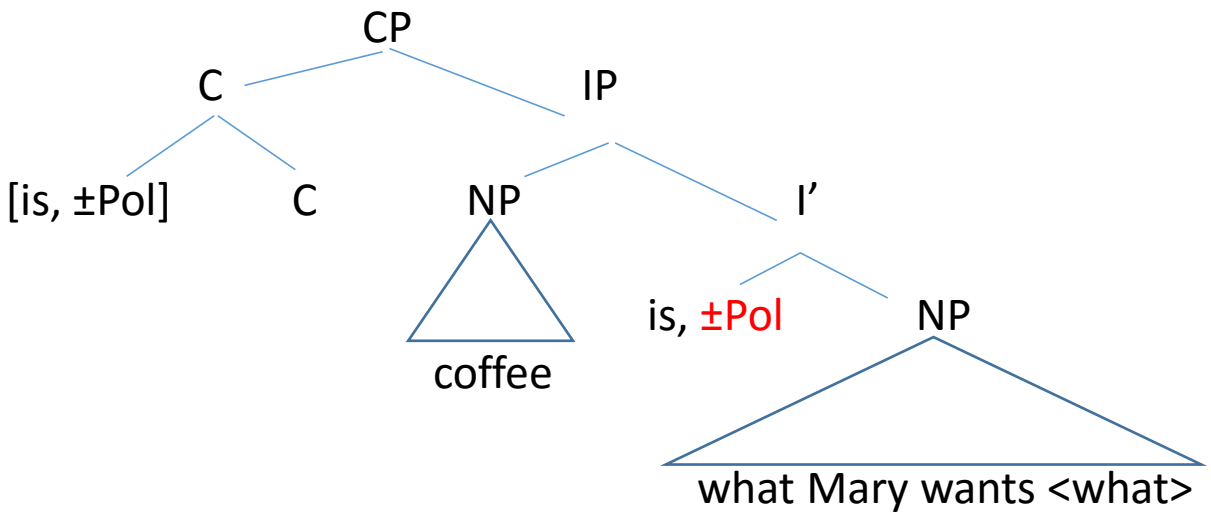
Mary wants coffee

Mary wants non-coffee (something other than coffee).

The alternatives in English are

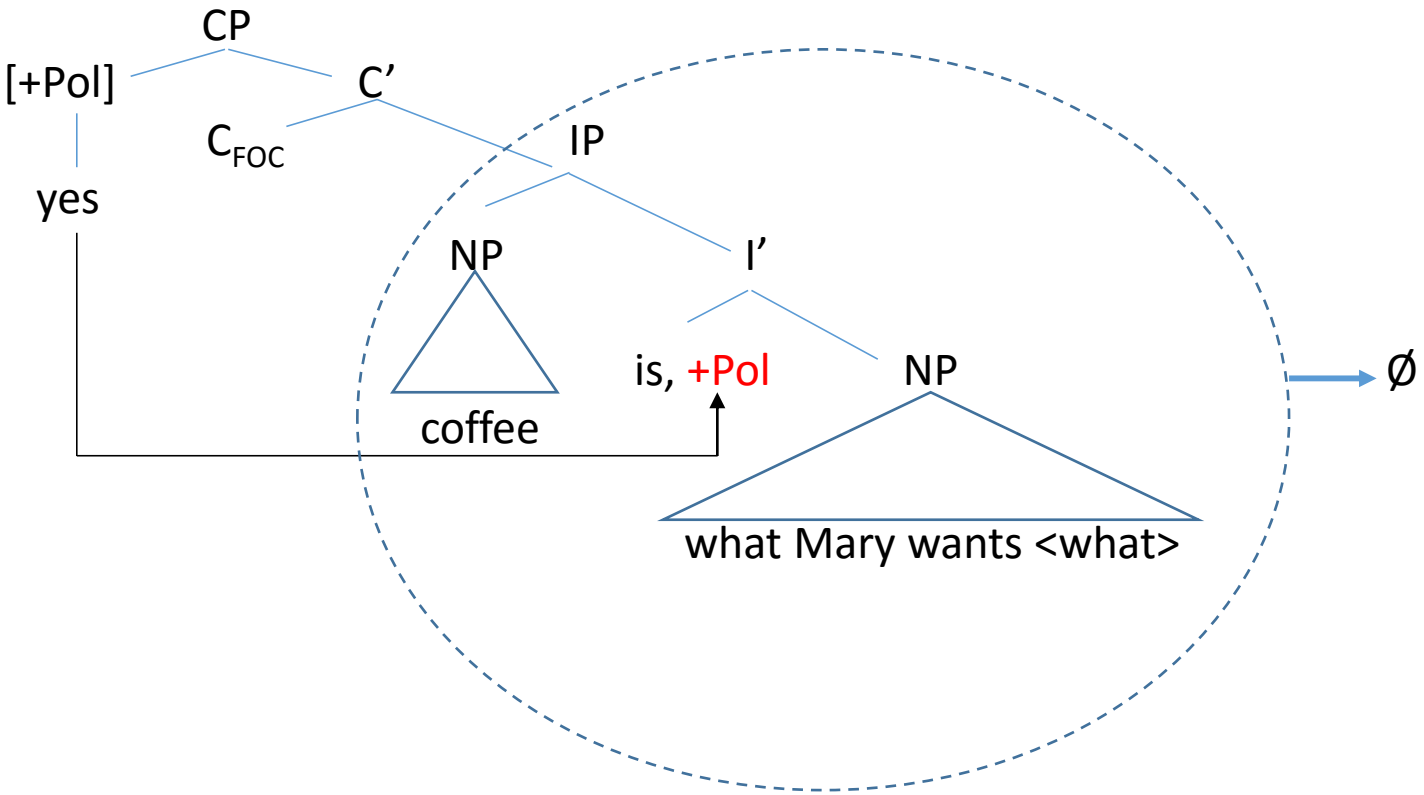
Coffee is what Mary wants.

Coffee is not what Mary wants.


CP
C
IP
[is, ±Pol]
C
NP
I’
coffee
is, ±Pol
NP
what Mary wants <what>

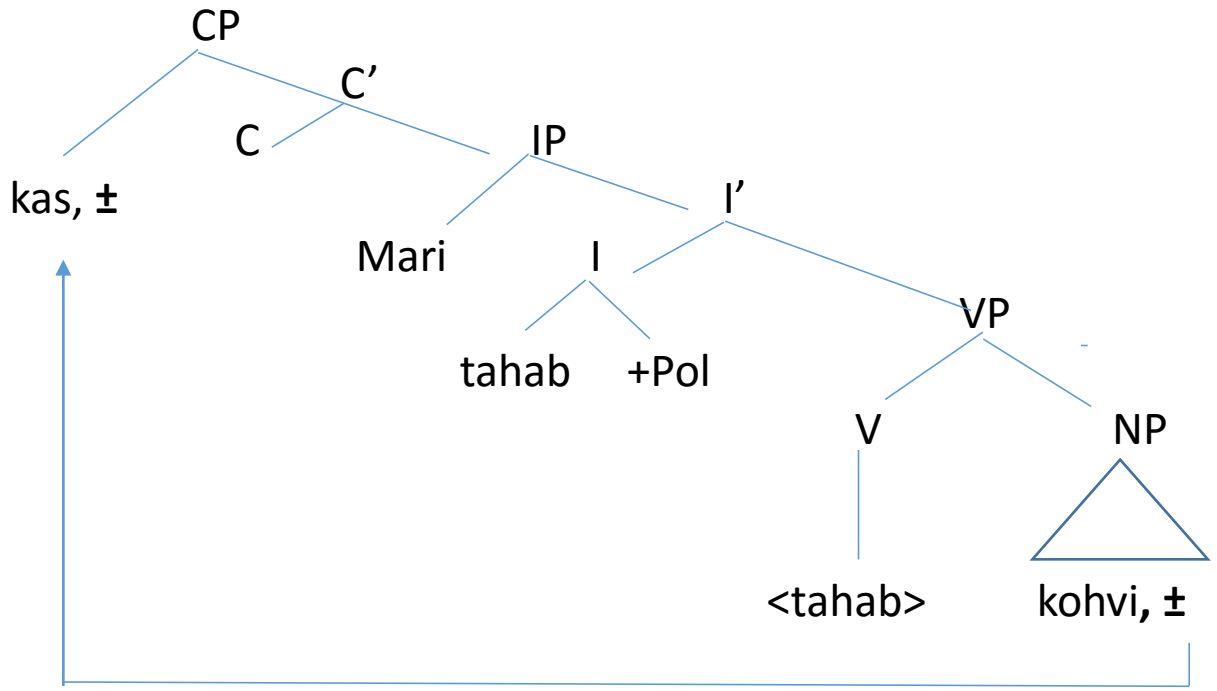
Q: Is coffee what Mary wants?

A: Yes.



Estonian (speculative)

Kas Mari tahab KOHVI ?



The variable [±] moves to the C-domain, for the disjunction to take sentential scope:
The constituent [*kohvi*, ±] is spelled out with focus intonation.

Estonian

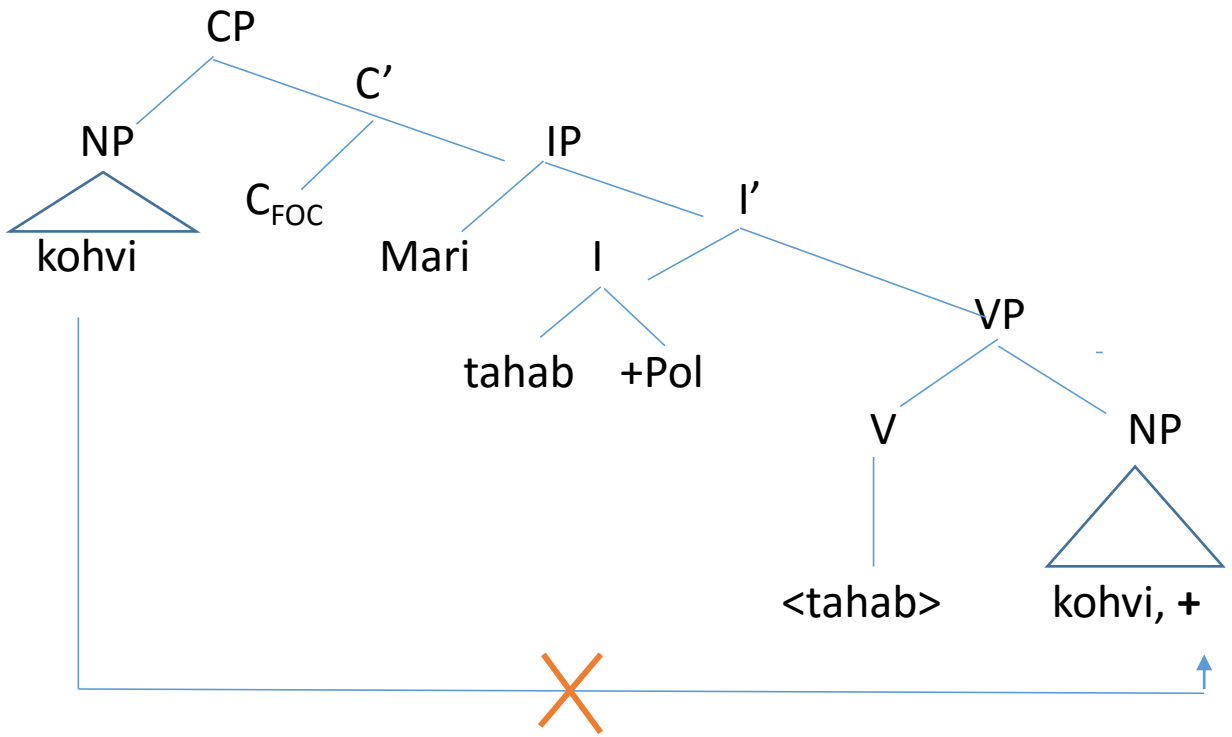
Q: Kas Mari tahab KOHVI ?
’Does Mar want coffee?’

A1: Jah.
yes

A2: *Kohvi.

A3: Kohvi jah.

Why not *Kohvi* 'Yes.' ?



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