Asymmetries in Spontaneous and Elicited Production of Wh-In Situ in Child French
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Colloquial French allows for both fronted wh-questions (1) and wh-in situ (2).

(1) Qu’est-ce que tu fais ?
(Lit. What are you doing?)

(2) Tu fais quoi ?
(Lit. You are doing what?)

However, while both of these forms are grammatical, adults often produce fronted wh-questions; conversely, French children produce significantly more in situ questions than adults (cf. Hamann 2006, among others). This apparent asymmetry between child and adult French has motivated previous claims that children are initially constrained by syntactic Economy (cf. Hamann 2006; Zuckerman & Hulk (Z&H) 2001). However, we argue that this difference is only particularly striking when considering rates of wh-in situ in spontaneous production. While Zuckerman & Hulk (2001) found that children’s rate of in situ in elicited production is elevated in comparison to adults, the rates for children and adults are 3% and 1%, respectively.

This study attempts to expand on previous findings by discussing the results from new elicitation research, comparing both children’s group and individual performance. The purpose being (i) to determine if children exhibit the same kind of asymmetry in terms of elicited production, viz. Z&H (2001), or (ii) if the high rates of wh-in situ are, rather, an artifact of the conversational nature of spontaneous production.

We conducted a production experiment with 19 French children, ages 3;09-5;08, and 12 adults, recruited in France. This experiment was in the form of a game, in which children would look at pictures with a puppet (Zap). One of the researchers was behind the computer screen (and could not see the pictures), and would provide a prompt as in (3). All of the target wh-questions contained qu’est-ce que (fronted)/quoi (in situ) (both lit. ‘what’), because this has been reported as the most frequent wh-word in past corpus-based research (cf. Gotowski & Becker 2016).

(3) Il y a deux animaux sur cette image. Hm... Je suis sûre que le chat a peint quelque chose, mais je sais pas quoi. Demande à Zap. Lui, il sait.

Eng: There are two animals in this picture. Hm...I am sure that the cat has pained something, but I do not know what. Ask Zap. He knows.

We find that while corpus data reports the rates of wh-in situ around 80% or higher, those from our elicitation task produce wh-in situ (with quoi) only 12% of the time (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Adults</th>
<th>Children</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fronted Wh-Q</td>
<td>79% (76)</td>
<td>51% (78)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wh-In Situ</td>
<td>1% (1)</td>
<td>12% (12)</td>
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* all “other” responses, e.g. no response, double wh-questions, were categorized separately

Crucially, only 5 children out of the 19 total produced any wh-in situ questions, with no obvious pattern with age. These findings suggest that spontaneous production data may be misleading in
terms of children’s early syntactic capabilities, and cast doubt on an Economy-based theory of children’s wh-in situ. Both children and adults prefer overt movement when prompted.

References:

