

# A question of case\*

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## 1. Introduction

This paper investigates a seemingly optional variation between accusative (ACC) and partitive (PART) case-marked objects in yes/no questions and certain kinds of negative contexts in Finnish. I discuss two hypotheses that aim to account for the ACC/PART variation: (i) the focus/background approach, which claims that the presence/absence of a focus/background partition guides the alternation, and (ii) the NPI approach, which makes use of the observation that the contexts that license the alternation are also contexts that license NPIs. In addition, in the second part of the paper, I discuss how these hypotheses fit in with the semantic consequences of ACC and PART case interacting with two types of disjunction in yes/no and alternative questions. This paper is best viewed as a preliminary investigation into these phenomena.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, I discuss the basics of object case marking in Finnish and present some unexpected data. In section 3, I discuss two possible analyses of this data, namely the focus approach and the NPI approach. In section 4 we turn to the data from yes/no and alternative questions. Section 5 is the conclusion.

## 2. Object case marking in Finnish

Finnish is a highly inflected, canonically SVO language with flexible word order. In declaratives, the object is usually in the accusative case (ACC) or the partitive case (PART).<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, the accusative case has been viewed as the basic object case and the partitive as a case that only occurs under special conditions (Heinämäki 1994:211).

Semantically, the partitive can be described as having two main functions, which Kiparsky (1998) calls an ‘aspectual’ function and an ‘NP-related’ function. In aspectual terms, the partitive case is described as being associated with irresultativity (e.g. Itkonen 1976) or unboundedness (e.g. Leino 1991), whereas the accusative case is linked to resultativity or

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<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations used in this paper: ACC=accusative, PART=partitive, GEN=genitive, ILLAT=illative, INESS=inessive, QUEST=the question particle [-ko/kö].

boundedness. Consider example (1a) from Kiparsky (1998). With a verb such as *ampua* ‘to shoot’, which permits both a resultative, bounded interpretation and an irresultative, unbounded interpretation, the object can be marked for accusative or partitive case. When it is marked for accusative case, the sentence is interpreted as resultative and aspectually bounded (as shown in 1a(i)), but when it is marked for partitive, the sentence is interpreted as irresultative and aspectually unbounded (as in 1a(ii)). Kiparsky notes that whereas the first construal implies a result (i.e. the bear dying), the second one is “non-committal” in this respect (Kiparsky 1998:267) and conversationally implicates a lack of a result (i.e. that the shooter missed the bear).

- (1a) Ammuin karhun/karhua. (Kiparsky 1998:267)  
*shot-1sg bear-ACC/bear-PART*  
 (i) ACC: I shot a/the bear dead. (resultative/bounded)  
 (ii) PART: I shot at a/the bear. (irresultative/unbounded → implicature: missed)

In addition to this aspectual function, the partitive case also has an ‘NP-related’ function which can be seen with intrinsically bounded verbs (Kiparsky 1998). Objects of such verbs, e.g. *saada* in ex. (1b) below, are partitive when they are “quantitatively indeterminate” (for example when they are indefinite bare plurals or mass nouns); otherwise, they are accusative (Kiparsky 1998:267-268). Thus, the partitive plural *karhuja* ‘bears-PART’ is like a bare plural in English, whereas the accusative plural *karhut* ‘bears-ACC’ is somewhat similar to the definite plural in English.<sup>2</sup> Irresultative, unbounded verbs, on the other hand, always have partitive objects and do not show this case alternation.

- (1b) Saan karhuja/karhut. (Kiparsky 1998:268)  
*Get-1sg bears-PART/bears-ACC*  
 ‘I get bears/the bears.’

Having discussed the two main functions of the partitive, it is worth nothing that, as Kiparsky (1998:268) points out, boundedness – and not resultativity – is what matters for the aspectual function of the partitive

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<sup>2</sup> However, as Kiparsky (1998) points out, “the NP contrast at stake does not correspond exactly to definiteness or to any other familiar determiner feature” (Kiparsky 1998:270). See the original paper for further discussion.

case. This is illustrated by a class of irresultative, bounded verbs that assign accusative case to their objects, e.g. *omistaa* ‘to own in (1c).’<sup>3</sup>

- (1c) *Omistan karhun/ #karhua.* (Kiparsky 1998:269)  
*Own-1sg bear-ACC/bear-PART*  
 ‘I own a/the bear.’

In addition, partitive is also required on the objects of negative sentences, as illustrated in (1d). As Heinämäki (1994:221) notes, negative sentences are “unbounded situation descriptions” and thus this use of the partitive can be linked to the aspectual function of the partitive.

- (1d) *En ampunut karhua/\*karhun.*  
*neg-1sg shot bear-PART/\*bear-ACC.*  
 ‘I did not shoot a/the bear.’

In sum, we can say that partitive-marked objects occur with unbounded predicates or when the object is “quantitatively indeterminate” (Kiparsky 1998:271). This bipartite description raises the question, What do these two functions of the partitive have in common, if anything? There does not yet seem to be a unified answer to this question. According to some researchers, these two conditions can be unified (e.g. Leino 1991, Kiparsky 1998, Heinämäki 1994). However, others claim that they are distinct (e.g. Itkonen 1976, Larjavaara 1991).

Let us turn to some of the data that we will focus on in this paper. In light of the contexts described above, it is surprising that in yes/no questions with a bounded verb such as *huomata* ‘to notice’, both cases are grammatical (2b) – even though PART is ungrammatical in the declarative form of the same sentence (2a).<sup>4</sup>

- (2a) *Pekka huomasi miehen/\*miestä.*  
*Pekka-NOM noticed man-ACC/\*man-PART*  
 ‘Pekka noticed a/the man.’
- (2b) *Huomasiko Pekka miehen/miestä?*  
*Noticed-QUES Pekka-NOM man-ACC/man-PART*  
 ‘Did Pekka notice a/the man?’

<sup>3</sup> Here, use of the partitive is not ungrammatical; in accordance with the NP-related function of the partitive, it coerces a mass noun interpretation of ‘bear’, e.g. ‘I saw some bear (meat).’ See Kiparsky (1998) for further discussion of coercion.

<sup>4</sup> I will mainly use the verb *huomata* ‘notice’ in the examples, but the same phenomenon obtains with other verbs (e.g. *hyväksyä* ‘to accept’) which require accusative in declaratives.

In this paper, I will investigate the question of why both cases can occur on the object in yes/no questions (2b), when only accusative case is possible in declaratives (2a) and alternative questions (examples to be presented in (16)).

### 3. Possible analyses

In this section, I present two possible ways of characterizing the distribution of the unexpected PART/ACC case alternation shown in the examples in (2), namely (i) the focus/background approach and (ii) the NPI approach.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3.1 Hypothesis 1: Focus/background partition

In this section I present evidence in favor of a focus/presupposition-based approach. The main idea is that in yes/no question contexts, as in (2b), accusative case is used in the presence of a focus/background partition, whereas the ‘optional’ partitive<sup>6</sup> case is used when no focus is present. Put somewhat differently, it seems that the ‘optional’ PART case is incompatible with a focus/background partition.

Let us now take a closer look at some of the distributional observations that support this idea. Native speaker intuitions and corpus data both suggest that in non-wh-questions with accusative-assigning verbs, ACC and ‘optional’ PART cases are most felicitously used in different kinds of contexts. More specifically, it seems that accusative case is used when (i) the NP is in focus (in the sense of Rooth 1985, 1992) or (ii) the polarity of the event itself is in focus. For example, for ex. (2b) above, the NP would be in focus in a context where we are talking about a list of people/things that Pekka noticed – so the proposition that ‘Pekka noticed X’ is the

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<sup>5</sup> A related question that comes up is, How does the partitive/accusative alternation in non-wh questions (e.g. 2b) relate to the grammatically required partitive/accusative marking (e.g. on quantitatively indeterminate objects, objects of unbounded verbs, etc.)? This is a difficult question, as there is still disagreement about how to explain the different functions of the partitive, whether they can be unified, and which of the two cases is the default/unmarked one. Here, I do not offer a unified analysis of all the different contexts in which the partitive occurs. Instead, I aim to shed light on the ‘optional’ partitive/accusative alternation illustrated in (2b), and to show how it relates to a seemingly surprising paradigm that arises with yes/no and alternative questions. I leave it as a question for future research to see if these findings can then be reconciled with the grammatically required partitive/accusative alternation.

<sup>6</sup> I will often use the term ‘optional’ partitive to mean the partitive which alternates with accusative in contexts such as (2b) – even though the alternation is not really *optional*. The term is simply intended to contrast with the ‘grammatically required’ partitive in contexts such as under negation, on objects of unbounded verbs, etc.

background/presupposed. A corpus example is given in (3a). Here, the writer is asking whether the person noticed yet another detail, i.e. the question is asked in a setting where a list of details is under discussion.

- (3a) Huomasitko vielä yhden **yksityiskohdan?**  
*Noticed-2sg-QUES yet one-ACC detail-ACC?*  
 ‘Did you notice yet another detail?’  
 (<http://cc.joensuu.fi/~ristioja/jo/tul/jako/98nov2.htm>)

An example of ‘polarity of the event in focus’ for example (2b) would be a setting where we know that Pekka and a man both went to the same store and so they might – or might not – have run into each other. The corpus example in (3b) is of a similar type; the invitation in question had a signature, and the speaker is wondering whether Henrik noticed it or not.

- (3b) Kysyn huomasiko Henrik kutsun **sigun.**  
*Ask-1sg noticed-QUES Henrik-NOM invitation-GEN sig-ACC?*  
 ‘I’m asking whether Henrik noticed the signature on the invitation?’  
 ([www.cs.tut.fi/~leopold/Babylon5/SiL2000/Synttarit.html](http://www.cs.tut.fi/~leopold/Babylon5/SiL2000/Synttarit.html))

In contrast to the accusative case which occurs in the presence of focus, the ‘optional’ partitive case shows up when there is no relevant presupposition generated by focus. For instance, consider ex. (4), with partitive case. In contrast to the accusative case, the ‘optional’ partitive case implies that the speaker does not know whether a draft is present at the relevant location,<sup>7</sup> and there does not seem to be focus on the polarity of the predicate.

- (4) Avatessasi ovia laboratorion huoneisiin,  
*Opening-INESS-2sg doors-PART laboratory-GEN rooms-ILL,*  
 huomasitko vedon tunnetta?  
*noticed-2sg-QUES draft-GEN feeling-PART?*  
 ‘When you opened doors into the rooms of the laboratory, did you notice a draft?’ (lit. ‘feeling of a draft’)  
 (<http://www.fanison.fi/sivut/tarkistuslista.htm>)

Further data suggesting that ‘optionally’ PART objects are incompatible with a focus/background partition come from the fact that such objects are ungrammatical in constructions that contain focus, such as wh-questions, questions with the focus-marker ‘only,’ and clefts. Let us consider each

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<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that pronominal objects also show the case alternation discussed here. Thus, characterizing the accusative case as marking an existential presupposition or definiteness of some kind, and the partitive case as being associated with indefiniteness does *not* seem to be the right way of characterizing their distribution.

construction in turn. First, ex. (5) shows that information-seeking wh-questions are incompatible with ‘optionally’ partitive objects.

- (5) Kuka huomasi **Liisan**/\***Liisaa**?  
*who-NOM noticed Liisa-ACC*/\**Liisaa-PART*?  
 ‘Who noticed Liisa?’

Secondly, the focus-marker *vain* ‘only’ does not permit ‘optionally’ partitive objects. This is the case even if *vain* is not modifying the object, as shown in (6b,c), which is to be expected if we treat ‘only’ as evoking some kind of focus/background partition.

- (6a) Huomasiko Pekka vain **miehen**/\***miestä**?  
*Noticed-QUEST Pekka-NOM only man-ACC*/\**man-PART*?  
 ‘Did Pekka notice only a/the man?’
- (6b) Huomasiko vain Pekka **miehen**/\***miestä**?  
*Noticed-QUEST only Pekka-NOM man-ACC*/\**man-PART*?  
 ‘Did only Pekka notice the man?’
- (6c) Huomasiko Pekka **miehen**/\***miestä** vain  
*Noticed-QUEST Pekka-NOM man-ACC*/\**man-PART* *only*  
*maanantaina*?  
*Monday-on*?  
 ‘Did Pekka notice the man only on Monday?’

Third, clefted questions, which are presuppositional, also do not permit ‘optionally’ partitive objects. In Finnish, any constituent can be moved to spec-CP and have the question marker [-ko/kö] affixed to it, as shown in the examples in (7). It does not matter which of the arguments or adjuncts is clefted; the PART case is out nevertheless.

- (7a) **Miehenkö**/\***Miestäkö** Pekka huomasi?  
*Man-ACC-QUEST/ Man-PART-QUEST Pekka-NOM noticed*?  
 ‘Was it a/the man that Pekka noticed?’  
 [presupposition: Pekka noticed X]
- (7b) Pekkako **miehen**/\***miestä** huomasi?  
*Pekka-QUEST man-ACC*/\**man-PART* *noticed*?  
 ‘Was it Pekka who noticed a/the man?’  
 [presupposition: X noticed man]
- (7c) Eilenkö Pekka **miehen**/\***miestä** huomasi?  
*yesterday-QUEST Pekka-NOM man-ACC*/\**man-PART* *noticed*?  
 ‘Was it yesterday that Pekka noticed a/the man?’  
 [presupposition: Pekka noticed man at X time]

In sum, these data suggest that we can characterize the distribution of the ‘optional’ PART by noting that it is incompatible with a focus/background partition.

### 3.2 Hypothesis 2: NPI approach

Another way of characterizing the PART/ACC alternation is to note that the ‘optional’ partitive case is in some respect like a negative polarity item (see Kiparsky 1998:288).<sup>8</sup> It seems that the contexts in which the case alternation is possible also license the negative polarity item (NPI) ‘anyone’ in Finnish (*kukaan* anyone-NOM, *ketään* anyone-PART). In this section, we take a closer look at a number of contexts that license both the NPI ‘anyone’ and the case alternation, as well as contexts which fail to license them.<sup>9</sup>

First, yes/no questions, as in (8), license the NPI ‘anyone’, just as they license the case alternation (2b).<sup>10</sup>

- (8) Näitkö       sinä       ketään?  
*Saw-QUEST you-NOM anyone-PART?*  
 ‘Did you see anyone?’

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<sup>8</sup> Kiparsky (1998) notes that negation assigns partitive case (see ex. (1d)), and further notes that, “like a negative polarity item, partitive case can appear in implicitly negative contexts” (288). As an example, he presents the two questions I’ve repeated here in footnote (10). However, he does not present a systematic comparison of contexts which license NPIs and partitive case.

<sup>9</sup> See Kaiser (2002) for a newer, more detailed analysis of NPIs and the ‘optional’ partitive case.

<sup>10</sup> It has been pointed out that the ‘optional’ partitive case occurs in implicitly negative contexts (see e.g. Hakulinen & Karlsson 1988, Heinämäki 1994, Kiparsky 1998). In the case of questions, Kiparsky notes that “a speaker expecting a negative answer, or trying to be polite, might prefer [b] to [a]” (Kiparsky 1998:288). See Kaiser (2002) for a more detailed discussion of NPIs, ‘optional’ partitive case and negative bias in questions.

- (a) Onko sinulla **kynä**? (Kiparsky 1998:288)  
*Is-quest you-ALL pen-NOM?*  
 ‘Do you have a pen?’
- (b) Onko sinulla **kynää**? (Kiparsky 1998:288)  
*Is-quest you-ALL pen-PART?*  
 ‘Do you have a pen?’

These examples involve the Finnish possessive construction, in which the possessed object is usually marked with nominative or partitive case and the possessor with adessive case (Finnish has not distinct verb ‘to have’). It is worth noting that the nominative/partitive-marked possessee in this construction is relatively more object-like, and the adessive-marked possessor more subject-like (see e.g. Vilkuna 1996:341).

Second, negative expressions such as *tuskin* ‘hardly’ also license both the case alternation and NPI ‘anyone’. The contrast between (9a) and (9b) shows that it is the presence of *tuskin* that makes the ‘optional’ PART case grammatical. Similarly, in (9c), ‘anyone’ is grammatical, even though it would be bad if the word *tuskin* were not present in the sentence.

- (9a) *No case alternation possible*  
 Pirkko huomaa **Antin/\*Anttia** heti.  
*Pirkko notices Antti-ACC/Antti-PART immediately.*  
 ‘Pirkko will notice Antti immediately.’  
 (modified from Heinämäki 1994:222)
- (9b) *Case alternation possible due to ‘hardly’*  
Tuskin Pirkko **Antin/Anttia** huomaa.  
hardly Pirkko **Antti-ACC/Antti-PART** notices  
 ‘It is unlikely that Pirkko will notice Antti.’  
 (modified from Heinämäki 1994:222)
- (9c) *NPI example*  
 Hän tuskin tapaa siellä ketään.  
*He hardly meets there anyone-PART.*  
 ‘It’s unlikely that he’ll meet anyone there.’

Now, in addition to contexts that license both NPIs and the case alternation, there are also a number of contexts which fail to license both. Declaratives, for example, rule out both NPIs (10) and the case alternation (2a).

- (10) He näkivät Liisan/\*ketään.  
*they saw Liisa-ACC/anyone-PART*  
 ‘They saw Liisa/\*anyone.’

Similarly, information-seeking wh-questions are ungrammatical with NPIs (11), and also rule out the case alternation (5).

- (11) Ketä Liisa/\*kukaan auttoi?  
*Who-PART Liisa-NOM/anyone-NOM helped?*  
 ‘Who did Liisa/\*anyone help?’

The case alternation and NPIs are also ruled out by yes/no questions with *vain* ‘only’ (ex. (12) for NPIs, ex. (6) for the case alternation), as well as by clefted questions (ex. (13) for NPIs, ex. (7) for the case alternation).

- (12) Auttoiko (\*vain) Pekka (\*vain) ketään?  
*Helped-QUEST (\*only) Pekka-NOM (\*only) anyone-PART?*  
 ‘Did (\*only) Pekka help (\*only) anyone?’

- (13) Pekkako Liisaa/\*ketään auttoi?  
*Pekka-QUEST Liisa-PART/\*anyone-PART helped?*  
 ‘Was it Pekka that helped Liisa/\*anyone?’

It is worth noting that, as mentioned earlier, PART is required under negation in Finnish, and, not surprisingly, NPIs are also licensed in negative sentences.

- (14) He eivät auta ketään.  
*they neg-3pl help anyone-PART*  
 ‘They don’t help anyone.’

In sum, then, there are a number of contexts that license both the NPI ‘anyone’ and the case alternation, as well as other contexts which fail to license both. At this stage, I leave open what the right analysis of NPI licensing is. This question has received considerable attention in the literature, and continues to inspire a lot of research. One line of research exploits the different boolean properties of negation and different negative elements (e.g. Ladusaw 1979, Zwarts 1998, van der Wouden 1994). Another line of research capitalizes on the notion of (non)veridicality as a means of explaining polarity sensitivity phenomena (e.g. Giannakidou 1999). In the present paper, my main goal is to point out the similarities in the behavior of the ‘optional’ partitive case and NPIs in Finnish, i.e. to note that the ‘optional’ partitive seems to be in some sense NPI-like.

It is interesting to note that this is not the first time that a morphological element has been analyzed as being NPI-like. Several researchers have suggested that the subjunctive is a polarity item (e.g. Stowell 1993, Uribe-Extebarria 1994, Giannakidou 1994, 1995, but see also Quer 1998). Consider the following example from Greek (cited in Quer 1998:18). Giannakidou (1994, 1995) points out that in Greek, both subjunctive and polarity items are licensed in main and embedded subordinate clauses but are ungrammatical in indicative contexts.

- (15a) elpízo na féris kanéna φίλο su sto párti  
*hope-1sg SUB bring-2sg any friend yours to-the party*  
 ‘I hope you will bring a friend of yours to the party.’

- (15b) \* oniréftika óti írthe kanénas.  
*Dreamt-1sg that came.IND-3sg anyone*  
 ‘I dreamt that someone came.’

The licensing similarities that Giannakidou observes between NPIs and the subjunctive in Greek and Romanian resemble the similarities we saw in the licensing of the ‘optional’ partitive case and NPIs in Finnish.

In sum, in this section, I discussed two possible hypotheses concerning the ACC/PART alternation, namely the focus/background approach and the NPI approach (see Kaiser 2002 for a more detailed discussion of NPIs and the ACC/PART case alternation). In future work, I hope to investigate whether one could unify and reconcile these two approaches.

#### 4. Yes/no and alternative questions

In this section, we turn to a surprising paradigm that arises with case-marking and disjunction type in yes/no and alternative questions, in order to see how these two approaches discussed above can account for it.

Finnish has two lexical items for ‘or’, *tai* and *vai*. *Tai* is the ‘default or.’ It contrasts with a more specific ‘or’, *vai*, which can only occur in alternative questions (Hakulinen & Karlsson 1988). If we cross these two kinds of ‘or’ with the ACC/PART case alternation we observed earlier, a surprising paradigm arises. As shown in (16a), a question with ACC objects and *vai*, the question can only receive an alternative answer. In contrast, (16b), the same question but now with PART objects and *vai*, is ungrammatical. Example (16c), with ACC objects and the ‘default or’ *tai*, permits both a yes/no and an alternative answer. However, (16d), with PART objects and *tai*, shows a preference for the yes/no answer.

(16a) [ACC objects and ‘vai’]

Huomasiko Pekka miehen **vai** naisen?  
*Noticed-QUEST Pekka-NOM man-ACC vai woman-ACC*  
 ‘Did Pekka notice man or woman?’

[ \* yes/no answer]

[ok alternative answer]

(16b) [PART objects and ‘vai’]

\*Huomasiko Pekka miestä **vai** naista?  
*Noticed-QUEST Pekka-NOM man-PART vai woman-PART*  
 ‘Did Pekka notice man or woman?’

[ ungrammatical ]

(16c) [ACC objects and ‘tai’]

Huomasiko Pekka miehen **tai** naisen?  
*Noticed-QUEST Pekka-NOM man-ACC tai woman-ACC*  
 ‘Did Pekka notice man or woman?’

[ok yes/no answer]

[ok alternative answer]

(16d) [PART objects and ‘tai’]

Huomasiko Pekka miestä **tai** naista?  
*Noticed-QUEST Pekka-NOM man-PART tai woman-PART*

‘Did Pekka notice man or woman?’

[ok **yes/no answer (preferred)**]

[ok **alternative answer**]

The question we will investigate in this section is whether the two hypotheses sketched above (the focus/background approach and the NPI approach) can explain this pattern.

#### 4.1 Applying the focus/background analysis

According to the focus/background approach, accusative case is used in the presence of focus somewhere in the sentence, whereas ‘optional’ partitive case is used when no focus/background partition is present. Let us now consider how this approach fits with the data in (16).

First, let’s take a look at (16a), with ACC objects and *vai*. As mentioned earlier, *vai* can only occur in alternative questions. Thus, we can straightforwardly explain why (16a) only has the alternative reading.

Ex. (16b), with PART objects and *vai* is ungrammatical – even though the first part of that question, as we saw in (2b), is fine. Why, then, is (16b) ungrammatical? We can explain this by means of the well-known observation that in alternative questions, one of the disjuncts is presupposed to be true (hence the term ‘alternative question’). In Finnish, then, questions with *vai* necessarily involve presupposition. Now, if it is the case that the partitive case is incompatible with a focus/presupposition partition, it will be ruled out in (16b).

Let us now consider (16c), with ACC objects and *tai*. This question can receive either a yes/no interpretation or an alternative interpretation, and I argue this is because (i) *tai* is compatible with both interpretations and (ii) ACC case is used when there is focus on the NP or on the polarity of the event, and so both the alternative and yes/no interpretations are possible.

Finally, let us turn to PART objects and *tai* in (16d). This question is predicted to permit only a yes/no answer, because ‘optional’ PART case is incompatible with the focus/presupposition partition and alternative questions presuppose one of the disjuncts to be true. So why does (16d) permit both a yes/no answer and an alternative answer? My claim is that semantically, (16d) can only be interpreted as a yes/no question. However, due to the pragmatics of questions and answers, (16d) can also receive an alternative answer, because if a person happens to know a more specific answer than a question asks for, s/he can provide that more detailed

answer. This is not an unusual phenomenon. Consider, for example, a question-answer pair as illustrated in (17). Here, the question is a yes/no question but it's possible for a person to answer it with additional information.

- (17) A: Is John home?  
B: He's in the kitchen.

Thus, I'd like to suggest that in (16d), the yes/no answer is semantically derived and the alternative answer is pragmatically derived. Given this distinction, it is not surprising that the semantically-derived answer is preferred over the pragmatically-derived one in (16d).

#### 4.2 Applying the NPI approach

The main idea of the NPI approach is that the partitive case is in some respect NPI-like. We noticed that the contexts which license the case alternation are also contexts which license the negative polarity item 'anyone' in Finnish. Let us now consider how this idea fits with the data in (16).

First, (16a) can be explained straightforwardly as before; use of the disjunction *vai* imposes an alternative interpretation on the question. Now what about (16b), with PART case and *vai*? Why is it ungrammatical? Here, it is important to note that NPIs are not licensed in alternative questions; (18) below only has a yes/no interpretation. Thus, I'd like to suggest that whatever rules out or prevents the alternative reading with NPIs also prevents the alternative reading with PART objects. However, since *vai* imposes an alternative interpretation, (16b) is ungrammatical. The case marking and the disjunction are simply not compatible here.

- (18) Did anybody notice a man or a woman?

Now, turning to (16c), with ACC case and *tai*, we see that this question permits both answers. This is easily explained, since *tai* is compatible with both interpretations and ACC case resembles the 'non-NPI' someone, in that it does not have special contextual requirements the way PART and NPI's do. In order to obtain the two readings, we can simply use mechanisms proposed for yes/no and alternative questions elsewhere in the literature (see e.g Larson 1985).

According to the NPI approach, the last example, (16d), with PART case and *tai*, is predicted to permit only a yes/no answer because 'optional' PART case is only licensed in certain contexts, and alternative questions do not constitute a licensing context. So why does (16d) permit both a yes/no answer and an alternative answer? We can offer the same explanation as

with the focus/background story, namely that the dispreferred alternative question answer is in fact pragmatically derived.

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, in this paper I presented a preliminary investigation of the seemingly optional variation between ACC/PART case in yes/no questions and certain kinds of negative contexts. I discussed two possible approaches: (i) the focus/background approach, which argues that the presence/absence of a focus/background partition guides the alternation, and (ii) the NPI approach, which argues that the ‘optional’ PART case is NPI-like. This second approach is built on the observation that contexts in which the alternation is licensed are also contexts which license NPI ‘anyone’ in Finnish (see Kaiser 2002 for a more detailed analysis). The two approaches offer (partly) different explanations of the paradigm that arises with yes/no and alternative questions. The focus/background approach rules out PART case in alternative questions because these questions are presuppositional, whereas according to the NPI approach, whatever rules out the NPIs in alternative questions also prevents the ‘optional’ PART case from occurring there. In future work I hope to explore the possibility of unifying these two different approaches.

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