



HOW TO ANSWER A NEGATIVE QUESTION

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<http://research.ncl.ac.uk/yesandno>



The Leverhulme Trust

Two ways to answer a negative question

Japanese:

Question: Kimi tukarete nai?
you tired NEG
'Are you not tired?'

Answer: **Un** (tukarete nai).
yes tired NEG
(Lit.) 'Yes, I'm not tired.'

Swedish:

Q: Är du inte trött?
are you not tired

A: **Nej** (jag är inte trött).
no I am not tired

Two ways to answer a negative question

Japanese:

Q: Kare-wa koohii-o noma nai no?
he-TOP coffee-ACC drink NEG Q
'Does he not drink coffee?'

A: **Uun**, nomu yo.
no drink PRT
(Lit.) 'No, he drinks (coffee).'

English:

Q: Does he not drink coffee?

A: **Yes**, he does.

The truth-based and the polarity-based answering systems

Truth-based:

The answer particle confirms or disconfirms the truth of the negative proposition. (Jones 1999)

Q: Are you not tired?

A: Yes (it's true that) I'm not tired .

A: No (it's not true that) I'm not tired. \longrightarrow I am tired.

Polarity-based:

The answer particle agrees with the polarity of the proposition.

Q: Are you not tired?

A: **No**, I'm **not** tired.

A: **Yes**, I am [**Affirm**] tired.

Also called the Agree/Disagree-based system

(Pope 1976, Kuno 1978)

Agree/Disagree-based

Q: 'Does he not drink coffee?' (expecting a negative answer)

A: '**Yes** (I agree with your expectation) he does not drink coffee.'

A: '**No** (I disagree with your expectation) he does drink coffee.'

Positive/Negative-based

Q: 'Does he not drink coffee?'

A: '**No**, he does **not** drink coffee.' (no = negative alternative is true)

A: '**Yes**, he does drink coffee.' (yes = positive alternative is true)

Languages reported to have the truth-based system (based on SSWL, literature & fieldwork)

Afrikaans	(Germanic, South Africa)	Mauwake	(Kumil, Trans-New Guinea)
Amele	(Gum, Trans-New Guinea)	Mualang	(Ibanic, Austronesian)
Amharic	(South Semitic, Afro-Asiatic)	Mwotlap	(E. Vanuatu, Austronesian)
Basaa	(Bantoid, Niger-Congo)	Nahuatl	(Uto-Aztecan)
Evenki	(Tungusic)	Navajo	(Athabascan)
Georgian	(Kartvelian)	Nigerian Pidgin	(English-based creole)
Greek	(Indo-European)	Nkore-Kiga	(Bantu, Niger-Congo))
Ibibio	(Lower Cross, Niger-Congo)	Nupe	(Nupe-Gbagyi, Niger Congo,)
Japanese	(Japonic)	Nweh	(Grassf. Bantu, Niger- Congo)
Kashmiri	(Dardic, Indo-European)	Shan	(Northwestern, Tai-Kadai)
Kobon	(Kalam-Kobon, Trans-New Guinea)	Southern Min	(Min, Sino-Tibetan)
Korean	(isolate, East Asia)	Thai	(Thai, Tai-Kadai)
Kuot	(isolate, Papua New Guinea)	Yoruba	(Volta-Niger, Niger-Congo,)
Lao	(Lao-Putai, Tai-Kadai)		
Malagasy	(Barito, Austronesian)		
Mandarin	(Chinese, Sino-Tibetan)		
Matses	(Panoan, South America)		

Languages reported to have the polarity-based system (based on SSWL, literature & fieldwork)

Arabic (varieties of) (Semitic, Afro-Asiatic)	Khwarshi (North-East Caucasian)
Bengali (Assamese-Bengali, Indo-Eur.)	Koromfe (Gur, Niger Congo)
Basque (isolate, Europe)	Malayalam (Tamil-Malayal., Dravidian)
Catalan (Romance, Indo-European)	Persian (Iranian, Indo-European)
Croatian (South Slavic, Indo-European)	Polish (Slavic, Indo-European)
Finnish (Finnic, Finno-Ugric)	Shupamem (Bantoid, Niger-Congo)
Gujarati (Western Indo-Aryan, Indo-Eur)	Sorani Kurdish (NW Iranian, Indo-Eur.)
Haitian (French-based creole)	Swedish (Germanic, Indo-European)
Hungarian (Ugric, Finno-Ugric)	Turkish (Turkic)
Irish (Celtic, Indo-European)	West Greenlandic (Inuktitut)
Imbabura Quechua (Quechua, S. America)	Wolof (Senegambian, Niger-Congo)
Jamaican Creole English	
Kannada (Kannada-Badaga, Dravidian)	

The lists are not balanced:

Some of the truth-based languages also allow polarity-based answers, but the polarity-based languages don't allow truth-based answers.

Languages reported to have the truth-based system (based on SSWL, literature & fieldwork)

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What is the source of this division?

Is it cultural conventions (like shaking hands or making a bow)

Is it the meaning/features of the words 'yes' and 'no'?

Is it a syntactic matter?

An argument that it isn't cultural conventions

There are languages that use both systems, or have a mixture, in a systematic way.

English does.

(1) Q: Isn't John coming?

A: Yes. ('John is coming.')

A: No. ('John is not coming.')

(2) Q: Is John not coming?

A: Yes. ('John is not coming.')

A: No. ('John is not coming.')

Negative neutralization: *yes* and *no* mean the same thing
(Kramer & Rawlins 2011)

There are contexts where English replicates the truth-based system exactly.

Which system English uses depends on the choice of negation.

Simplifying the situation:

n't → the polarity-based system

not → the truth-based system

n't and *not* are syntactically different.

Hypothesis: The choice of answering system , in a language, depends on the syntax of polarity, including the syntax of negation (in questions).

Assumption: Answers like 'yes' and 'no' are complete sentential expressions, where the IP is elided (not spelled out), under identity with the IP of the question.

Given this assumption we can understand the effect of the syntax of negation on the choice of answering system.

Two meanings of *yes*, in English

(1) Q: Is John not coming?

A: Yes.

Some people: It means John is not coming.

Other people: It's unclear what it means. It's not a good answer.

If anything, it means he is coming.

A: Yes, he is. (OK for all speakers, meaning that John is coming.)

A: No. (OK for all speakers, meaning that John is not coming.)

A: No, he is. (OK for some speakers, meaning that John is coming.)

Forcing the truth-based/agreement-based reading

(1) Q: Does John **sometimes** not show up on time?

A: Yes.

Can only mean: 'John sometimes does not show up on time.'

The truth-based answer.

A: No.

Means: 'John does not sometimes not show up on time'.

I.e. 'He's always on time.'

With this syntactic context, English behaves exactly like a truth-based system.

(2) Q: Did you purposely not dress up for this occasion?

A: Yes. ('I purposely did not dress up.')

A: No. (I didn't purposely not dress up – I just didn't know the dress code.)

(3) Q: Do cats typically not like rotten food?

A: Yes. ('They typically don't like rotten food.')

A: No. ('They don't mind if the meat is a bit rotten.')

(1) Is John **not** coming?

Yes. (Ambiguous: He is not coming, or you can't tell what it means.)

(2) Isn't John coming, too?

Yes. (Unambiguous: John is coming.)

(3) Is John sometimes **not** coming?

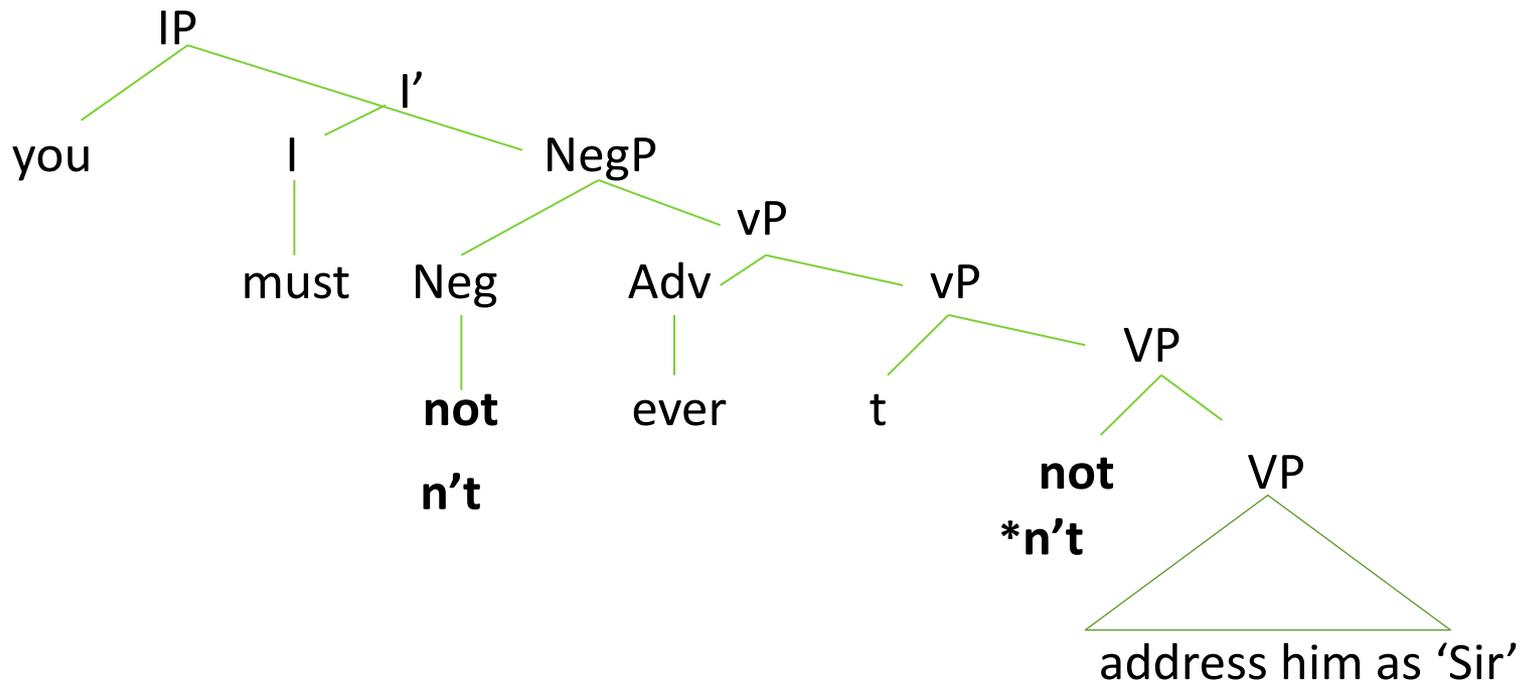
Yes. (Unambiguous: John is not coming, sometimes.)

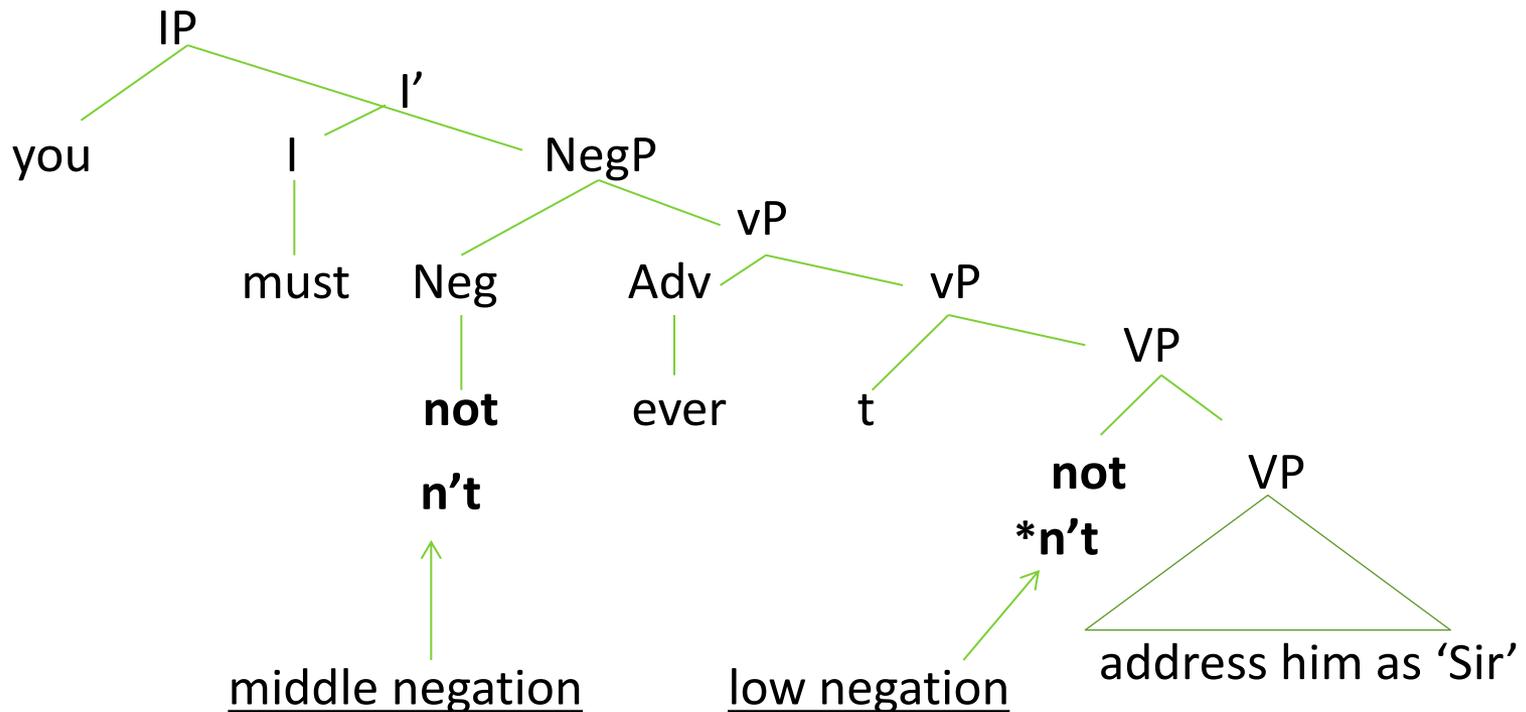
English has two negations *not*. (Cormack & Smith 2002)

One has sentential scope (like *n't*). One has vP-scope.

(4) You cannot **not** go to Church, and still call yourself a good Christian.

(5) You must **not** ever **not** address him as 'Sir'.



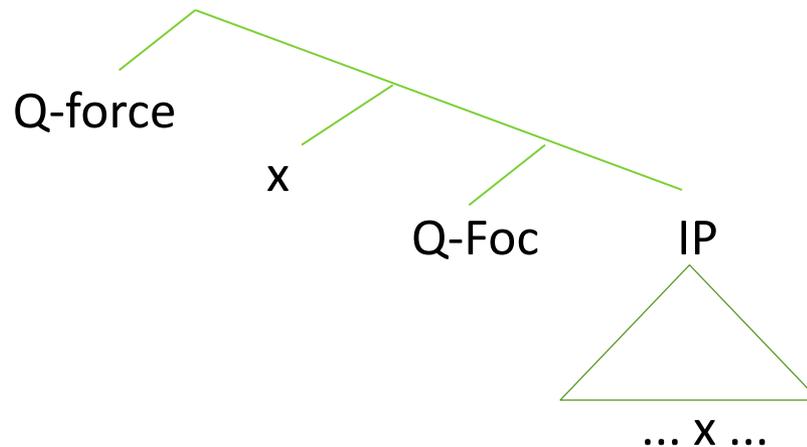


Is John not coming? Yes.

- When the question is analyzed as having low negation, the answer *Yes* means 'John is not coming.'
- When the question is analyzed as having middle negation, the answer *Yes* is infelicitous, not well formed.

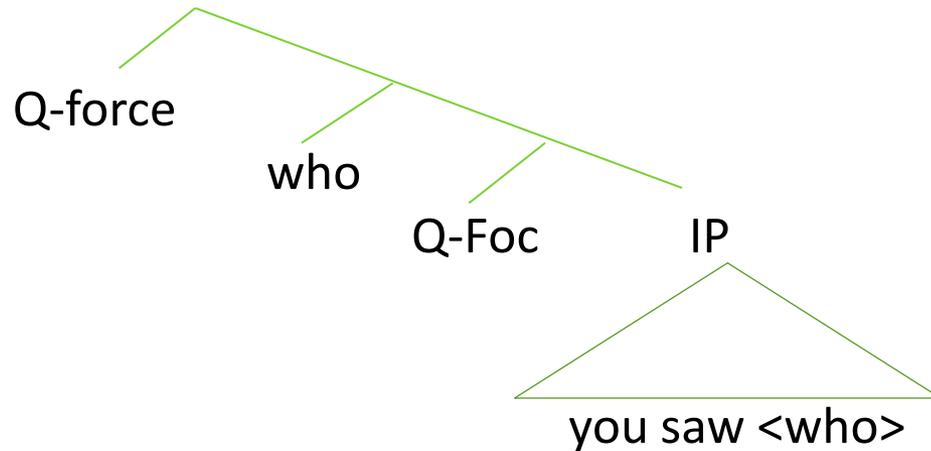
The structure of questions

Direct questions have the structure



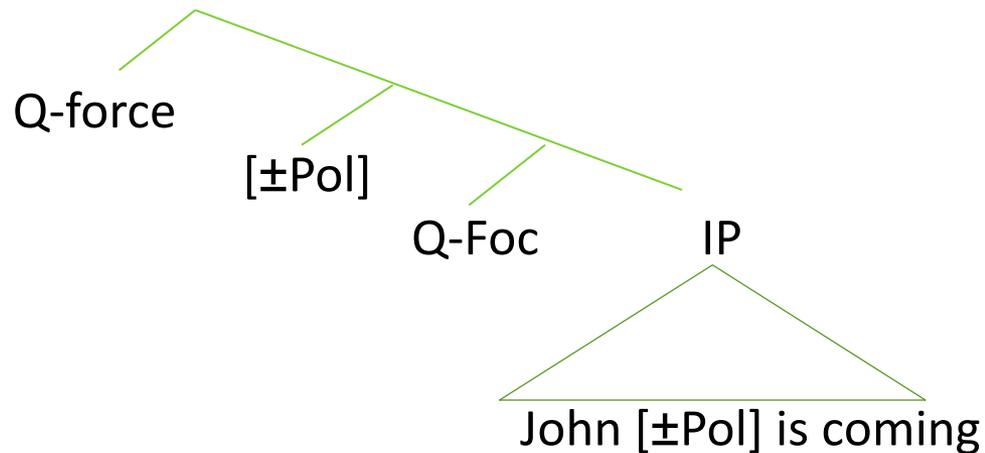
- IP contains a variable = a disjunction of possible values.
- This variable/disjunction is moved to the C-domain.
- Q-force is an illocutionary force feature which means ‘Tell me the value of the focused variable such that the proposition denoted by IP is true.’

The structure of questions



- In wh-questions the variable is a wh-phrase.
- The answer provides a value for the variable.

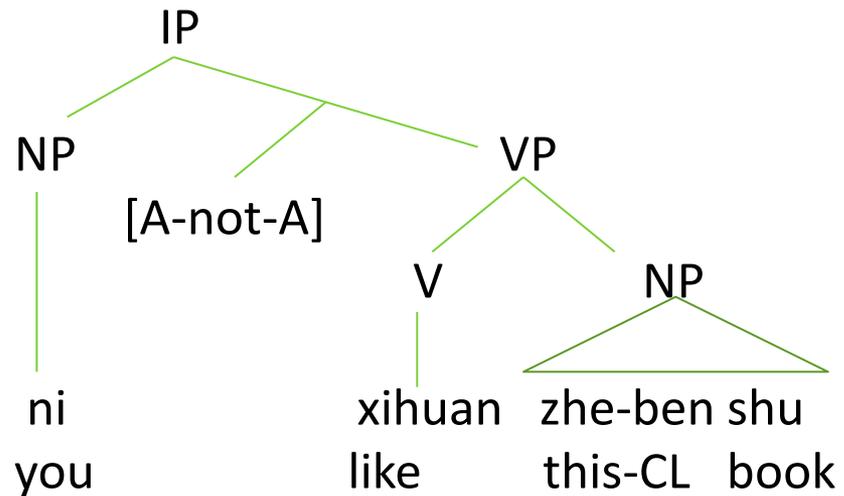
The structure of questions



- In yes/no-questions the variable is polarity.
- The answer provides a value for the variable.

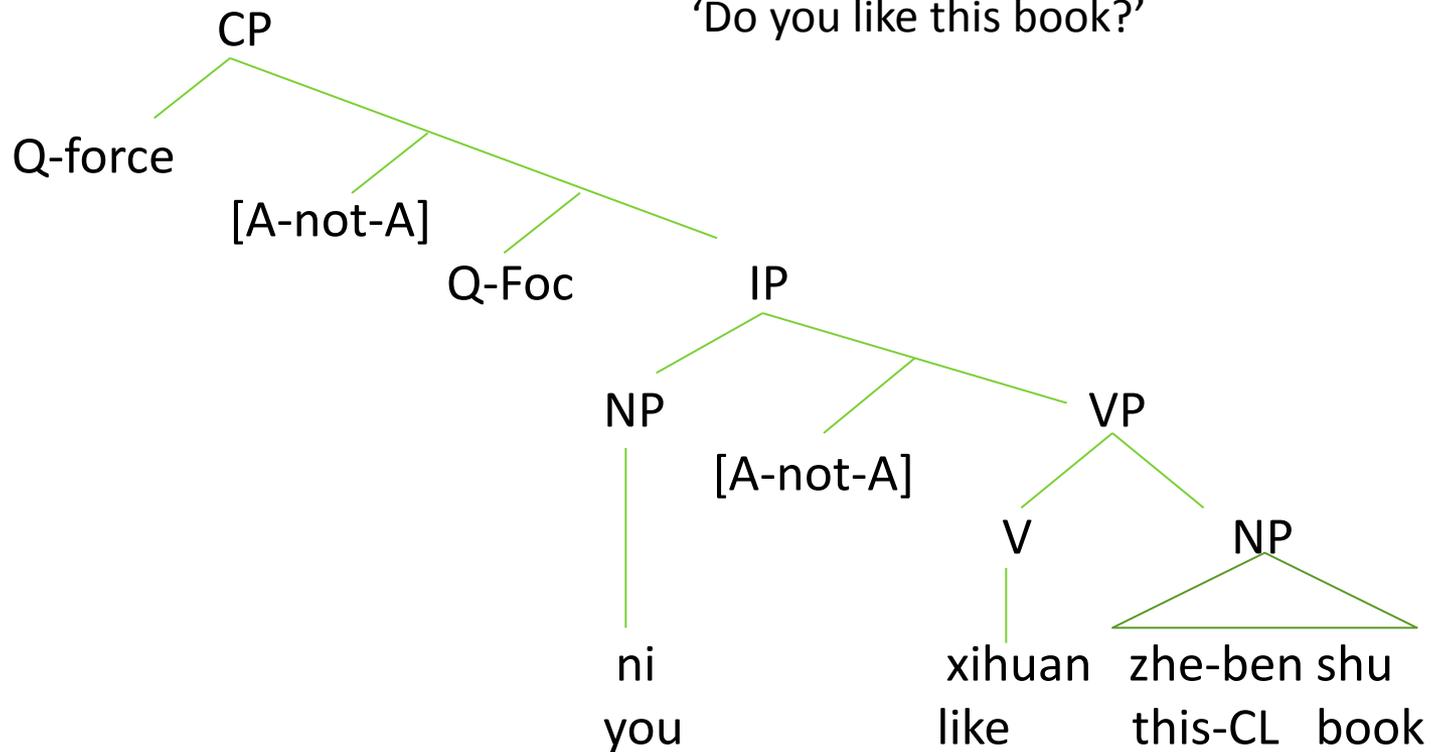
Chinese A-not-A questions (Huang, Li & Li 2010)

ni xi- bu xihuan zhe-ben shu?
you like not like this-CL book
'Do you like this book?'



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you like not like this-CL book
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Why movement of the polarity-disjunction?
In order for it to have sentential scope.

But also: It sets the stage for the answer.

Answering an A-not-A question

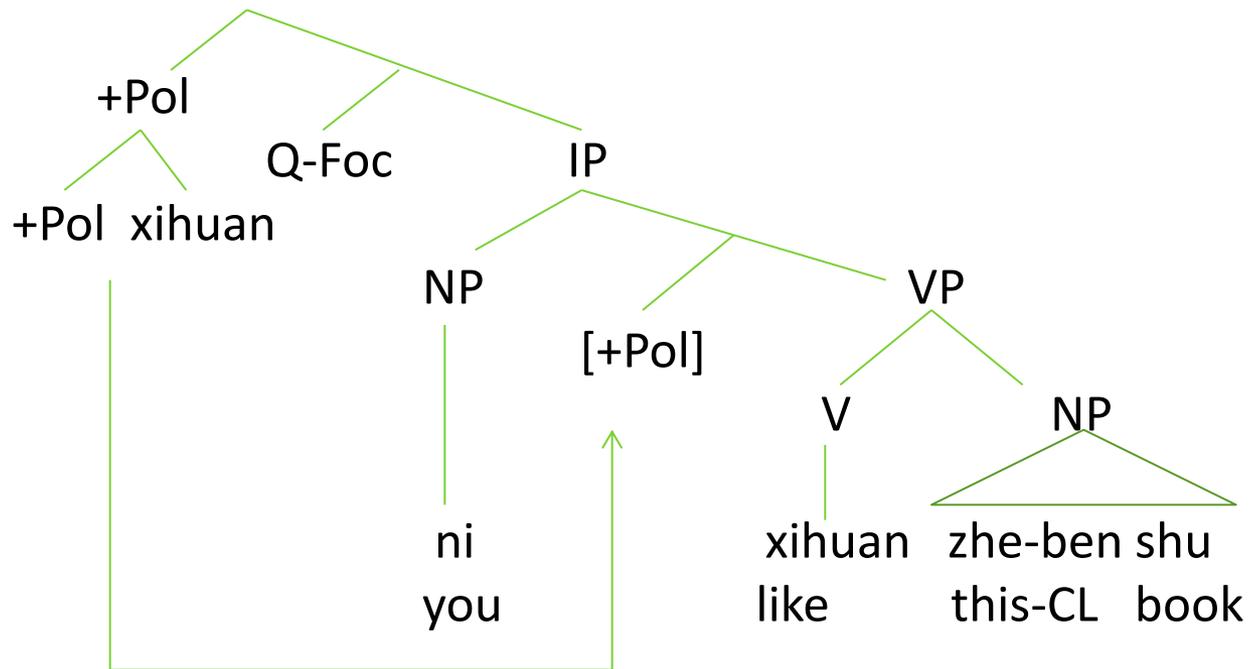
ni xi- bu xihuan zhe-ben shu?

'Do you like this book?'

xihuan.

like

'Yes.'



Answering an A-not-A question

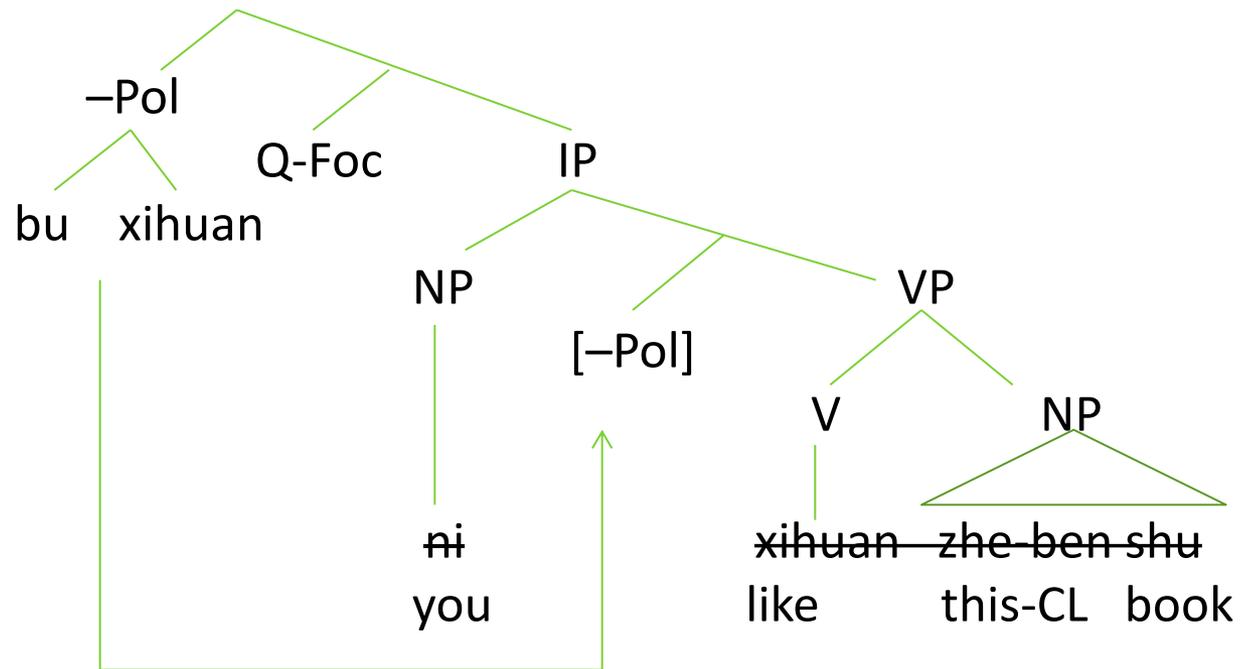
ni xi- bu xihuan zhe-ben shu?

'Do you like this book?'

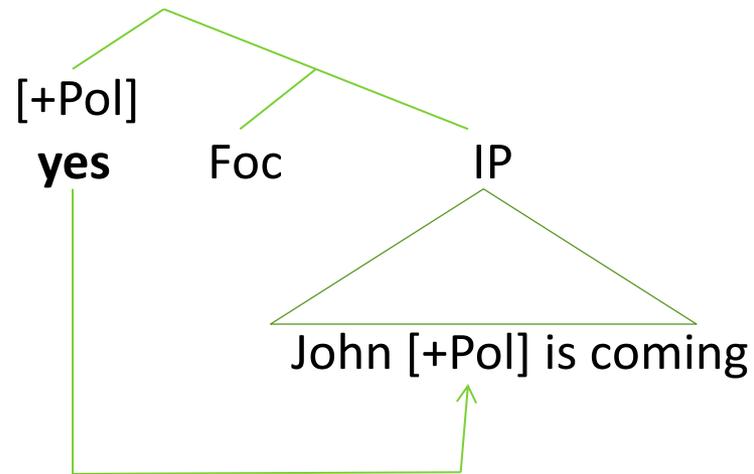
bu xihuan.

not like

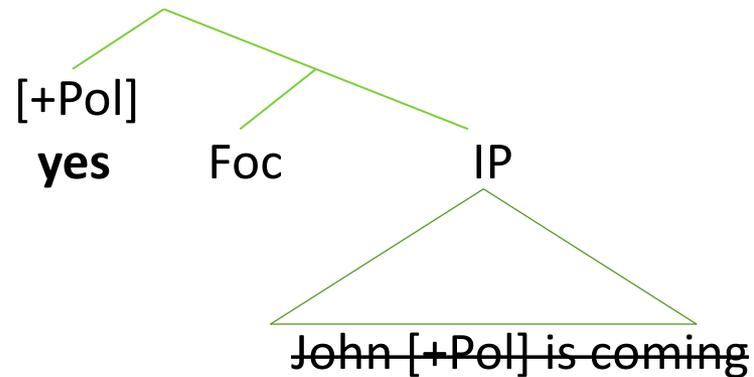
'No.'



The structure of answers



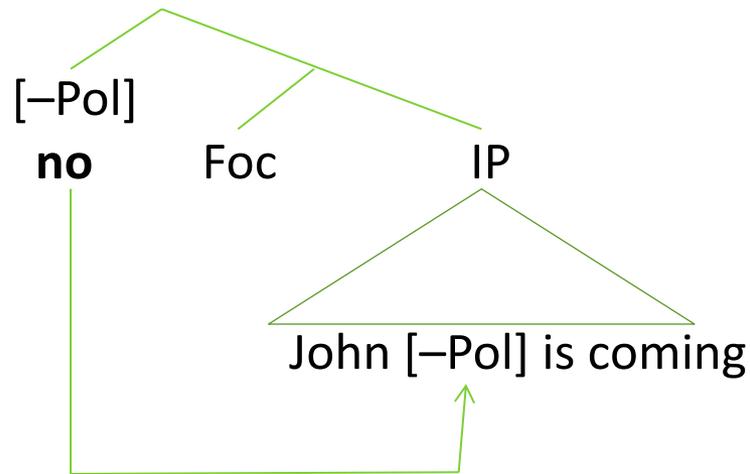
The structure of answers



The IP of the answer is a copy of the IP of the question, except for the value of the variable.

Therefore doesn't need to be pronounced.

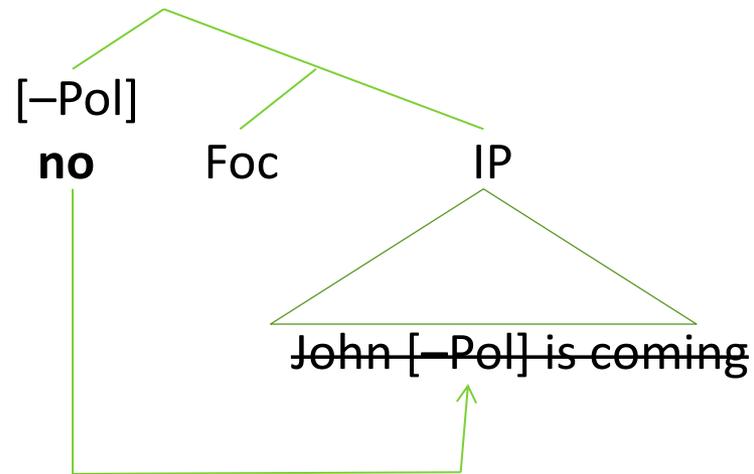
The structure of answers



spelled out: *John is not coming.*

The IP of the answer is a copy of the IP of the question, identical except for the value of the variable.

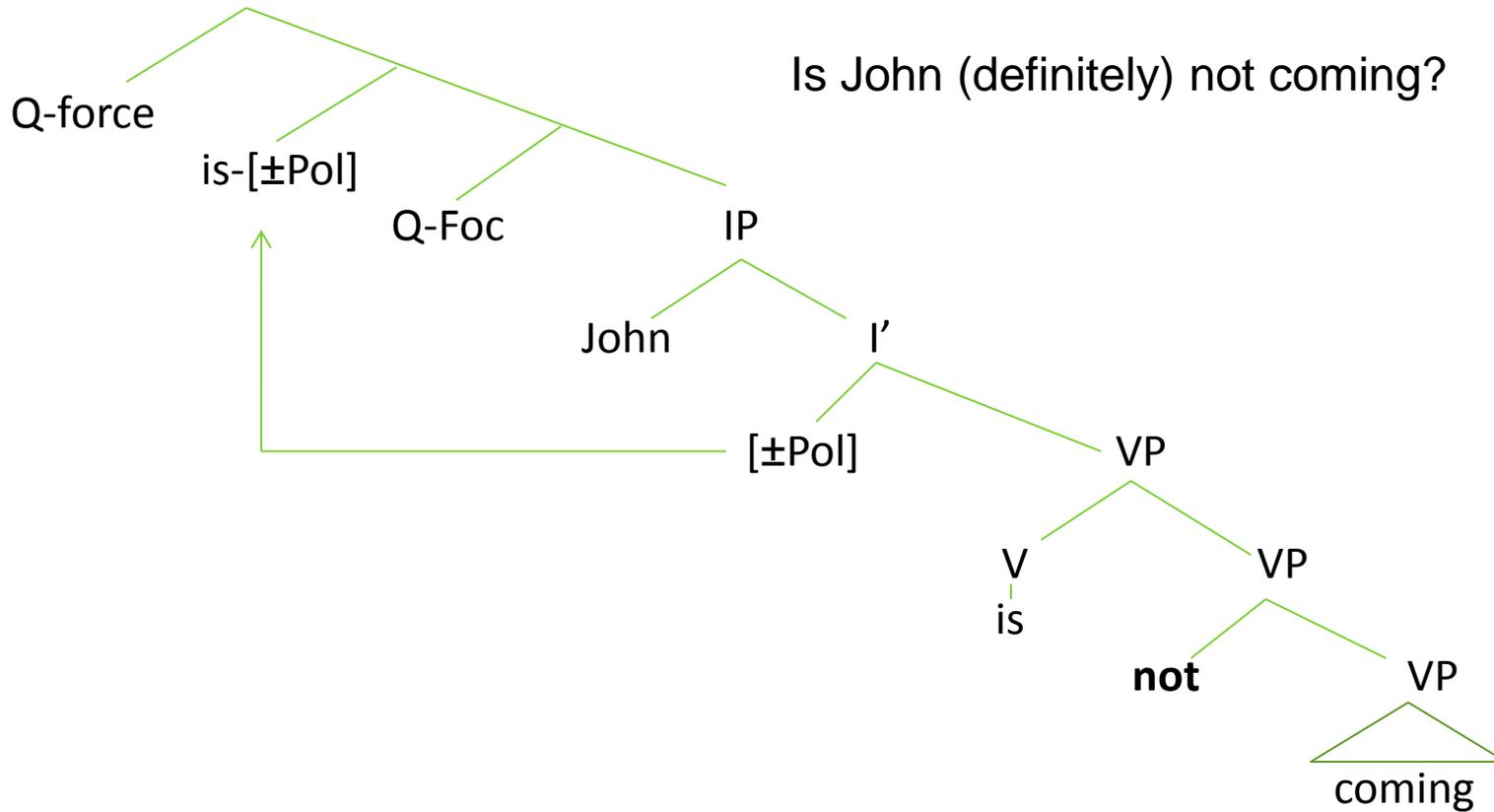
The structure of answers



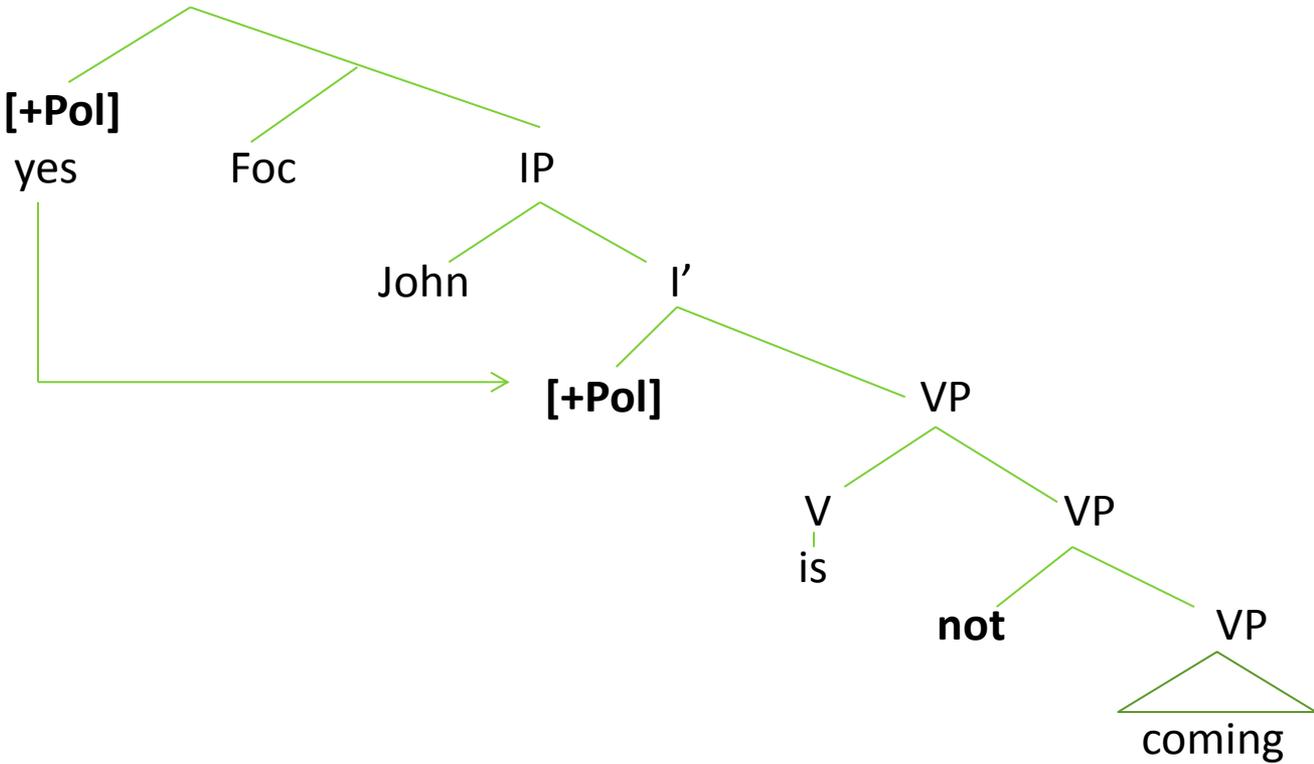
Therefore it needn't be spelled out.

The structure of a question with low negation:

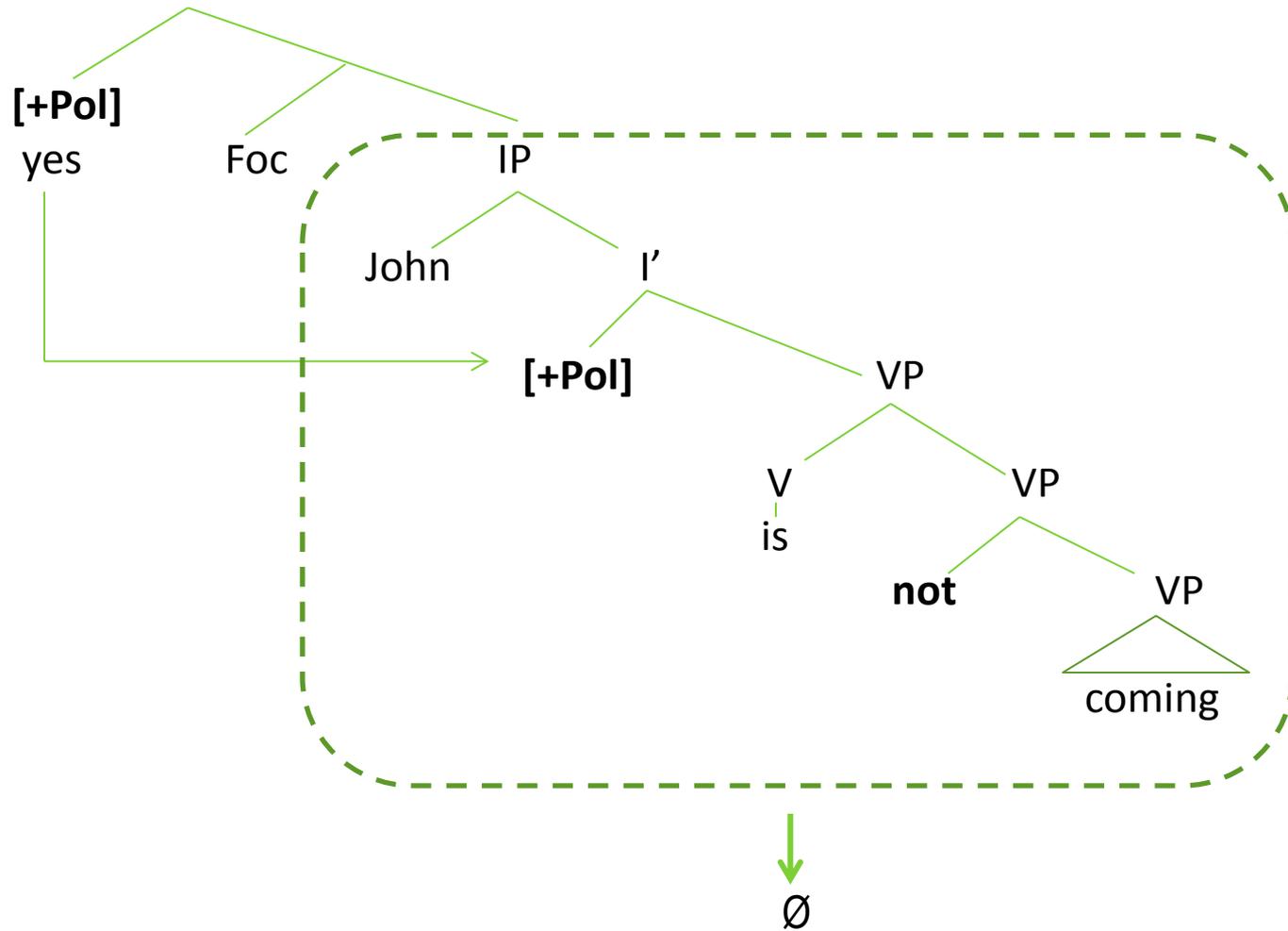
Is John (definitely) not coming?



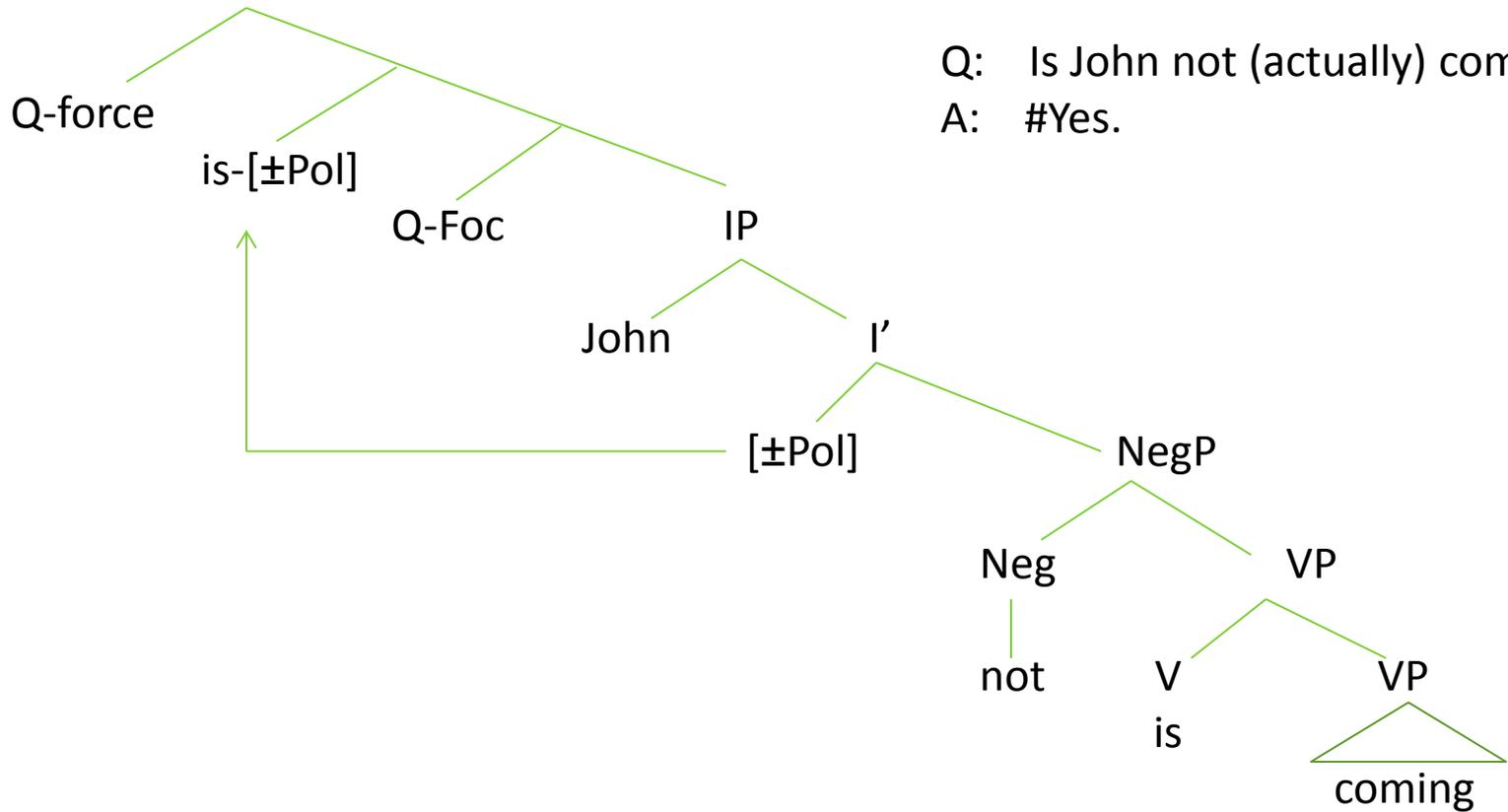
The structure of the answer with low negation:



The structure of the answer with low negation:



The structure of a question with middle negation:



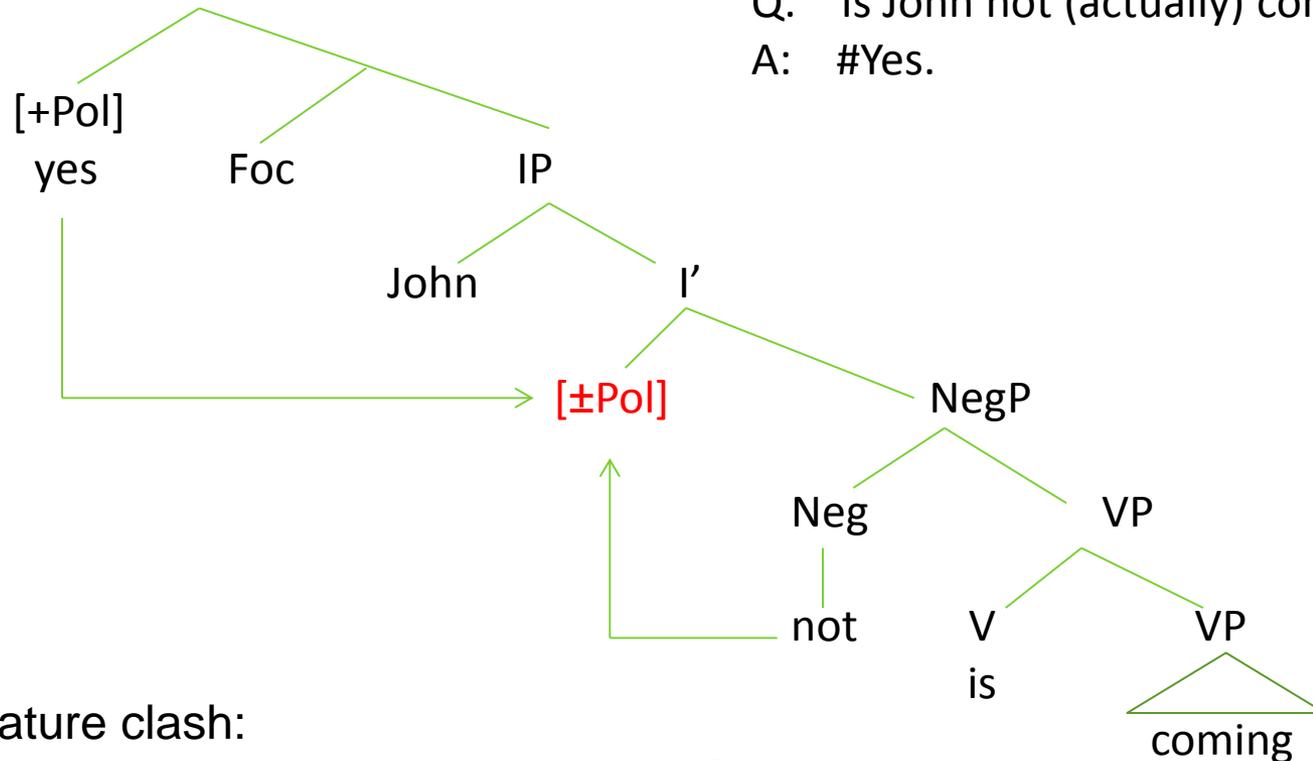
Q: Is John not (actually) coming?

A: #Yes.

The answer to a question with middle negation:

Q: Is John not (actually) coming?

A: #Yes.



A feature clash:

Middle *not* assigns negative value to Pol,

Yes assigns positive value.

Q: Is John not (actually) coming?

A: #Yes.

A: **Yes he is.**

Q: Is John not (actually) coming?

A: #Yes.

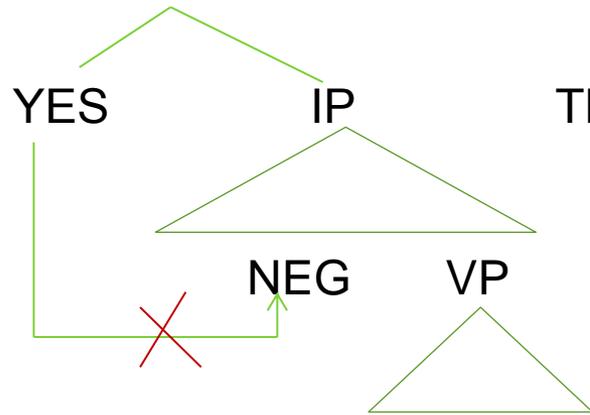
A: **Yes he is.**

When the answer is just *yes*, we know that the structure of the IP is the same as that of the question .

In this case, it has middle negation, which causes a feature clash.

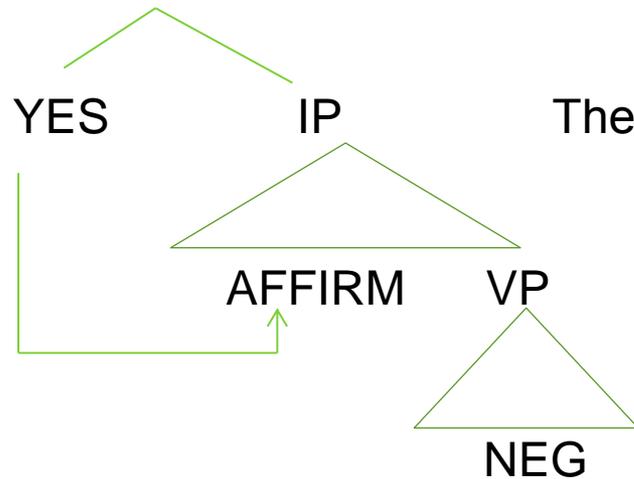
When the answer is *Yes he is* , the structure of the VP is the same as that of the question, but not (necessarily) the structure of the IP.

[yes, +Pol] Foc [IP he [+Pol] is [VP ~~coming~~]]



The effect of middle negation on 'yes'

Middle negation is a problem for negative questions: You can't answer 'yes'.



The effect of low negation on 'yes'

Cross-linguistic prediction

- Languages with a truth-based answering system have a low negation.
- Languages which don't allow truth-based answers don't have a low negation.

A language without low negation: Swedish

- (1) *Du kan **inte inte** gå i kyrkan, ...
you can not not go to Church
- (2) Du kan inte **avstå från** att gå i kyrkan, ...
you can not refrain from going to Church

Swedish doesn't have a negation with VP-scope. It has to use a verb with lexical negative meaning.

Swedish has only middle negation.

A robustly polarity-based answering system:

Q: Har Johan kommit?

has Johan come

A: Ja./Nej.

yes / no

Q: Har Johan inte kommit?

has Johan not come

A: *Ja./Nej. ('Johan has not come.)

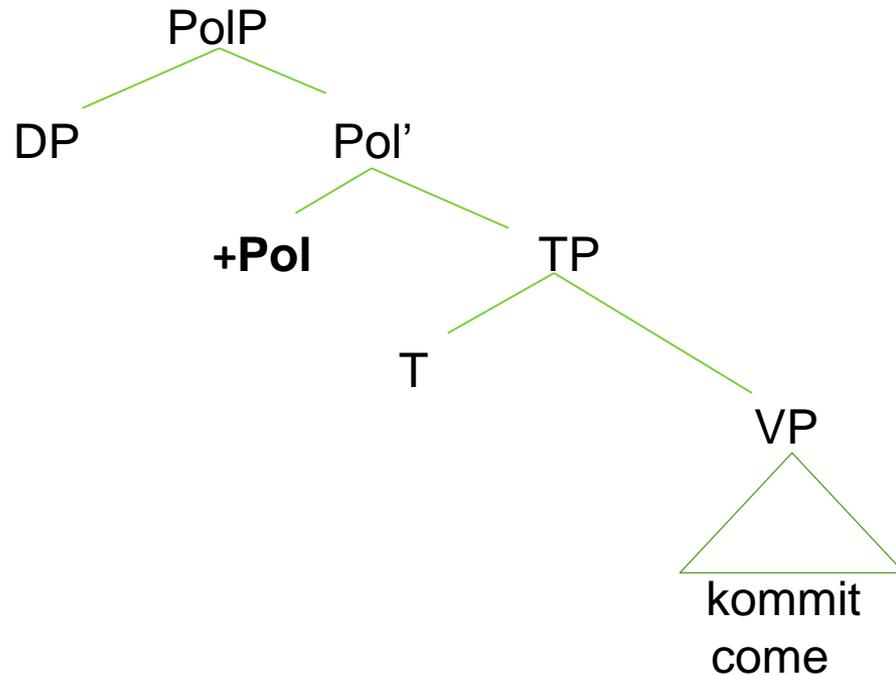
You still get 'the adverb effect' on the answer

Q: Har Johan **nångång** inte kommit i tid?
has Johan any time not come on time

A: Ja.
yes ('He has sometimes **not** been on time.')

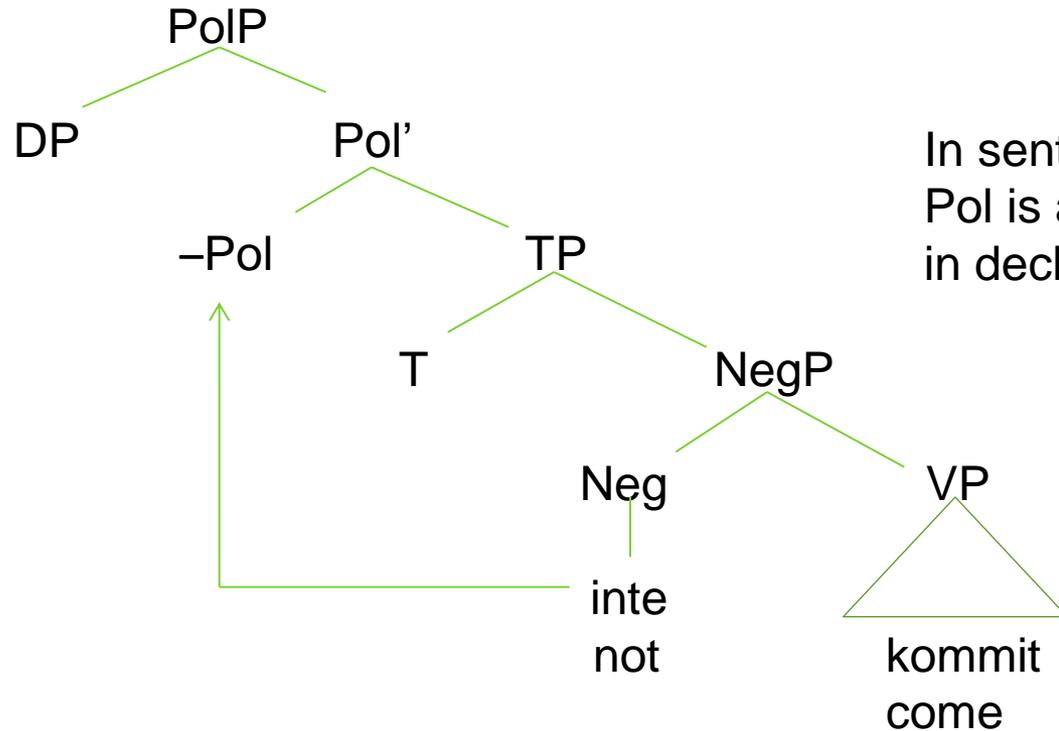
A: Nej. ('He has not sometimes not been on time, i.e. he has
always been on time.')

The abstract Polarity head



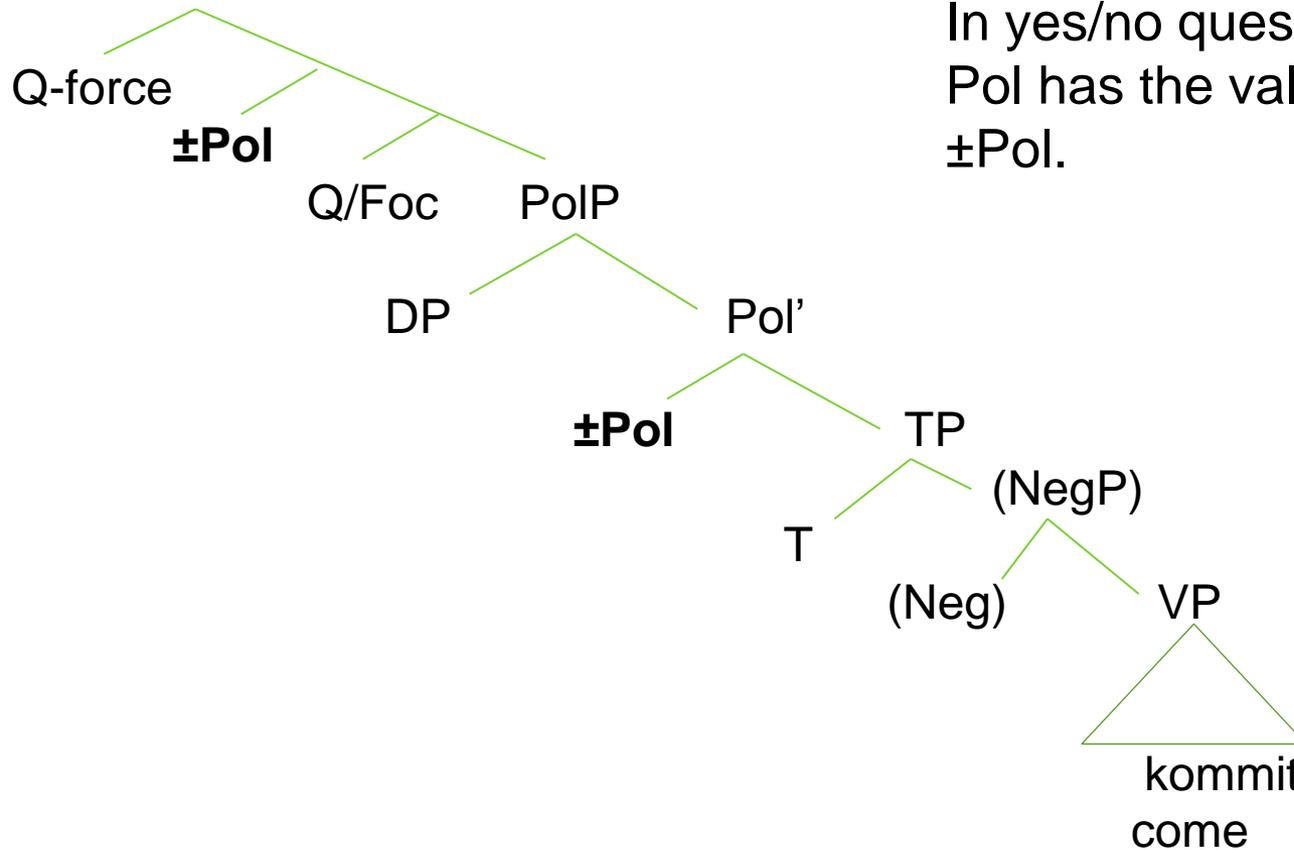
In the absence of negation, Pol gets the value **+Pol** (affirmative) by default, in declarative clauses.

The abstract Polarity head

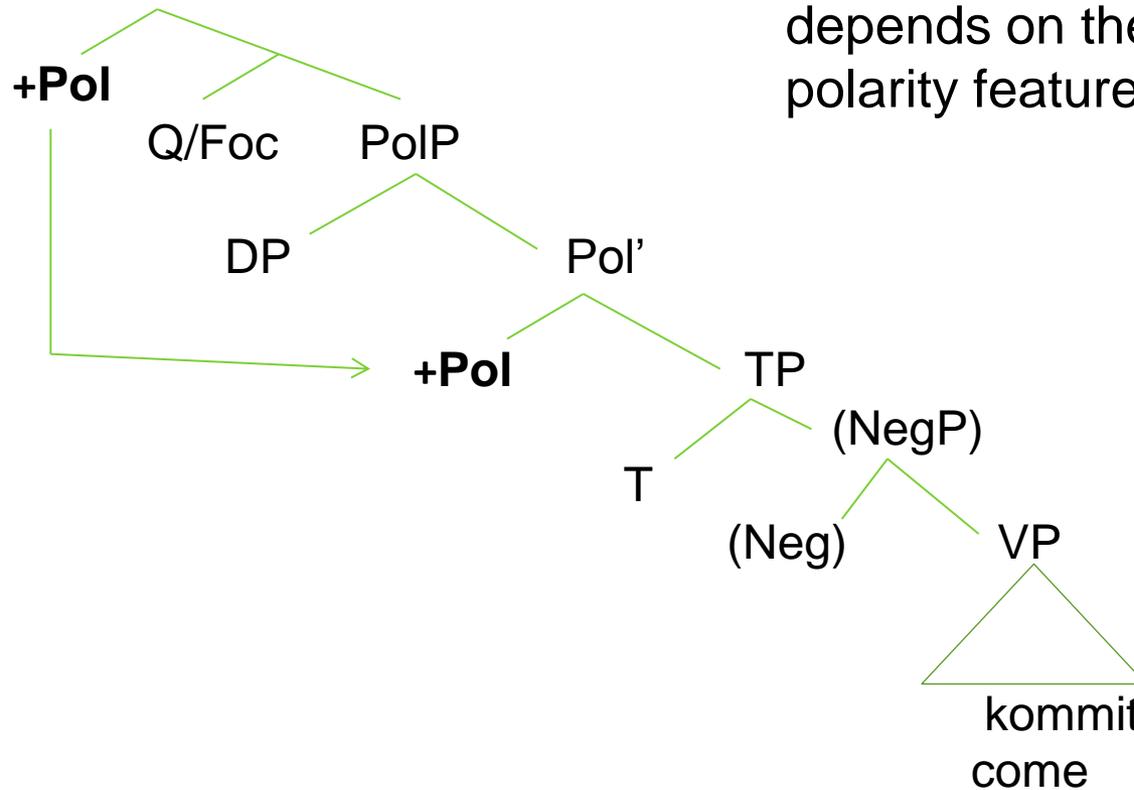


In sentences with a negation,
Pol is assigned negative value,
in declaratives

The abstract Polarity head

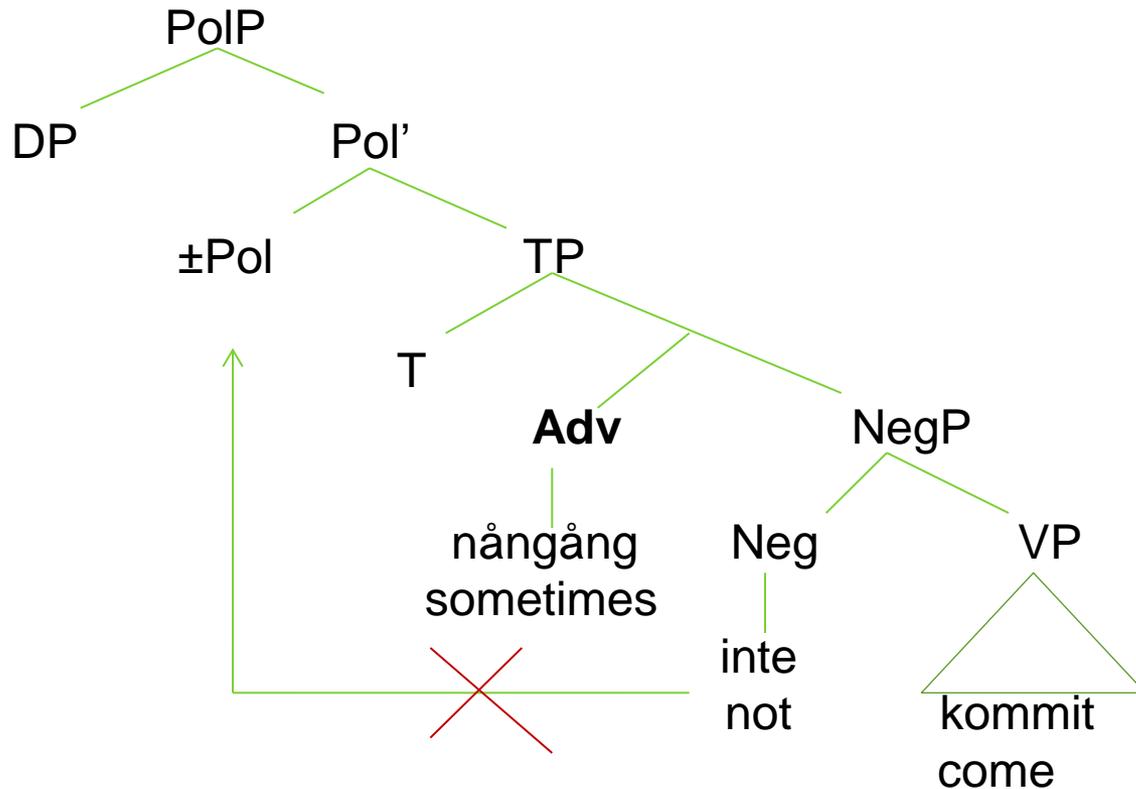


The abstract Polarity head



In answers the value depends on the focused polarity feature.

The adverb effect: It blocks Agree between Pol and Neg



Ja Foc [_{PolP} [+Pol] [Adv inte [_{VP} kommit]]]
 yes not come

A green arrow points from the word "yes" to the [+Pol] feature in the bracketed structure above.

Middle negation and affirmation: Swedish

(3) Q: *Har Johan kommit?*

has Johan come

'Has John come?'

A: *Ja.*

yes

A: *Nej.*

no

(4) Q: *Har Johan inte kommit?*

has Johan not come

'Has John not come?'

A: *#Ja.*

yes (Cannot mean that he hasn't come, or that he has come.)

A: *Nej.*

no ('He hasn't come.')

A: **Jo.**

'Yes he has come.'

The 'polarity-reversing affirmative particle'

(Farkas & Bruce 2009)

Har Johan inte kommit?
has Johan not come

[har, ±Pol] Foc [_{IP} Johan [±Pol] inte [_{VP} kommit]]
has John not come

The answer copies the IP of the question.

If the answer particle is [+Pol] it will clash with the value of the negation.

The particle *jo* neutralizes the negation of the IP.

The 'polarity-reversing affirmative particle'

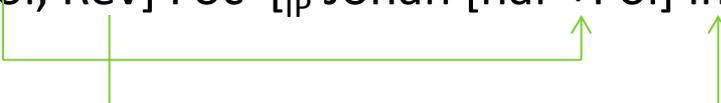
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The answer copies the IP of the question.

The particle *jo* neutralizes the negation of the IP.

[*Jo*, +Pol, Rev] Foc [_{IP} Johan [har +Pol] ~~inte~~ [_{VP} kommit]]


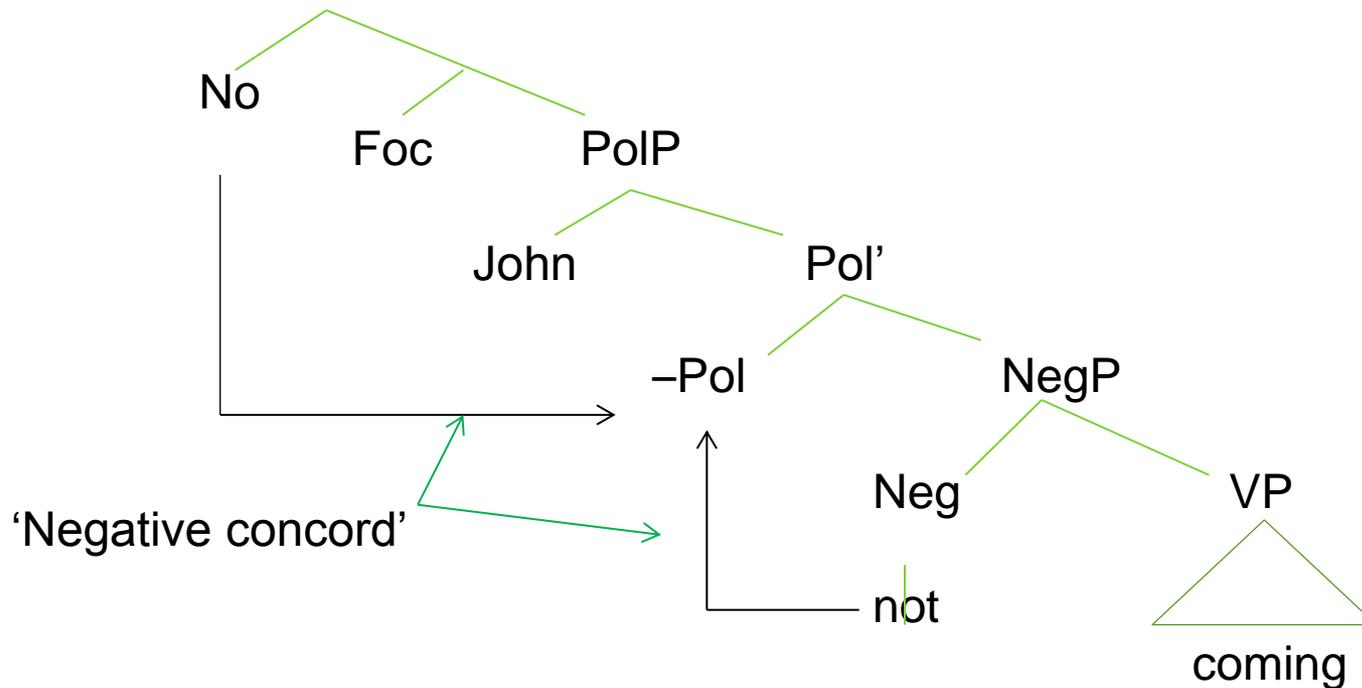
Also found in Standard Arabic, German, French.

A solution to the problem posed by middle negation in negative questions.

Negative answers

Q: Is John not coming?/ Isn't John coming?

A: No. ('John is not coming.')



If this is negative concord, either *no* or *not* is 'uninterpretable negative'.

Presumably *no*.

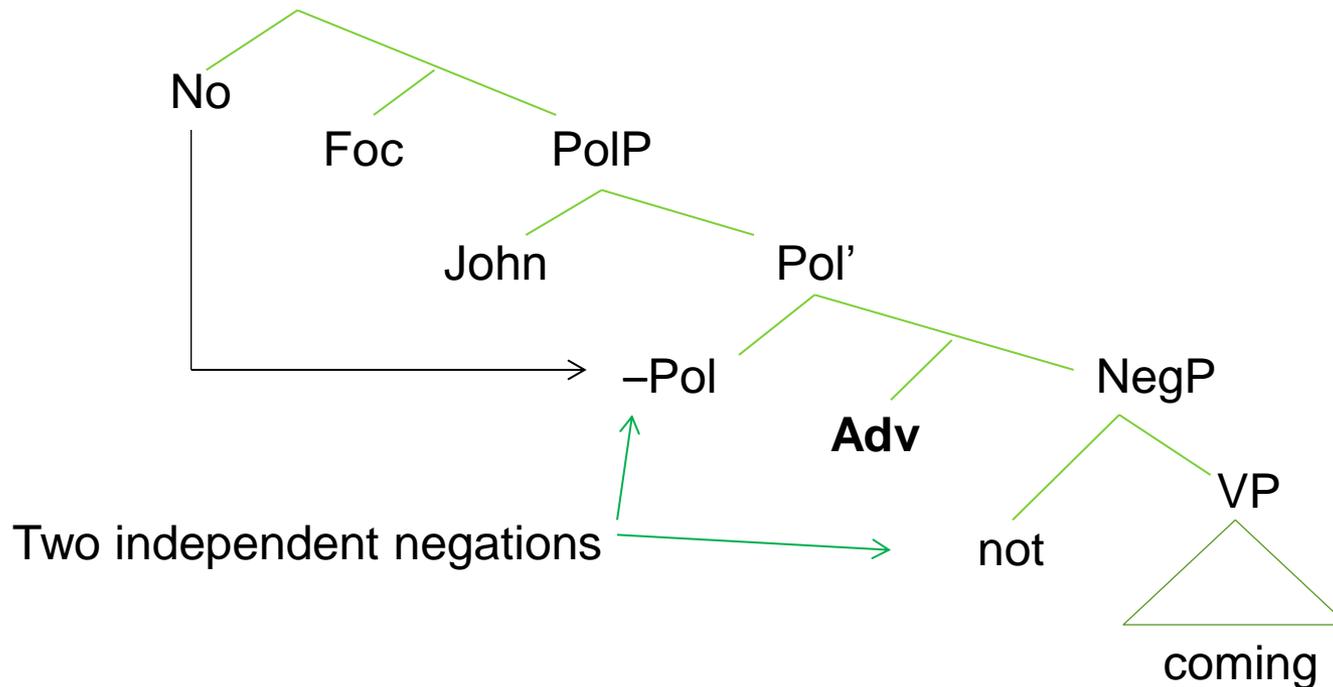
This means that there are two *no*'s: one interpretable, one uninterpretable.

This may be a property characteristic of the polarity-based system.

The adverb effect

Q: Is John sometimes not coming?

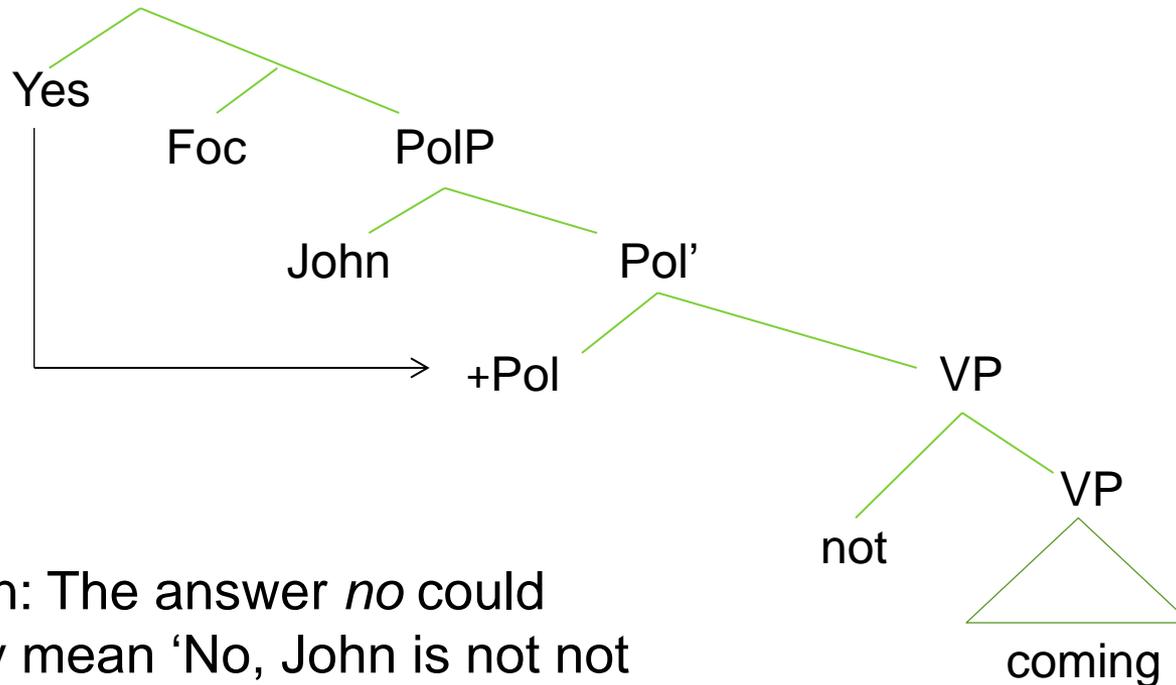
A: No. ('John is not sometimes not coming'. → He is always coming)



Low negation: Does not value Pol obligatorily

Q: Is John not coming?

A: Yes. ('John is not coming'.)

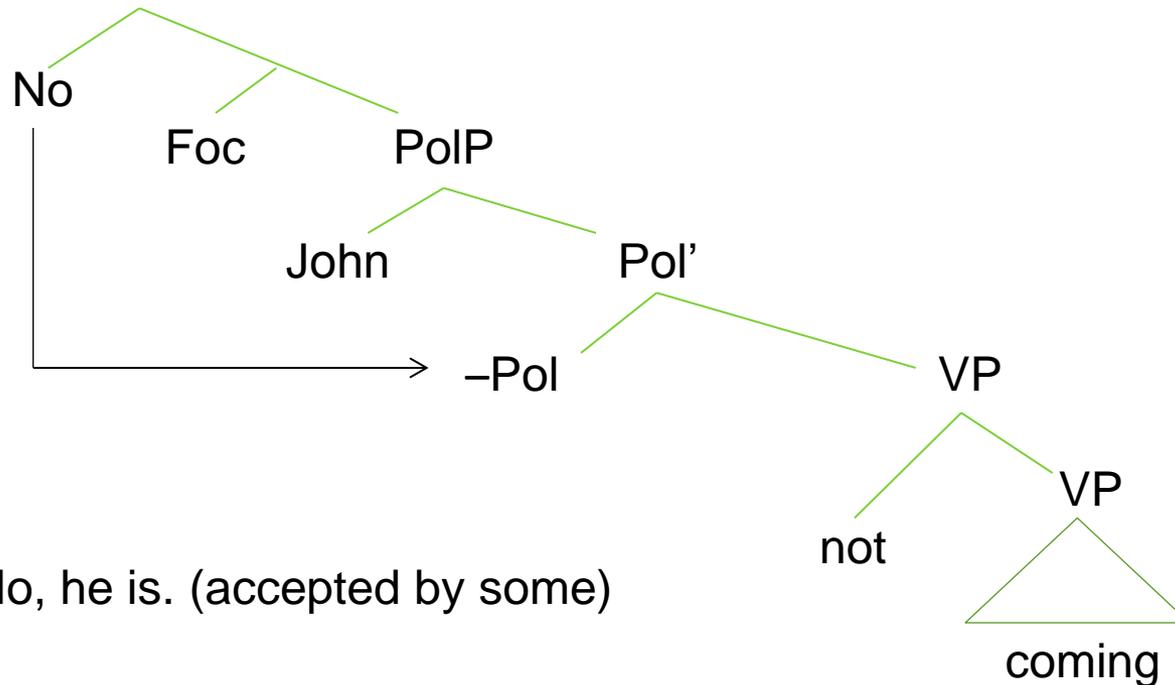


Prediction: The answer *no* could optionally mean 'No, John is not not coming', i.e. 'John is coming'.

Testing the prediction

Q: Is John not coming?

A: No.

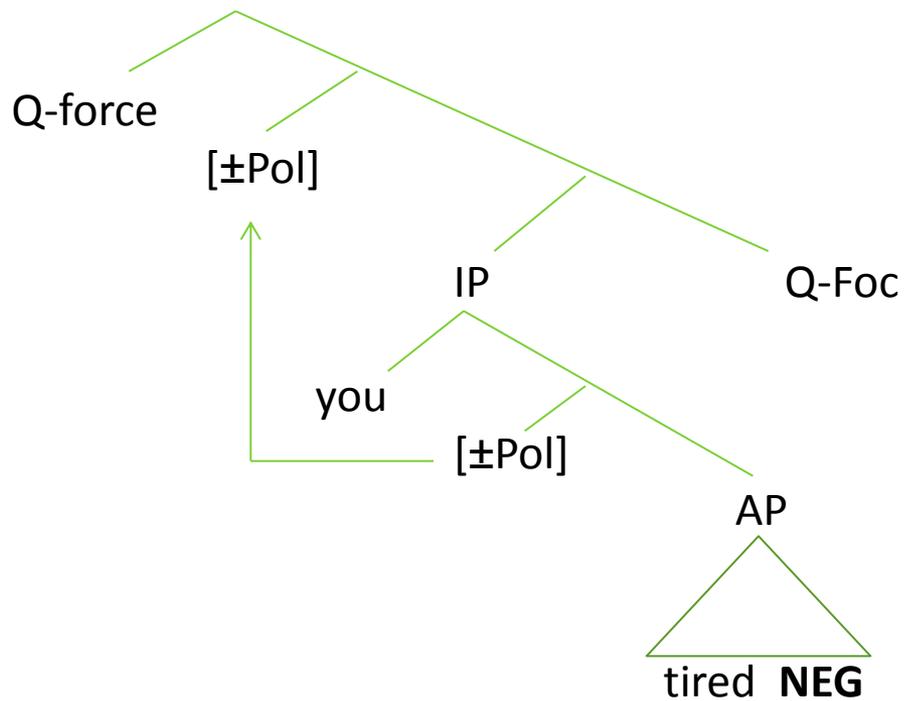


A: No, he is. (accepted by some)

Analysis: No [he is not not coming] --> 'He is coming'

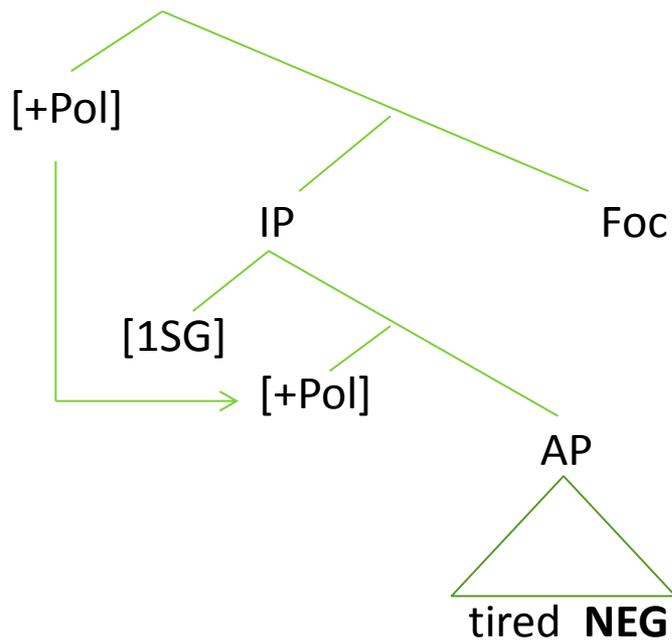
Cross-linguistic prediction

- Languages with a truth-based answering system have a low negation.
- Languages which don't allow truth-based answers don't have a low negation.



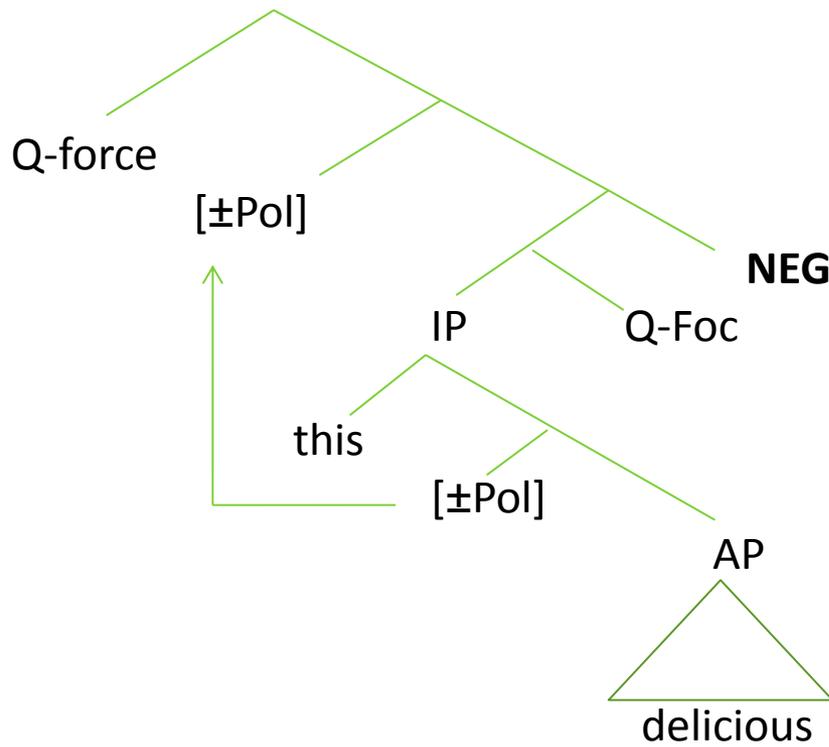
This is an 'ordinary negative question'.

Q: Kimi tukarete nai?
 you tired NEG



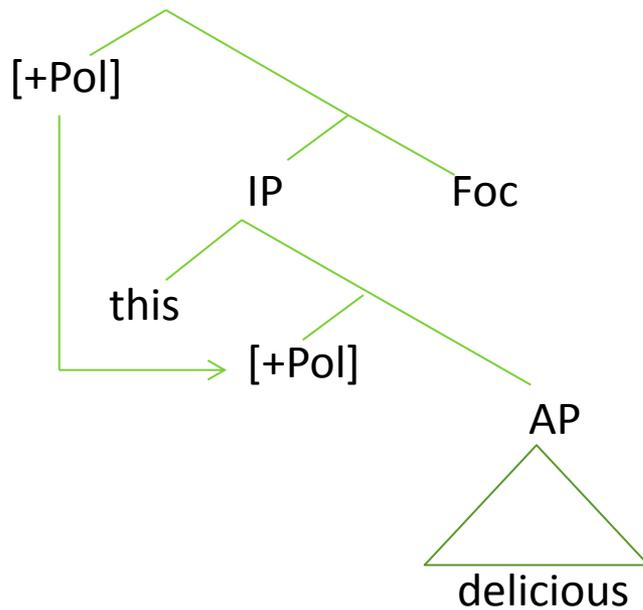
With a truth-based answer:

A: Un (tukarete nai).
 yes tired NEG



The high negation question:

Q: Kore oisiku nai?
 this delicious NEG



The answer copies the IP of the question.
The IP of the question has no negation.

The answer:

A: Un (oisii).
yes delicious

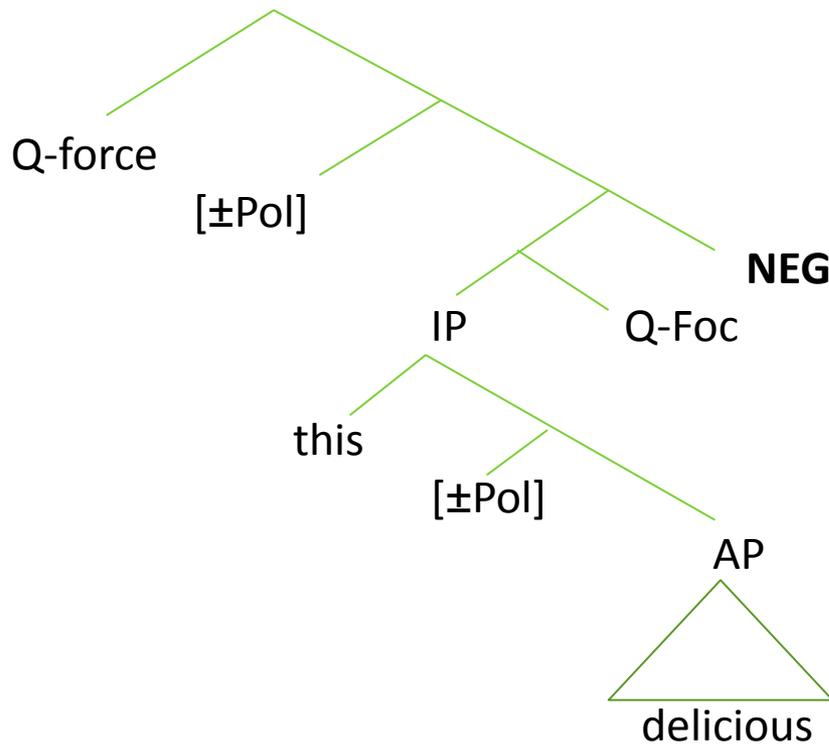
Evidence: The high-negation question cannot have a question particle

Q: Kimi tukarete nai (**no**)? [the low-negation question]
you tired NEG Q

A: **Un**, tukarete nai.
yes tired NEG

Q: Kore oisiku nai (**#no**)? [the high-negation question]
this delicious NEG Q

A: Un, oisii.
yes delicious



Can't have a final question particle because the negation is higher than Q-Foc.

An alternative analysis of negative questions with *no* in Japanese

Kuwabara (2013):

- The *no*-question is embedded under a silent copula and Q-particle *ka*.
- *no* is a FIN-complementizer.

Kimi tukarete nai no DESU KA
you tired NEG C COP Q
lit. 'Is it that you are not tired?'

'Yes (it is that) I am not tired.'

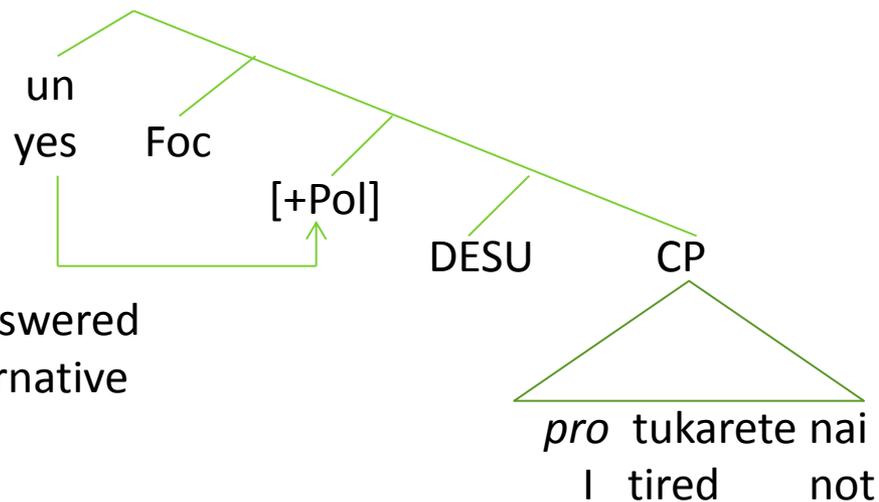
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It also follows that a question answered 'yes' to confirm the positive alternative cannot be constructed with *no*.

Languages reported to have the truth-based system (based on SSWL, literature & fieldwork)

Afrikaans	(Germanic, South Africa)	Mauwake	(Kumil, Trans-New Guinea)
Amele	(Gum, Trans-New Guinea)	Mualang	(Ibanic, Austronesian)
Amharic	(South Semitic, Afro-Asiatic)	Mwotlap	(E. Vanuatu, Austronesian)
Basaa	(Bantoid, Niger-Congo)	Nahuatl	(Uto-Aztecan)
Evenki	(Tungusic)	Navajo	(Athabascan)
Georgian	(Kartvelian)	Nigerian Pidgin	(English-based creole)
Greek	(Indo-European)	Nkore-Kiga	(Bantu, Niger-Congo))
Ibibio	(Lower Cross, Niger-Congo)	Nupe	(Nupe-Gbagyi, Niger Congo,)
Japanese	(Japonic)	Nweh	(Grassf. Bantu, Niger- Congo)
Kashmiri	(Dardic, Indo-European)	Shan	(Northwestern, Tai-Kadai)
Kobon	(Kalam-Kobon, Trans-New Guinea)	Southern Min	(Min, Sino-Tibetan)
Korean	(isolate, East Asia)	Thai	(Thai, Tai-Kadai)
Kuot	(isolate, Papua New Guinea)	Yoruba	(Volta-Niger, Niger-Congo)
Lao	(Lao-Putai, Tai-Kadai)		
Malagasy	(Barito, Austronesian)		
Mandarin	(Chinese, Sino-Tibetan)		
Matses	(Panoan, South America)		

Claim: They have a 'low negation'.

Languages reported to have the polarity-based system (based on SSWL, literature & fieldwork)

Arabic (varieties of) (Semitic, Afro-Asiatic)	Khwarshi (North-East Caucasian)
Bengali (Assamese-Bengali, Indo-Eur.)	Koromfe (Gur, Niger Congo)
Basque (isolate, Europe)	Malayalam (Tamil-Malayal., Dravidian)
Catalan (Romance, Indo-European)	Persian (Iranian, Indo-European)
Croatian (South Slavic, Indo-European)	Polish (Slavic, Indo-European)
Finnish (Finnic, Finno-Ugric)	Shupamem (Bantoid, Niger-Congo)
Gujarati (Western Indo-Aryan, Indo-Eur)	Sorani Kurdish (NW Iranian, Indo-Eur.)
Haitian (French-based creole)	Swedish (Germanic, Indo-European)
Hungarian (Ugric, Finno-Ugric)	Turkish (Turkic)
Irish (Celtic, Indo-European)	West Greenlandic (Inuktitut)
Imbabura Quechua (Quechua, S. America)	Wolof (Senegambian, Niger-Congo)
Jamaican Creole English	
Kannada (Kannada-Badaga, Dravidian)	

Claim: They don't have 'low negation'

Are there shortcuts to the determination of height of negation? Can we use WALS?

You typically can't tell the height of negation by inspecting surface word order.

S V Neg O

S Neg V O

Neg S V O

We can't tell what the position of Neg is without knowing what the position of the verb is.

19 out of 421 languages in WALS. “The majority are VSO languages which employ Neg S V O in negative clauses.” (Dryer 2011)

Situated in East Africa, the Amazon, Australia and some Pacific Islands.

Note: What is crucial is the position of negation in yes/no-questions.

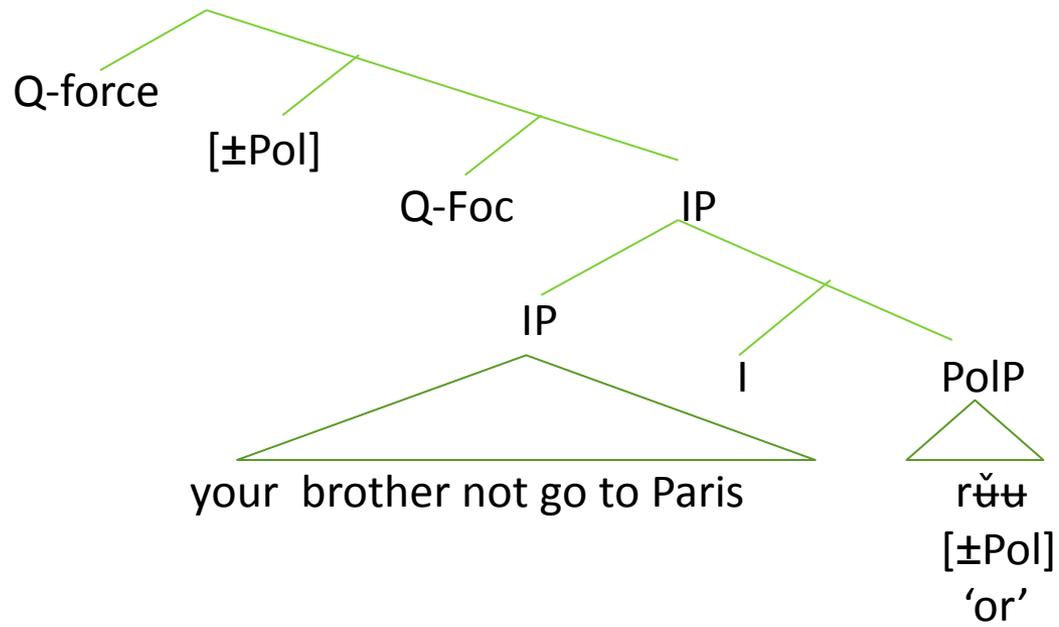
SSWL (Syntactic Structures of the World's Languages):
Potentially a more useful tool.

A language with low negation only: Thai

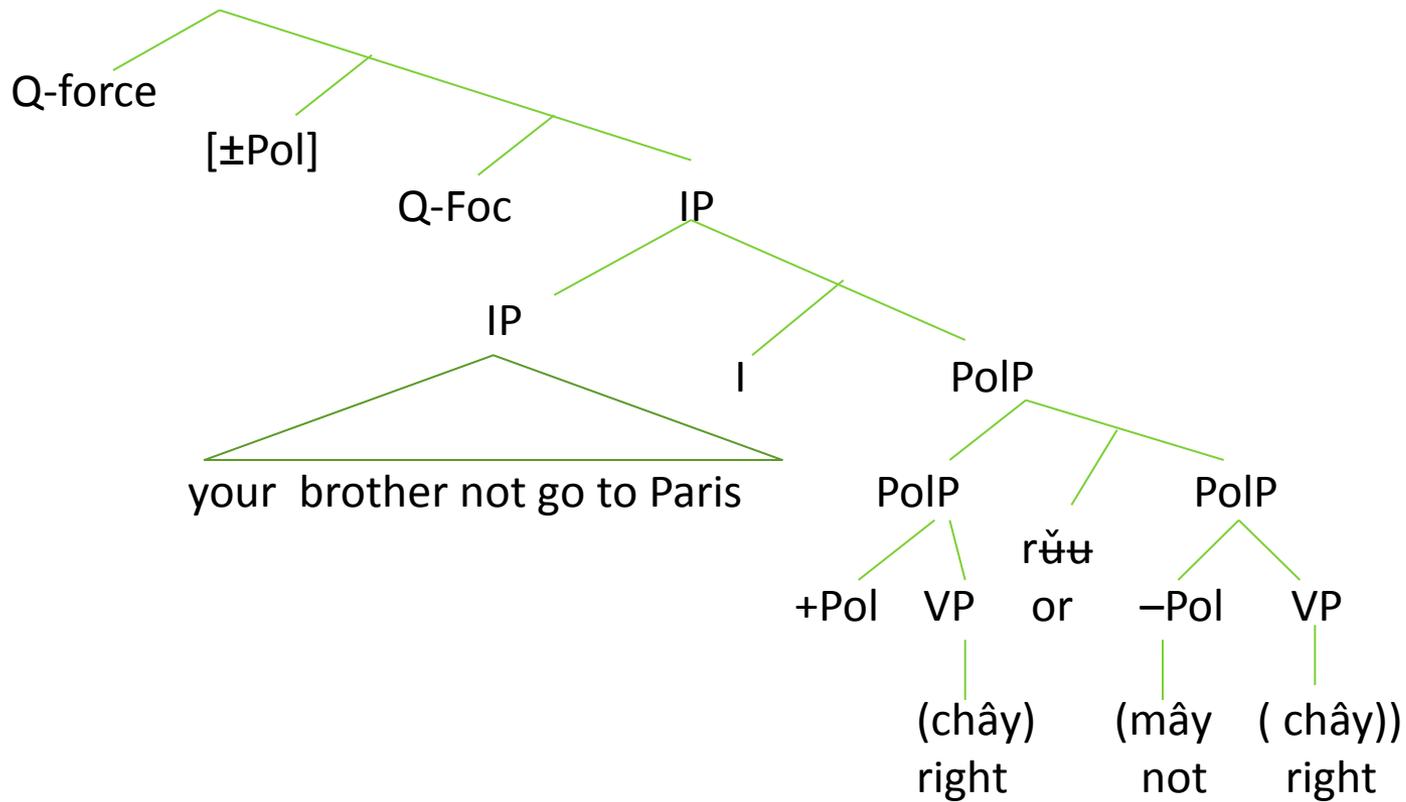
Thai:

Q: phîi-chaay mây pay paa-rîit rǎm
 older-brother NEG go Paris Q
 'Didn't you brother go to Paris?'

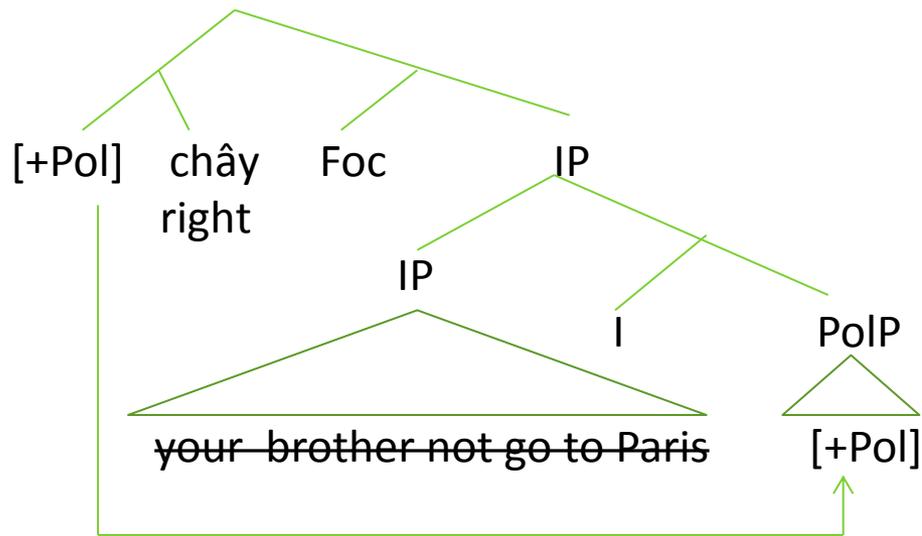
A: chây
 right/ yes ('He didn't go.')



Yaisomanang (2012)



Yaisomanang (2012)



Note: No c-command relation between the negation and [\pm Pol].
 --> 'Low negation'

Question bias has no effect on answers in Thai

(1) Q: thəə mây cha-làat rǎm
she NEG clever Q
Isn't she clever? (said by a mother about her daughter)

A: chây (thəə mây cha-làat)
yes, she NEG clever
'No, she is not clever.'

A: plàaw (thəə cha-làat)
NEG she clever
Lit: No (she is clever).
i.e. 'Yes, she's clever.' Somphob Yaisomanang, p.c.

In Thai, the negation in the question remains 'low', regardless of speaker bias.

In Japanese the height of the negation is variable.

Mauwake: A truth-based answering system

(Berghäll 2006)

Q: *Auwa me ekap-o-k-i?*
my.father not come-PA.3S-QM)
'Didn't father come?'

A: ***Weetak, (ekap-o-k)***
no (come-PA-3S)
Yes, he did.'

The only verbal negator in Mauwake is the adverb *me*, placed before the VP.

Irak-owa maneka ewur me kerer-e-k.
fight-INF big quickly not appear-PA-3S
'The big fight did not start quickly.'

The position of the negator following the manner adverb indicates low negation

The negator *me* is also used as constituent negator, another indication of low negation.

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