

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

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Puzzle

In French information-seeking questions, the question term (wh) can be either fronted (wh-ex situ) or left in situ (I-2)

- (1) Où vas-tu? [ex situ]
- (2) Tu vas où? [in situ]

Being always possible, the ex-situ option is often seen as the “default” option. Wh-in situ is more restricted in distribution, as it is impossible in embedded questions.

- (3) a. Je me demande où tu vas.
- b. *Je me demande tu vas où?

Yet, in all other contexts, wh-in situ is grammatical, which suggests that the choice of this forms is not merely governed by syntactic factors alone. The question of what conditions the choice of wh-in situ remains a topic of continuous debate.

Our Research Question:

What role does discourse situation and the nature of the speaker- addressee interaction play in conditioning wh-in situ?

Previous Research

Previous research suggested that wh-in situ is tied to both (i) strong presupposition and (ii) rising prosody [1], but both claims have since been challenged, see [3], [5].

Recent research sought to connect wh-in situ to information structure [5], [8], [9] and speaker-addressee pragmatics [4], [6].

Furthermore, although discourse situation was also taken to be important, corpus results in the literature, generally uncontrolled for size, vary a lot with no clear pattern for in situ [2].

Here we further probe the role of discourse situation (formality), the speaker/addressee relation, as well as the information state (familiarity/expertise) via a **corpus-study** and a forced-choice **experiment**.

References

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Corpus-Based Analysis (ESLO)

Procedure

We analyzed corpora from the Enquêtes SocioLinguistiques à Orléans (**ESLO**) database, a collection of recorded interviews in a variety of situations/settings.

Corpora were categorized on formality of **discourse situation** based on (i) description of the corpus, and (ii) an independent measure of formality (tu/vous counts). We coded a sample of ~1,000 questions from each sub corpora.

Question were coded by types, and sample of wh-questions were extracted. Fragment questions were excluded. All non-subject wh-questions were coded as either fronted or in situ.

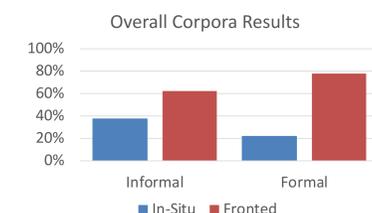
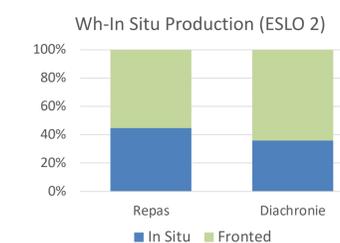
ESLO 1	Repas 1 (Informal)	Entretien (Formal)
Discourse Situation	mealtime interactions	formal interviews
# of Informal Pronouns	206	3
# of Wh-Questions	175	172

ESLO2	Repas 2 (Informal)	Diachronie (Formal)
Discourse Situation	mealtime interactions	formal interviews
# of Informal Pronouns	205	8
# of Wh-Questions	132	134

Results

For ESLO1, comparing the production of wh-in situ, we found a difference in rates between corpora (33% in situ for Repas vs. 12% for Entretien). This difference is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$), as confirmed via a mixed effects logistic regression model.

For ESLO2, we found the same trend, but not a significant difference in rates (45% vs. 36%), based on a small sample.



A mixed effects logistic regression model reveals a significant effect ($p < 0.05$) when ESLO 1 + 2 are evaluated together, with corpus as a random effect.

Experiment

Experimental Design: Participants were given a context situation with an interlocutor description, prompting a dialogue. They were asked to select between a fronted and an in-situ question to continue the dialogue. We manipulated speaker/addressee **familiarity** (familiar vs. non-familiar) and addressee **expertise** (expert vs. non-expert), resulting in a 2X2 design.

Ex: Non-Familiar/ Expert Scenario: When in a store looking at jeans, and you say to the salesperson: Bonjour, ce jeans coûte combien / Bonjour, combien coûte ce jeans?

Participants: 82, recruited online from a French university. The study was created and hosted on Ibex Farm.

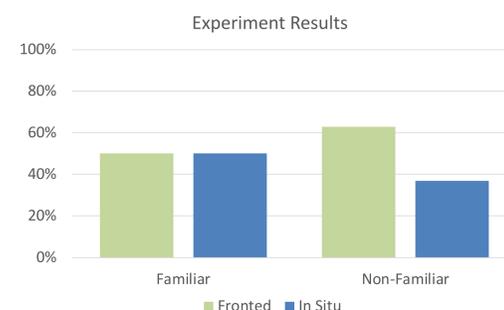
Materials: 16 target questions (4 per condition) + 16 fillers for a total of 32 questions.

Results:

- Significant effect of familiarity ($p < 0.05$) – speakers are more likely to select wh-in situ when the addressee is a known person in some capacity.
- Significant effect of expertise ($p < 0.01$) – speakers produced more in situ when addressees were “non-experts” (perhaps suggesting the role of discourse setting here too).
- Overall, participants selected more wh-in situ questions!

	Familiar	Non-Familiar
Expert	180	160
Non-Expert	235	168
Total #	415	328

Raw Counts of Wh-In Situ Responses per Condition



Conclusions

- ❖ Although wh-in situ is intuitively seen as the more informal choice, this has not been confirmed in previous research. We suggest the need for a more nuanced picture.
- ❖ The choice of in-situ increases in informal situations where speakers are familiar with one another– but this alone does not exclude fronted wh-questions, which are overall preferred in naturalistic contexts.
- ❖ Experimental data confirms that familiarity increases the likelihood of wh-in situ, and that expertise is a relevant variable. Expertise, however, increased ex-situ (contra Engdahl 2006/Myers 2007).
- ❖ In none of these contexts is either form “required”– rather preference reflects the interaction of multiple pragmatic factors.

Remaining Questions

1. How does (in)familiarity interact with discourse context (current sample is too small to address this)?
2. Is there a diachronic shift that points to increased rates of in situ?

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