

## Yes-no questions in Balkar<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** This paper investigates yes-no questions in Balkar. We show the distribution and attachment options for the Balkar question particle *mI* in single-clause matrix questions and in questions with embedded complements. We also show that the Balkar *mI*-particle can scope out of island structures. We consider movement and non-movement accounts for Balkar yes-no questions. We conclude that the *mI* particle in Balkar is an adjunct focus particle attaching to the source of alternatives.

**Keywords.** Balkar, yes-no questions, question particles.

**1. Background.** Polar questions (PQs), also known as yes-no questions, often come with a special particle: *li* for Russian (Rudnitskaya, 2000) and Bulgarian (Rudin et al 1999), *ko* for Finnish (Holmberg, 2014), *ka, no* for Japanese (Hagstrom 1998), *mI* in Turkish (Kornfilt, 2013). In some languages (Russian, Bulgarian, Finnish) polar questions also involve the fronting of focused constituents, while in others (like Turkish) the focused phrase is marked by the PQ particle and doesn't undergo such fronting. Holmberg 2014 suggests a syntactic account of PQs in Finnish: the particle *ko* has a [uFoc] and an EPP-feature and attracts the focused phrase to its specifier. The particle also has a [wh] feature and so undergoes movement to Spec,CP pied-piping the whole *ko*-phrase and thus leading to focused material being fronted. For Turkish, Özyıldız (2015) puts forward a movement account of *mI*-questions: *mI* is considered a head which takes TP as its complement and attracts some constituent in its scope.

As for semantic approaches, alternative semantics (Hamblin, 1973) interpret PQs as a set of possible answers. Commitment space semantics (Krifka, 2015) is based on the notion of commitment states (sets of shared propositions) which can be updated by speech acts. Kamali & Krifka (2020) analyze Turkish polar questions with narrow focus (nuclearPQs) in the Commitment semantics framework. They assume *mI* to be a focus particle licensed under the Act head (the speech act projection). Nuclear PQs are derived via composition of the question operator (introduced in Act<sup>o</sup>) and an operator that takes a focused speech act and outputs an update function (introduced in Foc<sup>o</sup>). As for sentence-final *mI*, Kamali & Krifka (2020) proposes to analyze the particle consistently as a particle that attaches to alternative-generating constituents. In case of sentence-final *mI* they suggest that the source of alternatives is in PolP, which expresses the truth polarity of the clause.

The aim of this paper is to give an overview of yes-no questions in Balkar and investigate the structure of those questions. Section 2 contains basic information about the *mI* particle and the formation of yes-no questions. Sections 3 and 4 show the distribution of the *mI* particle in wide and narrow focus yes-no questions. Section 5 contains yes-no questions in sentences with sentential arguments where the focused element is inside the embedded clause. Section 6 shows how constructions parallel to ones in Section 5 can be used as indirect questions. Section 7 contains data on the interaction of yes-no questions with syntactic islands in Balkar. The conclusions are presented in Section 8.

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**2. Balkar yes-no questions: Introduction.** Yes-no questions in Balkar are formed using the enclitic *mI*, realized as *mi*, *mi̇*, *mu* or *mü* depending on vowel harmony. This particle, when attached to a verb, can only be followed by agreement markers (Baskakov 1976) (1).

(1) Alim telefon al-*van-mi*-di?  
 Alim phone take-PFCT-Q-3SG  
 Has Alim taken the phone?’

(2) \*Alim telefon al-*van-di-mi*?  
 Alim phone take-PFCT-3SG-Q  
*Int.*: ‘Is it true that Alim has taken the phone?’

According to our participant, (2) is ungrammatical. Aliev (1972) points out that (2) can only receive an echo-question interpretation (*Did you say that Alim has taken the phone?*). Consider also one of the examples he gives:

(3) Dagir bu kitab-ni oqu-*van-di-mi*?  
 Dagir that book-ACC read-PFCT-3SG-Q  
 ‘Did you say that this book was read by Dagir?’ / ‘Did Dagir really read THIS BOOK?’

If attached to any other constituent, the particle cannot be followed by any markers (i.e. case, possessive markers), consider (4) and (5).

(4) a.\* Sen Kerim-ni alma-*mi*-si-n aša-di-η?  
 You Kerim-GEN apple-Q-3-ACC eat-PST-2SG  
*Int.* ‘Did you eat Kerim’s APPLE?’  
 b. Sen Kerim-ni alma-si-n-*mi* aša-di-η?  
 You Kerim-GEN apple-3-ACC-Q eat-PST-2SG

The combination of *mI* and a *wh*-word is unacceptable (5), as well as *mI* on subject and object DP within one clause (6):

(5) \*Kim kitab zaz-di-*mi*?  
 Who book write-PST-Q  
 (6) \*Alim-*mi* telefon-nu al-*van-mi*-di?  
 Alim-GEN phone-ACC take-PFCT-Q-3SG  
*Int.*: ‘Did he take ALIM’S phone?’

Attaching *mI* to two constituents of the same syntactic category forms an alternative question:

(7) Sen alma-*mi* gertme-*mi* aša-di-η?  
 You apple-Q pear-Q eat-PST-2SG  
 ‘Have you eaten an apple or a pear?’  
 \*‘Have you EATEN an apple or a pear?’

Finally, *mI* is definitely an enclitic since it has to attach to the right of some constituent:

(8) \**Mi* Alim-ni telefon-nu al-*van-di*?  
 Q Alim-GEN phone-ACC take-PFCT-3SG  
*Int.*: ‘Has he taken Alim’s phone?’

**3. Single-clause questions: wide focus.** The default way to form a yes-no question is to attach *mI* to a lexical verb (as in (1)). Attaching *mI* to an auxiliary does not yield an acceptable question (9):

- (9) <sup>??</sup>Alim tünene kel-gen edi-**mi**?  
 Alim yesterday come-PFCT AUX-Q  
 ‘Did Alim arrive yesterday?’

Also, according to Aliev (1972), *edi-mi* can only be interpreted as an echo-question (*Did you say that Alim arrived yesterday?*).

- (10) Osman kel-gen edi-**mi**?  
 Osman come-PFCT AUX-Q  
 i. ‘Did you say that Osman arrived?’  
 ii. \*‘Did Osman arrive?’

**4. Single-clause questions: narrow focus.** The question particle on constituents other than the predicate triggers a narrow focus reading. The Balkar *mI* has a fairly wide distribution. The particle can attach to nouns as in (11). Besides, *mI* can be attached to adjectives (12) and adverbs (13):

- (11) Kerim-**mi** ustaz-di?  
 Kerim-Q teacher-3SG  
 ‘Is it KERIM who is a teacher?’
- (12) Sen zašil-**mi** mašina-(ni) al-*kan*-sa?  
 You green-Q car-ACC take-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you buy a GREEN car?’
- (13) Alim terk-**mi** caba-di?  
 Alim fast-Q run-3SG  
 ‘Does Alim run FAST?’

*MI* can also be attached to functional categories, for instance, conjunctions (14) and postpositions (15):

- (14) Kerim bla-**mi** Alim biblioteka-*ka* bar-di-la?  
 Kerim with-Q Alim library-DAT go-PST-3PL  
 ‘Did Kerim go to the library with ALIM?’
- (15) Sen Alim ücün-**mü** kel-gen-se?  
 You Alim for-Q come-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you come for ALIM?’

The only problem *mI* seems to have is being attached to a past *-kan-* participle:

- (16) <sup>?</sup>Tepse-gen-**mi** zaš-cik zivil-*kan*-di?  
 dance-PART-Q boy-DIM fall-PST-3SG  
 ‘Did the guy who was DANCING fall?’ {No, it was the guy who was singing}

As for other attachment options within syntactic phrases, focusing some part of a complex DP does not cause a problem either:

- (17) Sen Alim-ni ana-si-ni surat-i-n-**mi** al-kan-sa?  
 You Alim-GEN mother-3-GEN photo-3-ACC-Q take-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Have you taken the PICTURE of Alim’s mother?’

*MI* can also be placed between a postposition and its complement. Here we are comparing the distribution of *mi* with an ordinary focus particle *quru* ‘only’. Note that *quru* is a prepositional particle; thus, in (19) it is attached to the postposition. *MI*, on the contrary, can either focus the noun or the whole PP. Unlike the question particle, *quru* cannot break up a postpositional phrase.

- (18) Sen stol-**mu** tübünde tuz-(nu) tab-di-η?  
 You table-Q under salt-(ACC) find-PST-2SG  
 ‘Did you find the salt UNDER THE TABLE / under THE TABLE?’
- (19) \*Sen stol **quru** tübünde tuz tab-di-η?  
 You table only under salt find-PST-2SG  
*Int.*: ‘You only found the salt UNDER the table?’

**5. Sentential arguments: matrix questions.** In Balkar, there are two ways to introduce an embedded clause: with the help of nominalization or with the *dep* complementizer (which diachronically goes back to the *-p* participle from the verb *depze* (*derge*) ‘to say’). For both of them we checked if *mi* can be placed on a subject, a direct object and an adjunct, and all options turn out acceptable. A nuclear matrix yes-no question can be formed when the *mi* particle is attached to the subject (20), the direct object (21) and an adjunct (22) of a nominalized embedded clause.

- (20) Sen [fatima-ni qiz-i-**mi** šorpa aša-kan-i-n] ešt-gen-se?  
 You Fatima-GEN daughter-3-Q soup eat-PFCT-3-ACC hear-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you hear that Fatima’s DAUGHTER ate the soup?’
- (21) Sen [fatima-ni qiz-i šorpa-**mi** aša-kan-i-n] ešt-gen-se?  
 You Fatima-GEN daughter-3 soup-Q eat-PFCT-3-ACC hear-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you hear that Fatima’s daughter ate THE SOUP?’
- (22) Sen [fatima-ni qiz-i terk-**mi** šorpa aša-kan-i-n]  
 You Fatima-GEN daughter-3 fast-Q soup eat-PFCT-3-ACC  
 ešt-gen-se?  
 hear-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you hear that Fatima’s daughter ate the soup QUICKLY?’

The same is true for the particle attaching to the subject (23), the direct object (24) and an adjunct (25) of a finite embedded clause with the complementizer *dep*.

- (23) Sen [fatima-ni qiz-i-**mi** šorpa aša-di dep] ešt-gen-se?  
 You Fatima-GEN daughter-3-Q soup eat-PST COMP hear-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you hear that Fatima’s DAUGHTER ate the soup?’
- (24) Sen [fatima-ni qiz-i šorpa-**mi** aša-di dep] ešt-gen-se?  
 You Fatima-GEN daughter-3 soup-Q eat-PST COMP hear-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you hear that Fatima’s daughter ate the SOUP?’

- (25) Sen [fatima-ni qiz-i terk-**mi** šorpa aša-di dep]  
 You Fatima-GEN daughter-3 fast-Q soup eat-PST COMP  
 ešt-gen-se?  
 hear-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you hear that Fatima’s daughter ate the soup QUICKLY?’

Attaching *mI* to the nominalized clause yields an interpretation where the whole embedded speech act is being questioned:

- (26) Fatima [qiz-i šorpa-ni aša-~~van~~-i-n-**mi** sor-du?  
 Fatima daughter-3 soup-ACC eat-PFCT-3-ACC-Q ask-PST  
 ‘Did Fatima ask WHETHER HER DAUGHTER ATE THE SOUP?’ (or did she ask some other question)

Placing *mI* on a verb in a *dep*-clause results ungrammatical, which is somewhat unexpected, regarding that *mI* can easily attach to a verb in the matrix:

- (27) \*Sen [Fatima kel-di-**mi** dep] ešt-gen-se?  
 you Fatima come-PST-Q COMP hear-PFCT-2SG  
*Int.*: ‘Did you hear Fatima COME?’ (or do something else)

However, *mI* can be attached to the *dep*-clause also scoping over the entire speech act.

- (28) Fatima [qiz-i šorpa-ni aša-di dep-**mi** sor-du?  
 Fatima daughter-3 soup-ACC eat-PST COMP-Q ask-PST  
 Did Fatima ask WHETHER HER DAUGHTER ATE THE SOUP?’ (or something else)

**6. Sentential arguments: indirect questions.** In the embedded argument *mI* has the same attachment freedom as in simple clauses; consider (29)-(31): in every example *mI* focuses the constituent inside the nominalized embedded clause creating an indirect question. It can attach to the subject (29), the object (30) and an adjunct (31).

- (29) Fatima [a-n qiz-i-**mi** šorpa-ni aša-~~van~~-i-n] sor-du  
 Fatima this-GEN daughter-3-Q soup-ACC eat-PFCT-3-ACC ask-PST  
 ‘Fatima asked if HER DAUGHTER ate the soup.’
- (30) Fatima [qiz-i šorpa-ni-**mi** aša-~~van~~-i-n] sor-du  
 Fatima daughter-3 soup-ACC-Q eat-PFCT-3-ACC ask-PST  
 ‘Fatima asked if her daughter ate THE SOUP.’
- (31) Fatima [a-ni qiz-i terk-**mi** šorpa-ni aša-~~van~~-i-n]  
 Fatima this-GEN daughter-3 fast-Q soup-ACC eat-PFCT-3-ACC  
 sor-du  
 ask-PST  
 ‘Fatima asked if her daughter ate the soup QUICKLY.’

The same is true for finite embedded clauses with the complementizer *dep*.

- (32) Fatima [a-ni qiz-i-**mi** šorpa-ni aša-~~van~~-di dep] sor-du  
 Fatima this-GEN daughter-3-Q soup-ACC eat-PFCT-3 COMP ask-PST  
 ‘Fatima asked if HER DAUGHTER ate the soup.’

- (33) Fatima [a-ni qiz-i šorpa-ni-**mi** aša-~~kan~~-di dep] sor-du  
 Fatima this-GEN daughter-3 soup-ACC-Q eat-PFCT-3 COMP ask-PST  
 ‘Fatima asked if her daughter ate THE SOUP.’
- (34) Fatima [qiz-i šorpa-ni terk-**mi** aša-di dep] sor-du  
 Fatima daughter-3 soup-ACC fast-Q eat-PST COMP ask-PST  
 ‘Fatima asked if her daughter ate the soup QUICKLY.’

While attaching *mI* to the right edge of the clause (both nominalized (26) and finite (28)) can form a matrix question, the same structures cannot be interpreted as indirect questions, so the ii. interpretations of (35)–(36) are blocked.

- (35) #Fatima [qiz-i büteu šorpa-ni aša-~~kan~~-i-n-**mi**] sor-du  
 Fatima daughter-3 all soup-ACC eat-PFCT-3-ACC-Q ask-PST  
 i. ‘Did Fatima ask IF HER DAUGHTER ATE THE SOUP?’ (or was it another question)  
 ii. \*‘Fatima asked if her daughter ate all the soup.’
- (36) #Fatima [qiz-i šorpa-ni aša-di dep-**mi**] sor-du  
 Fatima daughter-3 soup-ACC eat-PST COMP-Q ask-PST  
 i. ‘Did Fatima ask IF HER DAUGHTER ATE THE SOUP?’ (or was it another question)  
 ii. \*‘Fatima asked if her daughter ate all the soup.’

Unlike in the case of a matrix question, the *mI* particle can attach to the verb in the finite embedded clause to form an indirect question.

- (37) Men[Madina me-ni alma-mi aša-di-**mi** dep] sor-du-m  
 me Madina me-GEN apple-1SG eat-PST-Q COMP ask-PST-1SG  
 ‘I asked if Madina ate my apple.’

**7. Islands.** To investigate the structure of *mI*-questions – whether the particle attaches to some phrase as an adjunct or involves movement, overt or covert – it is useful to see whether this question particle can take scope out of islands. Complex NPs, which are islands in Balkar, do not pose any restrictions on the interpretation.

- (38) Sen [a-ni zaš-i kitab-**mi** žaz-~~kan~~ (ol) žanliq-ni]  
 you this-GEN son-3 book-Q write-PFCT that news-ACC  
 oqu-~~kan~~-sa?  
 read-PFCT-2SG  
 ‘Did you read the news that his son wrote A BOOK?’

The same is true for sentential adjuncts:

- (39) Asijat [Kerim šorpa-**mi** aša-~~kan~~-da] kitab oquu e-di?  
 Asijat Kerim soup-Q eat-PFCT-LOC book read AUX-PST  
 ‘Asijat was reading a book when Kerim was eating SOUP?’
- (40) [Alim šorpa-**mi** aša-sa] anasi a-ni oram-~~ka~~  
 Alim soup-Q eat-COND mom this-ACC street-DAT  
 zibe-rik-ti?  
 let.go-FUT-3  
 ‘Mom will let Alim go if he eats THE SOUP?’

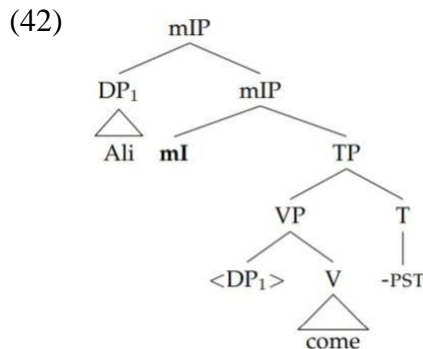
The only exception are coordinate structures, which are also islands in Balkar, but it is impossible to attach *mI* to of the two conjuncts<sup>2</sup>:

- (41) a. \*Farida it-**mi** da kištik da körü-di?  
 Farida dog-Q PTCL cat PTCL see-3  
*Int.* ‘Does Farida see a DOG and a cat?’
- b. \*Farida it da kištik-**mi** da körü-di?  
 Farida dog PTCL cat-Q PTCL see-3  
*Int.* ‘Does Farida see a dog and a CAT?’

Thus, *mI* can take matrix scope from inside island structures, which means that a movement account for this particle is highly problematic.

## 8. The structure of *mI*-questions: conclusion.

8.1 THE STRUCTURAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MI AND ITS HOST. As mentioned in the Background section, yes-no questions with question particles in some languages involve the fronting of the focused constituent (Russian, Finnish). For Turkish, where the *mI* particle also attaches to the focused constituent in-situ, there has been put forward an account based on movement (Özyıldız, 2015). Özyıldız proposes the structure (42) for Turkish yes-no questions where *mI* is a head of its own projection and it attracts the host of the particle to Spec,*mIP*



Part of the evidence for the analysis in Özyıldız (2015) are the results of Binding Principles tests. We have conducted the same tests on our Balkar data.

One of the logically possible structural relationships between *mI* and its host is that the *mI* head takes its host (for example, DP) as a complement. In this configuration, such a DP no longer c-commands the elements that it c-commanded without the particle in the structure. To test c-command relationships, we use the principles of Binding Theory.

Principle A:

- (43) a. Farida<sub>i</sub> **kesi**<sub>i</sub> küzgülü-de kör-dü  
 Farida REFL mirror-LOC see-PST  
 ‘Farida saw herself in the mirror.’

<sup>2</sup> It is an interesting phenomenon that although other island effects do not present in Balkar with *wh*-in-situ questions (Voznesenskaia 2021) or *mI*-questions, the Coordinate Structure Constraint still stands. The investigation of how this particular constraint is different from the other is outside the scope of this paper, however, it has been investigated for other languages. See Kubota & Lee (2015).

- b. Farida-**m<sub>i</sub>** **kesi** küzgü-de kör-dü  
 Farida-Q REFL mirror-LOC see-PST  
 ‘Did FARIDA see herself in the mirror?’

As can be seen from (43), the appearance of the question particle in the structure does not violate the relations necessary for binding the anaphor *kesi*.

Principle B:

- (44) a. Farida<sub>i</sub> **a-n<sub>j</sub>** küzgü-de kör-dü  
 Farida this-ACC mirror-LOC see-PST  
 ‘Farida saw him in the mirror.’ ( $i \neq j$ )  
 b. Farida-**m<sub>i</sub>** **a-n<sub>j</sub>** küzgü-de kör-dü?  
 Farida-Q this-ACC mirror-LOC see-PST  
 ‘Did FARIDA see him in the mirror?’ ( $i \neq j$ )

As can be seen from (44), the appearance of the question particle in the structure does not create the conditions necessary for the freedom of the pronominal: the subject still c-commands it.

The next logical possibility is that the host of the particle *mI* is in the specifier of its projection. In such a case, unless this projection is inserted directly inside the DP<sup>3</sup>, the host of the particle (e.g. DP) raises in the structure and new c-command relationships are formed. Let's test this prediction using the principles of Binding Theory.

Principle A:

- (45) a. Farida-n<sub>i</sub> şujöx-u<sub>i</sub> **kesi<sub>i/\*j</sub>** küzgü-de kör-dü  
 Farida-GEN friend-3 REFL mirror-LOC see-PST  
 ‘A friend of Faridas saw himself in the mirror.’  
 b. Farida-ni-**m<sub>i</sub>** şujöx-u<sub>i</sub> **kesi<sub>i/\*j</sub>** küzgü-de kör-dü  
 Farida-GEN-Q friend-3 REFL mirror-LOC see-PST  
 ‘Did THE FRIEND OF FARIDAS see himself in the mirror?’

It can be seen from (45) that the attachment of the particle *mI* does not imply the movement of its host higher in the sentence structure and the forming of new c-command relations: the possessor is still embedded in the DP and cannot c-command the anaphor.

Principle B:

- (46) a. Farida-n<sub>i</sub> şujöx-u **a-n<sub>i</sub>** küzgü-de kör-dü  
 Farida-GEN friend-3 this-ACC mirror-LOC see-PST  
 ‘A friend of Faridas saw her in the mirror.’  
 b. Farida-ni-**m<sub>i</sub>** şujöx-u **a-n<sub>i</sub>** küzgü-de kör-dü?  
 Farida-GEN-Q friend-3 this-ACC mirror-LOC see-PST  
 ‘Did THE FRIEND OF FARIDAS see her in the mirror?’

In (46)b, the possessor is still not c-commanding the pronominal, which allows it to refer to *Farida*. The presence of the particle *mI* did not lead to the establishment of a new c-command relationship.

<sup>3</sup> If we assume that this projection can be inserted anywhere in the structure, taking into account that there's no apparent head-spec agreement, it's more plausible at this point to postulate that *mI* is an adjunct.



These tests suggest that in yes-no questions in Balkar the host of *mI* is not a complement of a *mI* phrase, and that the host doesn't raise to the specifier of *mIP*. It is also worth noting that an analysis of yes-no questions involving movement of the host into a particle projection specifier (as Öyıldız (2015) suggests for Turkish) predicts that only constituents capable of undergoing movement can be hosts of this clitic. This implies certain restrictions on the distribution of the particle: it is expected that *mI* will not appear between a postposition and its noun, between an adjective and its noun. Such restrictions are observed in Turkish, but not in Balkar. As is shown in Section 4, *mI* can appear between a postposition and its noun (18) and between an adjective and its noun (12). Thus we conclude that the *mI* particle is, in fact, an adjunct to its host in Balkar.

8.2 THE DERIVATION OF YES-NO QUESTIONS. The *mI*-particle can attach to elements inside islands and still form matrix questions (see Section 7). It can also attach to adjuncts of embedded clauses (which aren't able to move outside those clauses) and form matrix questions (see Section 5). Those facts strongly point toward an analysis that the derivation of the Balkar yes-no question does not include the movement of the focused element.

We suggest that most appropriate for Balkar yes-no questions would be a semantic analysis along the lines of Kamali & Krifka (2020). In this account *mI* is considered a focus particle which attaches to the source of alternatives, which is licensed under the interrogative Act head. The wide distribution of the particle and its scoping abilities in complement clauses (Sections 5–6) and islands (Section 7) seem to go along with that. Adding to the previous discussion in this section, the data in sentences (26), (28) and (35)–(36) also make sense under this approach: when the particle is attached to the clause itself it can only be licensed by the Act head of the matrix clause which is why only matrix question interpretations are acceptable in these examples.

Although, as it is also noted in Kamali & Krifka (2020), analyzing *mI* as only relating to focus and not having anything to do with interrogatives leaves a question of why the particle only appears in questions. Another interesting puzzle for further research is the one presented in sentences (27) and (37). The fact that *mI* can form an indirect yes-no question if attached to the predicate inside a finite clause but cannot form a matrix question in that case has to be explained. One possible direction would be to investigate whether that would change if in a sentence like (27) the focus wasn't just on the verb but was actually wide (like it is in 37). It may be just that *mI* cannot attach to the clause predicates yielding a narrow focus yes-no question.

### List of glossing abbreviations

GEN – genitive, ACC – accusative, DAT – dative, LOC – locative, 1 – first person, 2 – second person, 3 – third person, PST – past tense, Q – question particle, REFL – reflexive, PTCL – particle, FUT – future tense, PFCT – past perfective, AUX – auxiliary, SG – singular, COMP – complementizer, DIM – diminutive.

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