

Revisiting Why-Questions in Child French
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PUZZLE Previous research has indicated that French-speaking children produce more wh-in situ questions than adults (see Hamann 2006, Zuckerman & Hulk 2001), which has led to claims that children are motivated by Economy. This idea has recently been challenged by Gotowski (2017), who found that 3-5-year-olds actually prefer fronted what-questions in an elicited production task. This would suggest that children have the syntax needed for fronted wh-questions at an early age, at least by the age of three. At the same time, it has also been reported that young children will occasionally produce ungrammatical why-questions with null subjects (see (1) from Hulk 1995; see also Hamann 2006) consistent with the idea that children “truncate” (viz. Rizzi 1993/4) to produce more economical structure.

- (1) Pourquoi *pro* coupe le bois?
why pro cut.PRES.3SG the wood
‘Why is (he) cutting the wood?’

Why-questions are of particular interest in this debate because, unlike other wh-words in French, (non-echoic) *pourquoi* (why) cannot be found in a post-verbal, in situ position; it is base-generated in the left-periphery (Rizzi 1999). If children are aware of restrictions on wh-in situ and have an articulated left periphery, then rates of null subjects and in-situ why-questions should be low.

GOAL In this study, we further explore children’s knowledge of why-questions and assess claims that children are motivated by economy considerations. We conduct a corpus analysis to probe (i) rates of null subjects and (ii) rates of in situ questions with this wh-word.

ANALYSIS We analyzed four corpora on CHILDES (Champaud, Geneva, Leveillé, Palasis) with children between 1;08-3;03 years. We coded each corpus for *why*-questions with overt and null subjects (ignoring fragment questions), and both ex-situ and in-situ forms. Of the 121 full why-questions produced across the corpora, only 5 had null subjects. All of these questions are ex-situ; none of the children are producing ungrammatical forms with *pourquoi* in a non-fronted position.

Table 1. Results from CHILDES

Corpus	Age Range	Overt Subjects	Null Subjects	Wh-In Situ
Palasis (Dylan and Mathilde)	2;08-3;03	14	0	0
Champaud	1;09-2;05	3	0	0
Geneva	1-08-2;06	3	0	0
Leveillé	2;01-3;03	96	5	0
TOTAL	--	116/121 (96%)	5/121 (4%)	0%

CONCLUSIONS These results indicate that children (i) are rarely producing null subjects with *why*, and (ii) despite any preference for wh-in situ in spontaneous production, are sensitive to when in

situ is and is not possible. We argue that these findings, when taken together, indicate that young children have early knowledge of the left-periphery, and are not driven by economy.

References:

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