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

This dissertation investigates the properties of a particular type of question, namely *wh*-in-situ questions in French. While this type of question is interesting for several reasons, its properties are still the subject of much debate. I examine their properties from two perspectives, both of which relate to the context in which a question is uttered. The first is the information structure of the sentence, specifically focus and givenness. The second is the distinction between regular information seeking questions and echo questions. The investigation of French *wh*-in-situ questions will also provide more general insights into the relation between *wh*-questions and aspects of the context in which they are uttered.

In this chapter, I begin by introducing the object of study: French *wh*-in-situ questions (Section 1). I then lay out the approach that is taken in the current work (Section 2). The chapter ends with an outline of the dissertation (Section 3).

1 French *wh*-in-situ questions

French has multiple ways in which a *wh*-question may be formed, of which the main ones are displayed in Table 1. Differences in pragmatic usage aside, all questions in the table may be translated as 'Who do you see?'.

Table 1. The main types of French *wh*-questions, examples all translatable as
'Who do you see?' [adapted from Rowlett 2007: 152, ex. 209]

TYPE	EXAMPLE
wh-in-situ	Tu vois qui ?
	you see who
wh-fronting	Qui tu vois ?
	who you see
wh-fronting + *est-ce que*	Qui est-ce que tu vois ?
	who is-it that you see
wh-fronting + inversion	Qui vois-tu ?
	who you-see

It is clear from Table 1 that French has several types of *wh*-fronted
questions, i.e. questions in which the *wh*-phrase is moved to the left edge
of the sentence.[1] The language also has *wh*-in-situ questions, exemplified
in the top row, which are the focus of this dissertation. The *wh*-phrase
appears to be left 'in-situ' in this type of question, i.e. at the same position
as the corresponding element in a declarative, cf. (1).

(1) Tu   vois Pierre.
    you see   Pierre
    'You see Pierre.'

Wh-in-situ questions are not part of the prescriptive grammar.
Speakers of French for whom normative considerations weigh heavily
may even feel that they are not part of the standard language. However, it
has been established that these questions are very common in French
(Boucher 2010a; Myers 2007; Quillard 2000). They are more likely to be
used in an informal register, but are not limited to this domain. When it

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[1] For a recent overview of the different possibilities regarding these fronted questions and
analyses of the differences between them, see Reinhardt (2019).

comes to informal spoken language and simplex matrix clauses, *wh*-in-situ is even the most frequently occurring question form (Adli 2015). Indeed, Reinhardt (2019: 381) calls *wh*-in-situ "the default structure for contemporary spoken French".

French *wh*-in-situ questions take an interesting place in the cross-linguistic spectrum. There are two core strategies that the languages of the world employ for forming a *wh*-question: *wh*-movement and *wh*-in-situ. *Wh*-movement is used in languages like English, in which the *wh*-phrase is standardly moved to the left periphery of the sentence, as in (2).

(2) What did John buy ___?

Other languages, like Mandarin Chinese and Japanese, employ the w*h*-in-situ strategy, as exemplified in (3).

(3) hufei mai-le   shenme (ne)
    Hufei buy-PERF   what   PRT
    'What did Hufei buy?'

[Cheng & Rooryck 2000: 3, ex. 2]

Although there are more languages with both options, French is unusual in this typology in that it has both the *wh*-fronting and the *wh*-in-situ strategy, cf. Table 1 above (Aoun et al. 1981).[2] It is not yet understood why the language has both options and what may determine a speaker's choice for one or the other. The availability of both options sets *wh*-in-situ questions in French apart from those in typical *wh*-in-situ languages.

The properties of French *wh*-in-situ questions, although they are still debated, also seem to be different from those of questions in true *wh*-in-situ languages. As *wh*-in-situ is the only option in Mandarin Chinese, this strategy is used in all question contexts, including indirect questions (4a).

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[2] Other languages with both options are for instance Ancash Quechua (Cole & Hermon 1994) and Modern Greek (Vlachos 2012).

Yet, many authors have pointed out that *wh*-in-situ is illicit in indirect questions in French (4b) (e.g. Chang 1997; Obenauer 1994).

(4) a. Bótōng xiǎng-zhīdào Húfēi mǎi-le   shénme.
        Botong want-know   Hufei buy-PERF what
        'Botong wants to know what Hufei bought.'

   b. *Je me demande (que) Jean a   acheté quoi.
       I   me ask   that Jean has bought what
       Intended: 'I wonder what Jean bought.'

                                    [adapted from Bayer & Cheng 2017: 2-3, ex. 3]

Similarly, languages like Mandarin Chinese do not exhibit strong island effects if the *wh*-phrase is an argument (i.e. not an adverbial) (5a) (Reinhart 1998; Tsai 1994b). Yet it has been claimed that an in-situ *wh*-phrase is infelicitous inside a strong island in French (5b) (e.g. Cheng & Rooryck 2000; Mathieu 2002).

(5) a. hufei xihuan nei-ben shei xie   de shu.
        Hufei like   that-CL who write DE book
        'Who is the person x such that Hufei likes the book that x wrote?'

   b. *Jean aime le   livre que qui a   écrit.
       Jean like   the book that who has written
       Intended: 'Who is the person x such that
                  Jean likes the book that x wrote?'

                                    [Cheng & Rooryck 2000, p.3, ex. 3b and p.4, ex. 4b]

Another question connected to French *wh*-in-situ questions is how they may be distinguished from echo questions. The example in (6) displays an (ordinary) information seeking question, while (7) exemplifies an echo question. In the echo question in (7), part of speaker A's utterance was not clearly audible, which prompts speaker B to ask for a repetition, 'echoing' the previous utterance.

(6) Jean a   invité qui ?
    Jean has invited who
    'Who did Jean invite?'

(7) A: Jean a   invité #####[noise].
       Jean has invited
       'Jean invited #####[noise].'

    B: Jean a   invité qui ?
       Jean has invited who
       'Jean invited who? (I did not hear you.)'

As is clear from these examples, the two types of question may be string-identical.

Despite many previous discussions, the properties of French *wh*-in-situ questions are not yet well understood. Some of the areas in which the data are still unclear are prosody, 'intervention effects' and the presence of an 'extra-strong existential presupposition'. I briefly introduce the latter two terms. The term intervention effects refers to the phenomenon that *wh*-in-situ is infelicitous when the *wh*-phrase is preceded by a so-called 'intervener', such as a quantificational expression, focus or negation, like *aucun (étudiant)* 'no (student)' in (8) (Beck 1996; Chang 1997; Mathieu 1997; cf. Obenauer 1976).

(8) **Aucun étudiant* a   lu   quoi ?
    no   student has read what
    Intended: 'What did no student read?'

[Mathieu 2002: 48, ex. 23a]

The extra-strong existential presupposition is a special presupposition that has been claimed to arise from French *wh*-in-situ questions (Chang 1997; Coveney 1989). According to this claim, which is controversial, the speaker of a *wh*-in-situ question like (9) already assumes that there is something that Marie bought. Therefore, an answer like *rien* 'nothing' is perceived as odd, which contrasts with the *wh*-fronted question in (10).

(9) Question: Marie a   acheté quoi ?   Answer: [??]Rien.
             Marie has bought what   nothing
             'What is it that Marie bought?'   'Nothing.'

(10) Question: Qu' est-ce que Marie a   acheté ?   Answer: Rien.
              what is-it   that Marie has bought   nothing
              'What did Marie buy?'   'Nothing.'

[adapted from Chang 1997: 42, exs. 40 and 37]

The term "extra-strong" presupposition refers to the impression of a stronger presupposition than in other *wh*-questions. Traditionally, it is assumed that *wh*-questions in general exhibit an existential presupposition (e.g. Karttunen & Peters 1976; Katz & Postal 1964). Under this view, a question like *What did Marie buy?*, cf. (10), presupposes the existence of an entity answering the question. In other words, it presupposes that Marie bought something. Yet some authors have argued against the presence of an existential presupposition in regular *wh*-questions (see, among others, Fitzpatrick 2005; Ginzburg 2003; Groenendijk & Stokhof 1984). When asking a *wh*-question, the speaker expects there to be an answer, such as a thing that Marie bought in (10). However, based on several arguments like cancellability, this expectation is analysed by some as an existential implicature rather than a presupposition (Ginzburg 2003; Groenendijk & Stokhof 1984). While a presupposition cannot be cancelled, it is possible to cancel an implicature (Grice 1975). For instance, the *wh*-question in (10) can receive a negative reply (*rien* 'nothing'), which cancels the proposition that Marie bought something. This can be seen as support for the idea that the expectation that Marie bought something in (10) is not a presupposition. Following several studies that are relevant to this dissertation (Baunaz 2016; Büring 2016; Jacobs 1991), I will also refer to the expectation that there is an answer to a *wh*-question like (10) as an existential implicature.

2 The approach of this dissertation

To further our understanding of the properties of French *wh*-in-situ questions, I investigate them from two angles. The first is the information structure of the sentence, i.e. focus and givenness. The second is the distinction between ordinary information seeking questions and echo questions. Both these factors interrelate with the context in which a question is uttered.

Focus and givenness both indicate the relation of a sentence to the preceding context. They are exemplified in (11) and (12), in which the notation []$_G$ indicates that an expression is given, []$_F$ indicates focus, and capital letters represent a pitch accent.

(11) Sinatra's reputation among industry musicians grew swiftly, and
       James always supPORted [the singer]$_G$.

[Büring 2016: 18, ex. 1]

In (11), *the singer* is given, due to previous mention of *Sinatra*. This previous mention has made the referent of *Sinatra*, the singer Frank Sinatra, contextually salient. When the expression *the singer* is mentioned later in the sentence, its referent is already salient, as a result of which *the singer* is given (e.g. Büring 2016). Givenness is often associated with deaccentuation (Ladd 1980; Rochemont 1986; Selkirk 1984b).

The focus of a sentence is the only part of the content that does not have to be salient in the preceding context (e.g. Büring 2016; Schwarzschild 1999). When no part of the sentence is salient, different terminology may be used. Sometimes the term 'neutral context' is employed (e.g. Cheng & Downing 2012). Under the assumption that all sentences have a focus, which can be a larger or smaller part of the sentence, the whole sentence is focused in a neutral context. This may be referred to as 'broad focus', or 'whole-sentence focus'. I use this latter terminology, following for instance Büring (2016). For example, I call a focus as in (12a), uttered in a neutral context in which no aspect of the sentence is salient, a 'broad focus'. If it is already salient that somebody

invited John, but not who, a speaker might utter (12b), which I refer to as
having 'narrow focus' on *Mary*. A narrow focus, as I use the term, may be
larger than a single word, but is crucially smaller than the entire sentence.

(12) a. [Mary invited JOHN]$_F$.
   b. [MAry]$_F$ invited John.

[adapted from Truckenbrodt 2012: 2, exs. 4 and 5]

Focus is associated with prosodic prominence in many languages (e.g.
Jackendoff 1972; Truckenbrodt 1995). This is also illustrated in (12), in
which the main pitch accent in (12b) falls on *Mary*. A broad focus
coincides with a normal, 'neutral' prosody (e.g. Büring 2012), as in (12a),
with the accent on *John*.

   I assume in this dissertation that in certain languages, the context may
also affect what is focused in *wh*-questions. This view is controversial, as it
is often assumed that the focus in *wh*-questions constitutes the *wh*-phrase,
irrespective of the preceding context (e.g. Culicover & Rochemont 1983;
Lambrecht & Michaelis 1998). In Chapter 3, I consider the possible
arguments for the idea that the *wh*-phrase is always the focus and argue
that they are not conclusive. Chapter 4 provides evidence to support the
assumption that like in declaratives, the focus in in-situ *wh*-questions may
differ depending on the context.

   As was shown in (11) and (12), information structure may affect the
prosody of speech utterances. In addition, several authors claim that focus
plays a role in intervention effects (Beck 2006; Hamlaoui 2010; Kim 2002).
As focus and intervention effects are two of the areas in which the
relevant data remain unclear, I investigate French *wh*-in-situ questions
from the perspective of their information structure. In addition, I include
the distinction between echo and information seeking questions in the
investigation. While these two types of question may be string-identical
((6) and (7)), I will show in Chapter 3 that their properties are different.
To clarify the relevant data, I will therefore explicitly distinguish and
compare these two question types.

   Both information structure and the distinction between echo and
information seeking questions interact with the context in which a *wh*-in-

situ question is felicitously used. As was illustrated in (11) and (12), a particular type of context invites a sentence with a certain information structure. Conversely, a sentence with a certain information structure is felicitous in a particular type of context. As I indicated above, a particular information structure may also relate to other properties of the sentence, such as its prosody or the occurrence of intervention effects. The relation between echo questions and context is different. In contrast to an information seeking question, an echo question 'echoes' the preceding utterance and can therefore only be uttered in a particular context.[3] For instance, the echo question in (13) is not felicitous in the given context, while the corresponding information seeking question is.

(13) Anne and Betty are neighbours having a chat outside their house.
     They both visited the same event with their husband.
     Anne's husband John collects antiques.

     Anne: We really liked the annual fair.

     Betty: a. So did we.
                By the way, what did John buy?   (information seeking)
            b. #John bought WHAT?   (echo)

This reflects the semantic properties of echo questions, which, as I will suggest, also relate to prosody and intervention effects. Studying French *wh*-in-situ questions from these two angles will therefore provide more insight into their characteristics.

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[3] Unlike with information structure, it is not the case that a particular context 'asks for' an echo or an information seeking question. When part of the previous utterance was not clearly audible as in (7), it is also felicitous to ask an information seeking question.

3   Outline of the work

The dissertation has the following structure.

Chapters 2 and 3 provide the background that is needed to understand the later chapters. Chapter 2 examines the literature regarding the properties of French *wh*-in-situ questions. It notes a recurring pattern with respect to the presence of a large sentence-final rise (i.e. prosody), intervention effects and the 'extra-strong presupposition'. For each of these issues, some authors observe the phenomenon, other authors deny its existence and yet other authors observe its presence in a subset of the cases. I raise the possibility that there is some genuine variability in the data that is related to underlying factors.

Chapter 3 further develops and motivates the adopted approach. It provides background information on the notions of focus and givenness I employ and on the distinction between echo and information seeking questions. Furthermore, it considers the possible arguments against the adopted approach to focus in *wh*-questions and argues that they are not conclusive. It also includes a proposal regarding the notion of contextual salience, which accounts for the additional role of world knowledge and beliefs in focus and givenness.

Chapter 4 reports a production experiment that investigates the influence of a) information structure and b) the distinction between echo and information seeking questions on the prosody of French *wh*-in-situ questions. It describes the elicitation paradigm that was designed to elicit a particular type of question (echo or information seeking) and a particular information structure in information seeking questions. The chapter provides prosodic descriptions of French *wh*-in-situ (echo) questions. It demonstrates that the focus in these *wh*-questions may differ, depending on the context. It also confirms and adds to claims in the literature regarding focus marking in French. In addition, the chapter shows that French echo questions are prosodically distinct from information seeking questions, even if their information structure is the same.

Chapter 5 investigates the influence of context on intervention effects. It builds on work by Starke (2001) and Baunaz (2005; 2011; 2016), who note that a particular type of context voids intervention effects. I propose that what characterizes such a context is that it makes the entire *wh*-in-situ question given (using Büring's (2016) notion of givenness), which I call 'Maximally Given'. I assume that intervention effects arise when an intervener blocks covert movement of the *wh*-phrase. Yet Maximal Givenness licenses the use of a contextually supplied choice function (cf. Kratzer (1998) for specific indefinites), which forms an alternative for covert movement. Maximal Givenness makes the choice function recoverable for the interlocutor. The proposal accounts for both variation among different interveners and regarding judgments of sentences with the same intervener. It also explains the absence of intervention effects in echo questions.

Chapter 6 extends the proposal that French has two mechanisms for interpreting *wh*-in-situ, i.e. covert movement and a choice function, beyond intervention effects. The first half of the chapter investigates several properties of questions interpreted via the two mechanisms. It first presents a rating study that investigates to what extent questions of the form *Tu as acheté des quoi*, lit. 'You have bought INDF.ART what' are acceptable as non-echo questions interpreted via the two mechanisms and as echo questions. It then returns to the data variation reported in Chapter 2. I report on a second rating study that investigates the acceptability of *wh*-in-situ in indirect questions, inside a strong island and in long-distance questions, in an out of the blue context. Under my proposal, *wh*-in-situ in such a context is interpreted via covert movement. I then hypothesise that the grammar of certain speakers only allows for choice function *wh*-in-situ, while other speakers have choice function as well as covert movement *wh*-in-situ. In combination with the need for a certain context to license choice function *wh*-in-situ, this hypothesis explains the seemingly contradictory data regarding the extra-strong presupposition, the sentence-final rise and intervention effects. In the second half of the chapter, I argue that the choice function account is also a promising direction of research to explain contextually restricted *wh*-in-situ in *wh*-fronting languages like English and German. Finally, I compare

the properties of contextually restricted *wh*-in-situ to those of echo questions, resulting in some observations about echo questions and a proposed direction of research regarding their structure.

Chapter 7 concludes the dissertation. It provides an overview of the established properties of French *wh*-in-situ questions interpreted via the two mechanisms. It also discusses outcomes of the research regarding echo questions, focus and givenness, methodological considerations and implications for the cross-linguistic picture.