

Wh-In Situ in French as a Function of Discourse Factors

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PUZZLE: While French is well known to features both fronted (1a), and in-situ information seeking wh-question (1b) what determines the choice of either option remains a puzzle. Since fronting always seems possible and is even required in specific contexts (e.g. embedded questions), it is widely regarded as the canonical syntactic option. In-situ in contrast while sometimes favored, is never obligatory. Thus, while syntax must allow for this form, what governs its choice is unlikely to be syntactic in nature.

- (1) a. Qui tu as invité? b. Tu as invité qui?
 who you have.2SG invited you have.2SG invited who
 ‘Who did you invite?’ ‘Who did you invite?’ (Lit. You invited who?)

Previous accounts have considered a range of licensing factors, but the picture of what is driving in-situ remains incomplete. For Cheng & Rooryck (2000), strong-presupposition and rising prosody are required to license in-situ; but this has been challenged (see Déprez et al. 2013; Mathieu 2014; Tieu 2012). More recent proposals seek to link in-situ to discourse factors, such as information structure (Pires & Taylor 2007; Gotowski & Becker 2016; Déprez et al. 2013), and speaker-addressee pragmatics (Myers 2007). Here we probe the role of the discourse setting and of the nature of the speaker-addressee relation via a corpus analysis and an online experiment.

CORPUS ANALYSIS: Previous corpus work has not provided conclusive evidence that the discourse register matters. In a corpus meta-analysis by Coveney (1996), the rate of in-situ reported varies both across and within formal and informal corpora with no clear pattern. However, corpus size and discourse settings were not carefully controlled for. Here we provide a systematic analysis of the Enquêtes Sociolinguistiques à Orleans (ESLO1) database, a set of oral corpora. We chose two corpora with a similar number of questions (899-1075) for quantitative comparison: one of conversations during meals (informal) and one of interviews (formal). Besides discourse context, the (in)formal classification was confirmed by comparing rates of familiar addressee pronouns (68% of familiar *tu* in the informal corpus, compared to 0.5% in the formal one). We ran a mixed effects logistic regression model, and found a significant effect of formality ($p < 0.001$), with three times as many wh-in situ questions in the informal corpus (30% compared to 12%).

EXPERIMENT: We further conducted an experiment where participants (N= 82) were given a short scenario in which (non)familiarity with the interlocutor and her (non)expertise in answering the question (Myers 2007) were manipulated in a 2X2 design. Participants saw a total of 16 target items and 16 fillers. We found that while participants selected ex-situ and in-situ in all conditions, they were significantly more likely to prefer in-situ in the familiarity condition ($p < 0.001$). Expertise, on the other hand, did not favor in situ contra Myers (2007).

CONCLUSIONS: Our results support claims that non-syntactic factors, particularly discourse setting and interlocutor familiarity, play a role in question form choices. While perhaps not surprising, these findings confirm intuitions hitherto not substantiated with controlled data. These results also

crucially constrain future research; only when these discourse factors are controlled can any additional factors influencing the choice of wh-in situ be understood.

References

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