An argument for a biclausal analysis of yes/no questions in Vietnamese*

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1 Introduction

1.1 Surface profile of yes/no questions

Descriptively, a yes/no question in Vietnamese is derived from a declarative by flanking its VP with *có*, which means 'yes' as short answer, and *không*, which means 'no' as short answer.

(1) a. *Nam đọc sách.*
Nam read book
'Nam reads books.'

b. *Nam có đọc sách không?*
Nam YES read book NO
'Does Nam read books?'

Both YES and NO can occur preverbally in declaratives. In this position, NO functions as sentential negation, and YES as marker of 'verum focus'. I will assume that this position is head of 'polarity phrase'.[1]

(2) a. *Nam không đọc sách.*
Nam NO read book
'Nam doesn't read books.'

b. *Nam có đọc sách.*
Nam YES read book
'Nam does read books.'

1.2 Monoclausal analysis

Accounts of Vietnamese yes/no questions which have been proposed share the idea that the NO in (1b) and the NO in (2a) are two different lexical items which might be diachronically related but which, synchronically, have different meanings and occupy different slots in the tree (cf. Trinh 2005, Duffield 2007, Phan 2024). Specifically, the clause-medial NO in declaratives, call it NO_p, is a head in the auxiliary system which selects VP and means 'not'.[2] In contrast, the homophonous clause-final NO in yes/no questions, call it NO_q, is a 'question operator' in the C-domain which selects TP and means 'whether'. The structure of (1b), according to this 'monoclausal analysis', would therefore be (3).

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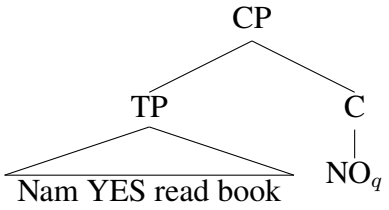
[1] Verum focus is focus on the polarity of the sentence. Thus, (2b) invokes (2a) as an alternative. However, (2a) only invokes (2b) as an alternative if stress is placed on the negative auxiliary. Thus, YES and NO are similar to affirmative *do* and the adverb *not* in English (Chomsky 1957).

[2] For arguments that sentential negation in Vietnamese is verbal see Trinh (2005).

(3)



where $[\![\text{NO}_q]\!] = \lambda p.\ \{p, \neg p\}$

One advantage of the monoclausal analysis is that it makes English and Vietnamese look similar with respect to their strategy of forming yes/no questions: a one-place operator – *whether* in English and NO_q in Vietnamese – composes with a proposition and outputs a set containing that proposition and its negation. A disadvantage is that we have to assume two different NO's for Vietnamese.[3]

1.3 Biclausal analysis

Now, let's say I insist that there is only one NO in Vietnamese, i.e. that the NO which appears clause-finally in yes/no questions actually *is* the very same NO which appears clause-medially in negated declaratives? Here is a rather intuitive analysis which would satisfy my demand.

(4) A yes/no question in Vietnamese has the form $[\text{S}_{\text{YES}}\ [\text{Q}\ \text{S}_{\text{NO}}]]$, where

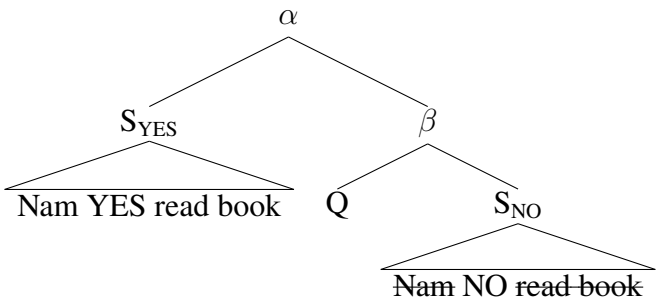
a. S_{NO} is derived from S_{YES} by replacing YES with NO
→ syntactic condition

b. Everything in S_{NO} is silent except NO
→ phonological condition

c. $[\![\text{Q}]\!] = \lambda p.\ \lambda q.\ \{p, q\}$
→ semantic condition

Yes/no questions in Vietnamese would then end up looking like alternative questions, specifically like a disjunction with a silent connective and an elliptical second argument. According to this 'biclausal analysis', the structure of (1b) is (5), where ~~strikethrough~~ represents phonological deletion. The labels of constituents are not important for present purposes.

(5)



where $[\![\text{Q}]\!] = \lambda p.\ \lambda q.\ \{p, q\}$

[3] Although the claim that sentential negation has been 'reanalyzed' and 'co-opted' for a different use is admittedly not outrageous, as this is known to happen to function words cross-linguistically.

At this point, there is no reason to prefer (3) over (5), nor is there reason to prefer (5) over (3). Both analyses have strengths and weaknesses. The monoclausal analysis postulates two different NOs for Vietnamese, one as negation and one as a question operator, but it assumes the same question-forming strategy for both Vietnamese and English. The biclausal analysis postulates one NO for Vietnamese, as negation, but it assumes two different question-forming strategies, one for Vietnamese and one for English. Both analyses deliver the correct sound and meaning for (1b): it is pronounced as the string in (6a), and interpreted as the set in (6b).

(6) a. Nam YES read book NO?
b. {Nam reads books, ¬Nam reads books}

My aim in this squib is to argue for the biclausal analysis and against the monoclausal analysis. I will first present data which pose a challenge for the monoclausal analysis, then show that given independently motivated semantic and pragmatic constraints, these data fall into place once we adopt the biclausal analysis.

2 Problematic data for the monoclausal analysis

The monoclausal analysis, presented in (3), faces a challenge of the following form: NO_q is mysteriously picky about its complement. Let me illustrate.

2.1 Only

Consider the sentences in (7).

(7) a. *Nam có đọc sách.*
Nam YES read book
'Nam does read books.'

b. *Mỗi Nam có đọc sách.*
only Nam YES read book
'Only Nam does read books.'

Both (7a) and (7b) are perfectly acceptable, syntactically as well as semantically. However, it turns out that only (7a) can be argument of NO_q, as shown by the contrast in (8).

(8) a. *Nam có đọc sách không?*
Nam YES read book NO
'Does Nam read books?'

b. **Mỗi Nam có đọc sách không?*
only Nam YES read book NO
('Does only Nam read books?')

2.2 Modal adverbs

Adverbs such as *chắc chắn* ('certainly') can occur before or after YES in declaratives, with no consequence for semantic interpretation. Both (9a) and (9b) are acceptable, and both mean it is certain that Nam reads books.

(9) a. *Nam có chắc chắn đọc sách.*
Nam YES certainly read book
'□Nam reads books'

b. *Nam chắc chắn có đọc sách.*
Nam certainly YES read book
'□Nam reads books'

However, only (9a) can be argument of NO_q, as shown by the contrast in (10).

(10) a. *Nam có chắc chắn đọc sách không?*
Nam YES certainly read book NO
'Is it certain that Nam reads books?'
b. **Nam chắc chắn có đọc sách không?*
Nam certainly YES read book NO
('Is it certain that Nam reads books?')

2.3 Quantifiers

The affirmative auxiliary YES can occur after definite subjects, as evidenced by (11), or after quantified subjects, as evidenced by the sentences in (12).

(11) *Mọi người có đọc sách.*
the people YES read book
'The people do read books.'

(12) a. *Người nào cũng có đọc sách.*
everyone YES read book
'Everyone does read books.'
b. *Một số người có đọc sách.*
someone YES read book
'Someone does read books.'

However, only (11) can be argument of NO_q, as shown by the contrast between (13) and the sentences in (14).

(13) *Mọi người có đọc sách không?*
the people YES read book NO
'Do the people read books?'

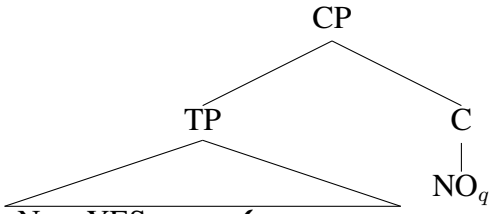
(14) a. **Người nào cũng có đọc sách không?*
everyone YES read book NO
('Does everyone read books?')
b. **Một số người có đọc sách không?*
someone YES read book NO
('Does someone read books?')

2.4 General form of the problem

As we just saw, TPs that are perfectly acceptable alone, i.e. those in (15), suddenly causes deviance when they combine with NO_q, giving rise to contrasts which otherwise would not obtain, as shown in (16).

(15) a. Nam YES came ✓
b. only Nam YES came ✓
c. the people YES came ✓
d. all/some people YES came ✓
e. Nam YES certainly came ✓
f. Nam certainly YES came ✓

(16)



Nam YES came ✓
only Nam YES came ✗
the people YES came ✓
all/some people YES came ✗
Nam YES certainly came ✓
Nam certainly YES came ✗

What prevents some TPs from composing with NO$_q$? Well, whatever it is, we can be sure it has nothing to do with phonology. The deviant sentences are perfect sequences of sounds. Approaching the problem from semantics seems equally hopeless. As far as its meaning is concerned, NO$_q$ takes a proposition as argument. But every sentence in (15) expresses a proposition. How can NO$_q$ distinguish between them, especially when the distinction must be made between two *semantically equivalent* sentences, as is the case of (15e) and (15f). These sentences have the exact same truth condition, but only (15e) can be argument of NO$_q$. We are thus left with syntax. The c-selectional properties of NO$_q$ would have to be such that they yield the following facts.

(17) a. The subject of its complement cannot be the focus associate of *only*
b. The subject of its complement cannot be a quantifier
c. Modal adverbs in its complement can follow but cannot precede the polarity head

Given that c-selection is a relation between a head and the head of its complement (Chomsky 1965), it is hard to see how the facts in (17) can be derived from c-selectional properties of NO$_q$. While I do not rule out the possibility of such a derivation, I am not clever enough to pursue it. Instead, I will explore another venue of explanation: the biclausal analysis.

3 The biclausal analysis

3.1 The logical relationship between the two answers

Here is, again, the biclausal analysis of yes/no questions in Vietnamese.

(18) A yes/no question in Vietnamese has the form [S_{YES} [Q S_{NO}]], where
a. S_{NO} is derived from S_{YES} by replacing YES with NO
$\rightarrow$ syntactic condition
b. Everything in S_{NO} is silent except NO
$\rightarrow$ phonological condition
c. $[\![\text{Q}]\!] = \lambda p.\ \lambda q.\ \{p, q\}$
$\rightarrow$ semantic condition

A yes/no question in Vietnamese, according to this hypothesis, tells us how to construct two sentences, S_{YES} and S_{NO}, each of which represents one answer to the question. It does this by presenting us with the positive answer, from which the negative answer is to be derived syntactically. Importantly, nothing in (18) forces the two answers to be contradictions of each other. Q maps the propositions expressed by S_{YES} and S_{NO} to the set containing them but these propositions do not have to be p and $\neg p$, as replacing YES with NO does not have to be negation. To illustrate, consider (19a) and (19b).

(19) a. *Nam chắc chắn có đọc sách.*
Nam certainly YES read book
'□Nam reads books'

b. *Nam chắc chắn không đọc sách.*
Nam certainly NO read book
'□¬Nam reads books'

As we can see, (19b) is derived from (19a) by replacing YES with NO, but the proposition expressed by (19b) is not the negation of the proposition expressed by (19a): $\Box\neg p$ is strictly stronger than $\neg\Box p$, and it is the latter, not the former, which is the negation of $\Box p$.

Of course, replacing YES with NO can result in negation of the original sentence, as exemplified by (20a) and (20b).

(20) a. *Nam có chắc chắn đọc sách.*
Nam YES certainly read book
'□Nam reads books'

b. *Nam không chắc chắn đọc sách.*
Nam NO certainly read book
'¬□Nam reads books'

The difference between (19b) and (20b) lies in the position of NO relative to the modal adverb. In (19b), NO is to the right of the adverb, while in (20b), it is to the left of the adverb. Note that there is no difference in truth-conditional meaning between (19a) and (20a): moving YES around the adverb has no semantic consequence. Thus, two positive base sentences can be equivalent, while their negative transforms are not.

And herein lies the crucial distinction between the monoclausal and the biclausal analysis. The monoclausal analysis provides the *semantic* guarantee that the question always denotes a set containing a proposition and its negation. This property is hardwired into the meaning of NO_q. The biclausal analysis, on the other hand, provides the *syntactic* guarantee that the position of NO in the negative answer is the same as the position of YES in the positive answer. This property obtains by virtue of (18a). However, as we saw above, replacing YES with NO does not always result in negation, and consequently, it is possible that the question does not denote the set $\{p, \neg p\}$. This distinction between the monoclausal and the biclausal analysis will be the anchor of my argument against the former and in favor of the latter.

3.2 Partition by Exhaustification

An auxiliary hypothesis which I am going to need is a general constraint on questions which is proposed by Fox (2019, 2020) and which goes by the name of 'Partition by Exhaustification'.[4]

[4]The definition of PbE in (21) is quite informal. Here is a more formal version.

(21) Partition by Exhaustification (PbE)
A question is only felicitous if its elements, once exhaustified, partition the context set

The 'context set' is the set of possible worlds representing the conjunction of all propositions that are mutually assumed to be true (cf. Stalnaker 1978). A partition of a set of possible worlds C is a set of non-empty subsets (cells) of C which do not overlap and whose union equals C. Here is an example of how PbE works. Consider the question in (22).

(22) Which girl came to the party?

Suppose the relevant girls are a, b and c, and let P be the predicate 'came to the party'. The question in (22) denotes the set of propositions $Q = \{Pa, Pb, Pc\}$.[5] Exhaustification of elements of this set yields the set $A = \{Pa \wedge \neg Pb \wedge \neg Pc, \neg Pa \wedge Pb \wedge Pc, \neg Pa \wedge \neg Pb \wedge Pc\}$, which we can represent more informally as $A = \{$only a came, only b came, only c came$\}$. PbE requires that A partitions the context set, which means it requires it be common ground that only a came, or only b came, or only c came. In other words, PbE predicts that the question presupposes that exactly one girl came. This prediction, as we know, is correct.[6]

We have discussed a case where the question, i.e. (22), is explicit. But PbE also applies to implicit questions. Consider the exchange in (23), where capitalization represents focus stress.[7]

(23) A: Mary bought an expensive convertible.
B: #She bought a RED convertible.

Let $expensive$ stand for the proposition asserted by A and red for that asserted by B. B's utterance, given the preceding utterance by A, alludes to the implicit question $Q = \{expensive, red\}$. Exhaustification of elements of this set yields the set $A = \{expensive \wedge \neg red, \neg expensive \wedge red\}$. PbE requires that A partitions the context set, which means it requires it be common ground that the car Mary bought

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(i) Partition by Exhaustification
A question Q is felicitous given a context set C only if
$\left\{ \left[exh(Q)(p)\right]_C \;\middle|\; p \in Q \right\}$ is a partition of C
where $[p]_A = p \cap A$ and $exh(Q)(p) = \lambda w.\, p(w) \wedge \forall q \in Q.\, q(w) \rightarrow p \subseteq q$

[5] Note that the noun *girl* in (22) is singular, and therefore has no pluralities in its denotation. Consequently, propositions such as 'a and b came to the party' are not in the denotation of (22). See Dayal (1996).

[6] As evidence for the existence and uniqueness presupposition of (22), consider the judgements in (i).

(i) a. I know that exactly one girl came. Tell me which girl came.
b. #I am not sure if any girl came. Tell me which girl came.
$\rightarrow$ existence presupposition failure
c. #I know that one or more girls came. Tell me which girl came.
$\rightarrow$ uniqueness presupposition failure

[7] This example is taken from Katzir (2023).

is either expensive but not red, or it is red but not expensive. In other words, PbE predicts that B's utterance presupposes that the car Mary bought is expensive if and only if it is not red. To the extent that this presupposition is hard to accommodate, the sentence is odd, as observed.

3.3 Resolving the puzzles

Let us now come back to yes/no questions in Vietnamese. My explanation of the deviant cases in section 2 will have the following form: given the meaning of S_{YES} and S_{NO} which are determined by the syntactic structure of the question, the context that must be accommodated for PbE to be satisfied turns out to be one in which the question is infelicitous for other reasons. The explanation necessitates the biclausal analysis, as without it there are no S_{YES} and S_{NO} which are determined by the syntactic structure of the question.

Only Recall the puzzle: subjects in polar questions cannot associate with *only*.

(24) **Chỉ Nam có đọc sách không?*
only Nam YES read book NO

Given the biclausal analysis, the two answers to this question are (25a), which is S_{YES}, and (25b), which is S_{NO}. The underlined part in the translation represents presuppositional content.

(25) a. *Chỉ Nam có đọc sách.*
only Nam YES read book
'<u>Nam reads books</u> $\wedge$ no other does.'
b. *Chỉ Nam không đọc sách.*
only Nam NO read book
'<u>Nam doesn't read books</u> $\wedge$ all others do.'

As we can see, S_{YES} and S_{NO} have contradictory presuppositions. This may already suffice to account for the oddness of (24). But let's say that we can *locally* accommodate these presuppositions. In other words, let's say that S_{YES} and S_{NO} are interpreted as the conjunctions in (26a) and (26b), respectively.

(26) a. Nam reads books $\wedge$ no other does
b. Nam doesn't read books $\wedge$ all others do

We thus have $Q = \{(26a), (26b)\}$. Exhaustifying elements of this set yields $A = \{(26a) \wedge \neg(26b), \neg(26a) \wedge (26b)\} = \{(26a), (26b)\}$, as (26a) strictly entails the negation of (26b) and vice versa. PbE kicks in and requires that A partitions the context set, which means it requires it be common ground that either Nam reads books and no other does or Nam doesn't read books but all others do. In this context, however, *only Nam* becomes equivalent to *Nam*, which means the use of *only* becomes semantically superfluous, giving rise to the oddness of (24).

Do we have independent evidence that *only* incur oddness when it is contextually redundant? Yes we do. Consider the scenario where it is common ground that either

John got the job or Bill did but not both. In that scenario, we can clearly observe the contrast between (27a) on the one hand and (27b) on the other.

(27) Context: either John got the job or Bill did, but not both
  a. Did John get the job?
  b. #Did only John get the job?

Modal adverbs Recall the puzzle: the modal adverb *certainly* can occur after, but not before, the auxiliary YES in yes/no questions, as shown by the contrast between (10a) and (10b), reproduced below in (28a) and (28b).

(28) a. *Nam có chắc chắn đọc sách không?*
  Nam YES certainly read book NO
  'Is it certain that Nam reads books?'
  b. **Nam chắc chắn có đọc sách không?*
  Nam certainly YES read book NO
  ('Is it certain that Nam reads books?')

Given the biclausal analysis, the two answers to the question in (28a) are (20a) and (20b), reproduced below in (29a) and (29b).

(29) a. *Nam có chắc chắn đọc sách.*
  Nam YES certainly read book
  '□Nam reads books'
  b. *Nam không chắc chắn đọc sách.*
  Nam NO certainly read book
  '¬□Nam reads books'

We thus have $Q = \{(29a), (29b)\}$. Exhaustifying elements of this set yields $A = \{(29a) \wedge \neg(29b), \neg(29a) \wedge (29b)\} = \{(29a), (29b)\}$, as (29a) and (29b) contradict each other. PbE kicks in and requires that A partitions the context set, which means it requires it be common ground that either it is certain that Nam reads books or it is not certain that he does. This is a trivial requirement, and the sentence is, consequently, acceptable.

Now consider the question in (28b), which is deviant. Given the biclausal analysis, the two answers to this question are (19a) and (19b), reproduced below in (30a) and (30b).

(30) a. *Nam chắc chắn có đọc sách.*
  Nam certainly YES read book
  '□Nam reads books'
  b. *Nam chắc chắn không đọc sách.*
  Nam certainly NO read book
  '□¬Nam reads books'

We thus have $Q = \{(30a), (30b)\}$. Exhaustifying elements of this set yields $A = \{(30a) \wedge \neg(30b), \neg(30a) \wedge (30b)\} = \{(30a), (30b)\}$, as (30a) strictly entails the negation of (30b). PbE kicks in and requires that A partitions the context set, which means it requires it be common ground that either it is certain that Nam reads books or it is certain that he does not. This is *not* a trivial requirement. The context is required to be an 'opinionated' one, which excludes possible worlds where it is possible, but not certain, that Nam reads books. Now, it can be observed that such a context makes it odd to use modals like *certainly*. Instead, a plain, non-modalized sentence is prefered (cf. von Fintel & Gillies 2010). As independent evidence for this, consider the contrast between (31a) and (31b).

(31) a. Look out the window and tell me if it's raining.
b. #Look out the window and tell me if it's certainly raining.

The local context of the second conjunct in these sentences is an opinionated context: after looking out the window, one is either sure that it is raining, or sure that it is not raining. In that context, the non-modalized *it's raining* is felicitous, but not the modalized *it's certainly raining*. Since *certainly* is infelicitous in opinionated contexts, and (28b) requires the context to be opinionated, (28b) is odd.

Quantifiers Recall the puzzle: subjects in yes/no questions can be definite descriptions but not quantifiers. This is evidenced by the contrast between (13), reproduced below in (32), and the sentences in (14), reproduced below in (33).

(32) *Mọi người có đọc sách không?*
the people YES read book NO
'Do the people read books?'

(33) a. **Người nào cũng có đọc sách không?*
everyone YES read book NO
('Does everyone read books?')
b. **Một số người có đọc sách không?*
someone YES read book NO
('Does someone read books?')

Given the biclausal analysis, the two answers to (32) are (34a) and (34b).

(34) a. *Mọi người có đọc sách.*
the people YES read book
'The people read books'
b. *Mọi người không đọc sách.*
the people NO read book
'The people do not read books'

We thus have $Q = \{(34a), (34b)\}$. Exhaustifying elements of this set yields $A = \{(34a) \wedge \neg(34b), \neg(34a) \wedge (34b)\} = \{(34a), (34b)\}$, as (34a) strictly entails the negation of (34b) and vice versa.[8] PbE kicks in and requires that A partitions the context set, which means it requires it be common ground that either the people read books, i.e. everyone does, or the people don't, i.e. no one does. This 'homogeneous' context licenses, in fact requires, the use of the definite description. The sentence, consequently, is acceptable.

Now consider the questions in (33), which are deviant. Let us begin with (33a). The two answers to this question are (12a), reproduced below in (35a), and (35b).

(35) a. *Người nào cũng có đọc sách.*
everyone YES read book
'$\forall x.\ x$ reads books'
b. *Người nào cũng không đọc sách.*
everyone NO read book
'$\forall x.\ \neg x$ reads books'

[8] I am talking as if the presuppositions of definite descriptions (existence, uniqueness, homogeneity) are all locally accomodated, i.e. made part of their assertive content. Otherwise I would have to replace 'entail' with 'Strawson-entail' (cf. von Fintel 1999).

We thus have $Q = \{(35a), (35b)\}$. Exhaustifying elements of this set yields $A = \{(35a) \wedge \neg(35b), \neg(35a) \wedge (35b)\} = \{(35a), (35b)\}$, as (12a) strictly entails the negation of (35b) and vice versa. PbE kicks in and requires that A partitions the context set, which means it requires it be common ground that either everyone reads books or no one does. Given Maximize Presupposition (Heim 1991), this homogeneous context gives rise to the oddness of the universal quantifier *người nào cũng*, hence the oddness of (33a), as the use of the definite *mọi người*, which comes with a homogeneity presupposition, is licensed.

What about (33b), where the subject is an existential quantifier. Given the biclausal analysis, the two answers to this question are (36a), and (36b).

(36) a. *Một số người có đọc sách.*
someone YES read book
'$\exists x.\ x$ reads books'

b. *Một số người không đọc sách.*
someone NO read book
'$\exists x.\ \neg x$ reads books'

We thus have $Q = \{(36a), (36b)\}$. Exhaustifying elements of this set yields $A = \{(36a) \wedge \neg(36b), \neg(36a) \wedge (36b)\} = \{\exists x.\ x$ reads books $\wedge \neg\exists x.\ \neg x$ reads books, $\neg\exists x.\ x$ reads books $\wedge\ \exists x.\ \neg x$ read books$\} = \{\forall x.\ x$ reads books, $\forall x.\ \neg x$ reads books$\} = \{(35a), (35b)\}$. Thus, exhaustifying the elements of (33b) actually yields the same set as exhaustifying the elements of (33a). This means that the context which must be accommodated for (33b) to satisfy PbE is the same homogeneous context which must be accommodated for (33a) to satisfy PbE. Maximize Presupposition then militates against (33b) in the same way it militates against (33a), and (33b) is consequently odd in the same way (33a) is.

4 Conclusion

I consider two analyses of yes/no questions in Vietnamese. The 'monoclausal analysis' takes such questions to be of the form $O(p)$, where $O(p) = \{p, \neg p\}$, while the 'biclausal analysis' takes them to be of the form $O(p)(q)$, where $O(p)(q) = \{p, q\}$. I argue in favor of the biclausal analysis on the basis of three observations: (i) subjects of yes/no questions cannot associate with *only*; (ii) subjects of yes/no questions cannot be quantifiers; and (iii) modal adverbs in yes/no questions can follow but not precede the polarity head. The argument relies crucially on the general requirement that answers to a question, once exhaustified, partition the context set.

The reader, at this point, might be asking herself what kind of language would *not* allow its speakers to ask such simple questions as those in (37).

(37) a. Does only Nam read books?
b. Does everyone read books?
c. Does someone read books?

Vietnamese, of course, does allow its speakers to ask the questions in (37), just not in the way we have discussed. Here is the Vietnamese way.

(38) a. *Có phải chỉ Nam đọc sách không?*
YES correct only Nam read book NO
'Is it the case that only Nam read books?'

b. *Có phải người nào cũng đọc sách không?*
YES correct everyone read book NO
'Is it the case that every read books?'
c. *Có phải một số người đọc sách không?*
YES correct someone read book NO
'Is it the case that someone reads books?"

We can say that the subject here is null *pro*, and the sentences in (38) all have the form '*pro* YES correct that *p* NO'. The biclausal analysis makes the right predictions in these cases, as the reader can trust me, or verify for herself.

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