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Questions in context: the case of French wh-in-situ

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Citation
Glasbergen, A. (2021, November 4). *Questions in context: the case of French wh-in-situ*. *LOT dissertation series*. LOT, Amsterdam. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3239072

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3239072

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Questions in context

The case of French *wh*-in-situ

This dissertation investigates the properties of a particular type of question, namely *wh*-in-situ questions in French. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, it examines their properties from two perspectives related to the context in which a question is uttered. These are (a) the information structure of the sentence, specifically focus and givenness, and (b) the distinction between regular information seeking questions and echo questions.

An important result is the insight that French has two mechanisms to interpret *wh*-in-situ questions, yielding potentially identical looking questions with different properties. While certain speakers only have one of these mechanisms to interpret *wh*-in-situ questions in their grammar, others, often younger speakers, have both. This explains much of the data confusion regarding the properties of French *wh*-in-situ questions. The dissertation particularly sheds light on the prosody of these questions and the data variation concerning intervention effects.

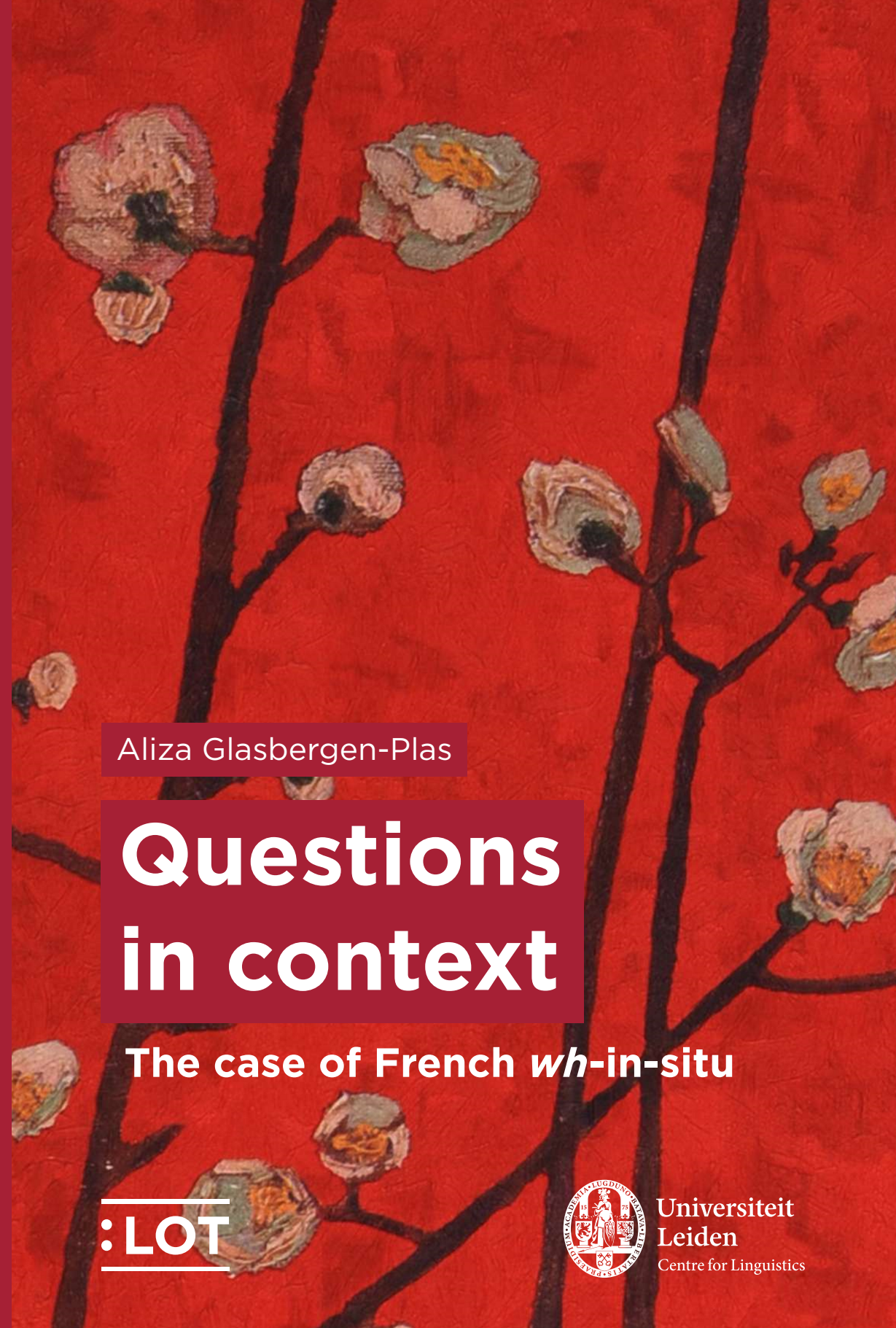
The investigation also provides more general insights into the relation between *wh*-questions and aspects of the preceding context. While it is often assumed that the focus in *wh*-questions necessarily equals the *wh*-phrase, the dissertation shows experimentally that this is not the case in all languages. In languages like French, what is focused may depend on the preceding context, as in declaratives. The dissertation also provides insight into the prosody and licensing conditions of echo questions. Finally, it suggests a direction of research for contextually restricted *wh*-in-situ in *wh*-fronting languages like English and German.

ISBN 978-94-6093-391-2
DOI https://dx.medra.org/10.48273/LOT0606

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