

Activation levels: A Fresh perspective on French wh in-situ

This corpus-based paper studies the evolution of French wh-interrogatives in micro-diachrony (1970s-2010s). By demonstrating a significant increase in the overall proportion of in-situ constructions and of context-free in-situ, we demonstrate that what counts for the understanding of in-situ is not ‘presupposition’ but ‘context’, *contra* much previous work on the topic.

The phenomenon. There exist (at least) 4 different strategies to form single-wh, mono-clausal, matrix partial questions in Hexagonal French; these are illustrated in (1).

- (1)
- | | | | | | |
|----|---------------------|---------------|------------|---------|----------------------------|
| a. | Où | va-t-il? | | | ex-situ, VS |
| | where | go-prs-3sg-he | | | |
| b. | Où | il | va? | | ex-situ, SV |
| | where | he | go-prs-3sg | | |
| c. | Où | est-ce | qu’il | va? | ex-situ, <i>est-ce que</i> |
| | where | est-ce | que | that=he | go-prs-3sg |
| d. | Il | va | où? | | in-situ, SV |
| | he | go-prs-3sg | where | | |
| | ‘Where does he go?’ | | | | |

Interpretationally, all question-formation strategies in (1) can be used as requests for information, i.e., as information-seeking questions. These uses signal ignorance on a certain topic, and consequent search for information (as opposed to, minimally, rhetorical and echo questions, which do not require a genuine answer). Here, we focus exclusively on information-seeking occurrences. Syntactically, despite the different ways in which the finite verb and the subject interact in the questions in (1) (VS, SV, *est-ce que* + SV), we observe that in (1a-c) the wh-word systematically surfaces clause-initially (‘ex situ’), while in (1d) the wh-word is in the so-called ‘in-situ’ position, i.e., it surfaces clause-finally. The last variant has (mainly) been described as a relatively new phenomenon of spoken French which has become gradually part of the language since at least the beginning of 20th century.

The problem. Over the past five decades, French in-situ questions have been the center of much work in theoretical linguistics. Nevertheless, most scholars still disagree on both the distribution and interpretation of the structure. A famous point of friction is whether a particular contextual condition (often understood as ‘presupposition’) licenses the in-situ strategy which differentiates it from ex-situ occurrences. Here, we refer to those who believe that a dedicated licensing condition exists (Chang 1997; Boeckx 1999; Cheng & Rooryck 2000, a.o) as the ‘conservatives’, and the opposing faction (Mathieu 2004; Adli 2006; Hamlaoui 2011; Déprez et al. 2013, a.o.) as the ‘liberals’.

Our solution. To solve the above controversy, we explored the interpretation of this construction in Hexagonal French over a span of 4 decades, as documented in two existing corpora of spoken French. Two dimensions were considered: (a) the quantitative dimension, i.e., the evolution of the total proportion of in-situ vs ex-situ constructions; (b) the interpretive dimension, i.e., whether the discourse-boundness of the structure observed for the beginning of the 20th century (Larrivée 2019) evolved over time. Accordingly, we evaluated our data based on the notion of ‘discourse activation’ (Dryer 1996, Larrivée 2019, Garassino 2022), which requires the study of the context that precedes each occurrence of wh-in situ, and its degree of linkedness (that we measure in terms of ‘activation’) to the wh-word itself.

Tools and frameworks. Our study is based on the ESLO corpus, a dataset of spoken French composed of two sub-corpora, ESLO 1 and 2. These corpora document how French was spoken in Orléans, France, in the 1970s and 2010s, respectively. To understand the pragmatics of the French wh in-situ strategy, we followed Larrivée (2019) and Garassino (2022). Larrivée (2019) investigates the relationship between in-situ constructions and the preceding discourse, and distinguishes two levels of activation: *explicit activation* (EACT) and *non-activation* (N-ACT).

He defines ‘[e]xplicitly activated sequences’ as ‘are those primed by their use in the antecedent context’. This is illustrated in (2), where the explicitly activated proposition is underlined.

- (2) OW26 dans les jeux antiques euh ils se dopaient quand même avec des méthodes un peu bizarres mais [...]
 ‘In the old (olympic) games they’d dope themselves with weird methods...’
 ch_PP6 ils se dopaient comment ?
 ‘How did they took drug?’
 OW26 ils prenaient euh des plantes
 ‘They took plants.’ (ESLO2_ENT_1026, Larrivée 2019a: 120, (13))

Conversely, in the context of *non-activation*, the question literally introduces a new topic into the discourse (i.e., the topic is not ‘activated’, discourse free), as in (3).

- (3) finalement tu trouves **comment** la vie à Orléans?
 ‘So, how you find life in Orléans?’ (ESLO2_ENT_1022, Larrivée 2019a: 120, (14))

Garassino (2022) additionally identified a third context in which in-situ is licensed, which we adopted in our classification: when the propositional content of the question is not ‘explicitly mentioned in the conversation’ but nonetheless easily retrievable through our knowledge of the world, it is inferable (INF), as in (4).

- (4) NAT: Et qu’est-ce que tu as acheté d’autre alors?
 ‘And so, what else did you buy?’
 MAI: Et ben on a acheté & euh la table avec les quatre chaises/# sept-cent balles//
 ‘Well, we bought a table with four chairs, 700 euros’
 JOS: Pour mettre où ? #
 ‘Where are you going to put them?’ (C-ORAL-ROM, ffamcv05, Garassino 2022)

Results: We observed a significant change within the system of partial interrogatives in French. In the 1970s, ex-situ questions constituted most cases of partial questions in spoken French while in the 2010s, in-situ had become the most widely used variant. We also observed that the percentages of each ‘activation’ level (EACT, N-ACT, INF) significantly varied and became more diversified in the 2010s. In particular, we observed a significant rise of N-ACT contexts (+25% in 40 years) and a significant fall of INF contexts, while the overall proportion of EACT did not change significantly. We thus registered a correlation between the frequency of the construction and its interpretative flexibility, while our calculations suggested that the in-situ strategy is in the process of replacing the ex-situ strategy.

Discussion: We propose that the controversy on the licensing conditions of the in-situ construction can be explained in terms of micro-diachronic change. The ‘conservatives’ indeed described a state of language concomitant with ESLO1, when N-ACT occurrences were still rare, while liberals described a state of the language like that in ESLO2, where in-situ was less context-bound. Our work therefore highlights the advantages of the tripartition of French wh in-situ as proposed in Garassino (2022) over a categorical understanding of wh in-situ, but also the importance of considering French and all languages not as monoliths but as living creatures. Especially when dealing with spontaneous speech and phenomena that display (apparent) optionality, the approach that seems to yield the most reliable results is indeed that of micro-diachrony. Our work thus brings a new understanding of the contexts in which this structure is licensed, and of its evolution over time, both quantitatively and theoretically.

Selected References. Boeckx, C. 1999. Decomposing French questions. *UPWPL* 6/1: 69–80. · Chang, L. 1997. *Wh-in-situ phenomena in French*, MA, UBC. Cheng, L. L-S & J. Rooryck. 2000. Licensing wh-in-situ. *Syntax* 3/1, 1–19. · Dryer, Matthew S. 1996. Focus, Pragmatic Presupposition, and Activated Propositions. *JP* 26: 475–523. · Garassino, D. 2022. A contrastive perspective on French and Italian wh-in situ questions : A discourse-pragmatic approach. *FL* 22 (1): 25–57. · Larrivée, P. 2019. Historical pragmatics, explicit activation and wh in situ in French. In I. Feldhausen, M. Elsig, I. Kuchenbrandt & M. Neuhaus (eds.), *RLLT 1*, 114–132. Amsterdam: Benjamins. · Mathieu, E. 2004. The mapping of form and interpretation: the case of optional WH-movement in French. *Lingua* 114: 1090–1132.