How French in-situ questions are not linked to givenness

Spoken Continental French can employ two different strategies to form information-seeking questions: the wh-word can be fronted (1a) or it can appear in-situ (1b).

(1) a. *Qu' est-ce que tu fais ce   soir   ?*
         what ESK   you do   this evening
         "What are you doing tonight?"

     b. *Tu fais quoi ce   soir   ?*
         you do   what this evening
         "What are you doing tonight?"

There is a substantial body of literature explaining speakers' choice to use an interrogative with non-fronted wh-phrase (WiQ) in French. All claiming that WiQs have to be more restricted than their fronted counterpart in some way. The most recent claims by Hamlaoui (2011) and Déprez et al. (2012) are based on the idea that WiQs are linked to givenness, namely that the non-wh-part of the question has to be given (in a broad sense i.e. evoked (Schwarzschild (1999)) based on the fact that French can not realize focus stress to the left and the need to de-accent given phrases. This is closely linked to analyses of echo questions(see Bartels (1999)) where "exempting all constituents except the wh-expression from the focus has the effect of linking the utterance to a prior commitment the addressee has made to the presupposed proposition". This notion of WiQs being tied to presupposition has been prevailing in the literature on French wh-in-situ since Chang (1997).

Proposal: This paper takes a fresh approach at WiQs, claiming that the account of givenness may be true for echo questions in French, but is not the right explanation for WiQs. WiQs are not restricted by givenness. The inference that WiQs have to be given is not true, as we can find out-of-the-blue WiQs. However, WiQs do not show certain surface structures, for example full DPs are rarely left to the wh-phrase. Syntactic peculiarities like dislocation and scrambling in WiQs point towards the inference that WiQs are restricted by focus prosodic constraints rather than de-accenting due to givenness. We will show how a prosodic/syntactic analysis can capture WiQs surface structures much better. This conflates with findings from our corpus data and a new acceptability judgement task.

New experimental findings: In our pilot experimental study, we created contexts for non-discourse-given subjects, showing that dislocation of full phrases in WiQs is not linked to givenness, but must indicate a prosodic strategy. If we look at example (2), we see that WiQs have specific surface structures. While (2a) is acceptable as an echo question, it is not as a WiQ. The only possible solution to get a well-formed WiQ is to use dislocation (in this case it's right dislocation) like in (2b).

(2) *(translated)* You are helping your friend moving in. You are looking through her stuff in different cartons. She is in the other room, but she can hear you. You ask:

     a. *? La vaisselle va où   ?*
            the dishes   go where
         "Where do the dishes go?"

     b. *Elle va   où   la vaisselle ?*
         it   goes where the dishes
         "Where do the dishes go?"

We provided 23 contexts that link a question (either with a full phrase or a dislocated subject) to a context, the subject of the question, however, was not given in the context but evoked and in some cases out-of-the-blue. 50 participants would read the context and then hear the question auditive in only one condition. Then they were asked to rate them on a 7-point-Likert-scale on how natural it sounded to them. The ratings were analysed using general additive models (GAMMs) with the ocat-linking function for ordered categorical data. Phrase was added as a fixed factors, subjects and items were entered as random smoothers. Results showed a significant effect of phrase condition ($\text{ß} = 0.9$, SE $= 0.02$, z $= 40$, p < 0.0001). Left dislocation was rated significantly higher than full phrases with answers ranging from 6-7 (very good to excellent) and full phrases ranging mostly at 3-5 (a bit bad to good). This can be seen in table 1. The results show that even though the left dislocation was not provoked by givenness, it would still prevail as the most natural way to ask a WiQ.
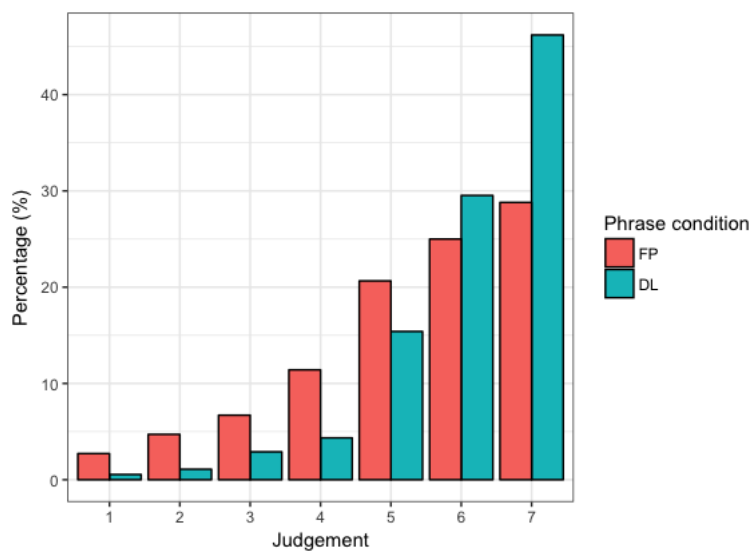

Figure 1: Full Phrases (FP) / Dislocation (DL) judgements for WiQs

Hypothesis: WiQs in French are not tied to givenness. WiQs have to adhere to a special prosodical structure (see table 2 for a proposition of a stylized surface structure) that will give focus-marking to the wh-word as the first sentence stress. To ensure this, the wh-phrase has to sit on the right edge of the first Accentual Phrase (AP) (Jun & Fougeron (2002)). Clitics have to replace full phrases, as they would create their own AP. Every intervener that forms its own AP is also automatically out. Clefting is often used to form WiQs. That also means that the wh-word is not base-generated in its "in-situ" position, but must move to a position close to C, but also not left-most, to get a focus-accent (this is in line with Richards (2016)).

Outlook: As seen from table 1 there is a high variance in judgements on WiQs with full phrases, some getting very high ratings. We claim that the prosodic constraints might sometimes be over-written by pragmatic ones. This is parallel to when WiQs can occur in languages that normally don't allow for info-seeking wh-in-situ like Spanish (see Biezma (in press)).
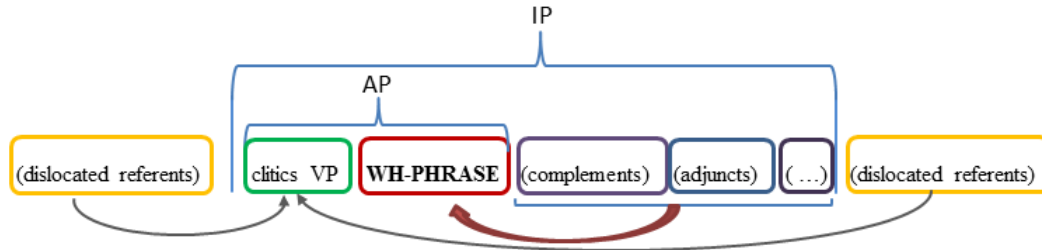
Figure 2: WiQ surface structure

References Bartels (1999) 'The Intonation of English Statements and Questions'◆ Biezma (in press) 'Givenness and the difference between wh-fronted and wh-in-situ questions in Spanish '◆ Chang (1997) 'Wh-in-situ phenomena in French'◆ Déprez et al. (2012). 'Interfacing Information and Prosody: French wh- in situ Questions. '◆ Hamblin (1973)'Questions in Montague English'◆ Hamlaoui (2011) 'On the role of phonology and discourse in Francilian French wh-questions'◆ Jun & Fougeron (2002) 'The Realizations of the Accentual Phrase in French Intonation'◆ Richards (2016) 'Contiguity theory '◆ Schwarzschild (1999) 'GIVENness, AvoidF and other constraints on the placement of accent'◆ Zubizarreta (2001) 'Intervention effects in the French wh-in-situ construction '