Interrogative licensing with intonation: The case of French wh-in-situ

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Introduction

Recent investigations of interrogatives have targeted prosody as one of the central factors accounting for cross-linguistic variation in wh-movement (Cheng & Roeryck, 2000; Kučerová, 2007; Provsky, 2000; Richards, 2006; Wagner, 2005, 2006).

French offers a unique empirical testing ground, since it allows both moved wh- (1) and wh-in-situ (2) questions.

1. Quel élément est-ce qu’elle a mis au milieu?
   Which shape did she place in the middle?

2. Elle a mis quel élément au milieu?
   She has placed which shape?

Cheng and Roeryck (2000) have proposed that French wh-in-situ questions require a rising intonation contour present in yes/no questions but absent in moved wh-questions.

To date, little to no experimental research has addressed this theoretical claim, and previous experimental work on French interrogatives (Adli, 2004; Delattre, 1996; Wunderli, 1983, 1984) omitted certain design variables, which would allow for a conclusive analysis of the interaction between syntax and prosody in French.

This study seeks to fill this gap and offer evidence about how prosody captures the interaction between syntax and information structure in wh-in-situ questions in French.

French Interrogatives

Cheng and Roeryck (2000)’s proposal:

French Interrogatives: Strong Q Feature in Sentence-Initial C

Participants:

32 native French speakers (5 F; 7 M; age: early 20s – late 50s) recruited from Central NJ area.

Stimuli:

Five 2- to 3-sentence discourse contexts for each of the 7 target sentences presenting a choice scenario, followed by the target sentence.

Sentences were pseudorandomized in 3 blocks. Words with obstructions were avoided. There were no sentence-final wh- words.

Procedure:

Speakers were recorded in a sound-attenuated booth and assigned to one of 3 orders. Pitch accenting and naturalness were later evaluated.

Results and Discussion

Analysis: The 420 sentences were segmented and annotated in Praat. Two double-blind researchers coded all sentences for rise/fall (intercoder agreement: 90%). All evendivided windows were then created beginning from the onset of the wh-word or determiner to the end of the sentence. Average F0 was calculated for each window for all speakers and sentences.

Variability in wh-in-situ Sentence-Final Rise

2 groups of speakers emerged: those who were perceived to give wh-in-situ a rise and those who were not.

No effects of age, gender, region, or years in US.

Deaccenting

• Nuanced support for Cheng & Roeryck (2000)’s claims about rising intonation
  • Contour of wh-in-situ content questions is higher than falling declarative, but lower than rising questions, especially in Group 1
  • Deaccenting following H+ pitch accent on wh-word appears to mask the rise.

• H+ on wh-word followed by falling contour (Beyssade et al., 2007)

• Distressing lexical material around wh-word (Hamlaoui, 2008)

• Intervention effects with wh-in-situ (Vergnaud & Zubizarreta, 2005; Zubizarreta, 2003)

• Pitch compression in wh-domain between wh-word and complementizer (Richards, 2006)

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Selected References