The historical development of French wh in situ

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« Ton père va où? » [...] c’est encore le rythme [...] qui jour un rôle plus important que la logique. »

de Boer (1926, p. 323)

General goal: This paper debates for the view that syntactic variation and syntactic linguistic change are external to (narrow) syntax. **Main claims:** 1) the **wh in situ** variant of partial questions (Qs) in Modern French (MF) is directly linked to the prosodic changes that Old French (OF) went through in the 12th c.; 2) Q formation is universal (CP present in all languages and so is WH scope) but variation in Q formation is not part of narrow syntax. It is conditioned instead by prosodic factors; 3) In diachronic terms, a wh mv language becomes a wh in situ language if it loses its mobile stress patterns. Conversely, a language with wh in situ becomes a language with wh mvt if the language develops mobile stress patterns. **Prosody and V2:** As is well-known, the loss of V2 in French has been linked to the prosodic change that the French declarative sentence underwent in the 12th c. (1) (Adams 1987). OF sentences had an initial accent and word stress comparable to Germanic languages (2)-(3). In Germanic word stress falls on initial rather than final syllables, but word stress is also mobile (4). In French word stress has for many centuries been on the final syllable: it is non-distinctive and predictable (4). Phrasal stress is also fixed in French (last position) contrary to Germanic (5). As a way of illustration, compare the meter system of English vs. French (6a-b). The prosodic change is confirmed by Noyer’s (2002) very interesting study where it is shown the OF octosyllable c. 975 to 1180 had an underlying iambic pattern. While he admits no text at any period conforms absolutely to the Iambic Pattern in the sense of classical English verse (Shakespeare, Milton, or even Shelley), in the earliest works, departure from this is fairly limited. (7) is a good and clear example from a text prior to 1160 where the four lines are in fact perfectly iambic. The change in prosody had catastrophic consequences for the grammar of French. V2 started to crumble (Adams 1988, Clark et Roberts 1993+many others) and at the end of the 12th century left dislocation (8) started to emerge (see Kroch 2001). **Prosody and questions:** de Boer (1926) argues that the development of Qs in French is tied to the change in prosody from OF to MidF (9). Yes-no Qs with est-ce que started to develop (in the 16th c. according to Foulet 1921, Marchello-Nizia 1997, Buridant 2000) to compensate for the lack of initial stress: *part votre père?* disappeared because the verb could no longer be stressed. Qs such as *pourquoi est-ce que, qui est-ce que,* etc. lost their emphatic connotation: *est-ce que* was used in lieu of stress. I would like to propose that the appearance of wh in situ in French is directly linked to the earlier change of accent. This idea follows de Boer’s (1926) insight. Although he does not discuss wh in situ very much, he nevertheless mentions this gem sentence in passing: [...] « Ton père va où? » [...] c’est encore le rythme [...] qui jour un rôle plus important que la logique. » p. 323. French focused elements (including wh) appear in final positions, the only stressed positions (10). Whereas it is often claimed in the literature that wh in situ in French is a recent development (Thévenot 1976 : 164), I argue that the construction is old, that it must have developed when the stress change cycle was complete. Wh in situ is rare in French texts, presumably because it has always been considered non-standard (even today). It is even absent from 19th century novels with dialogues from the working class, cf. Hugo and Zola). However, one example is attested as early as 1784 ((11) from Diderot’s *Le Rêve de d’Alembert* and many examples start to surface at the beg. of the 20th c.(12)-(13). I will also argue that the development of split questions such as (14)-(15) is a direct consequence of the prosodic change. These are also considered colloquial and new but it turns out that they are very old. They start surfacing at the end of the 15th c./beg. of 16th. In these constructions, although the wh part remains in the initial position, a portion of the wh phrase appears in situ. No such constructions are found before the 14th c. These are measurable because there are numerous examples: their evolution is easy to track. **External parameters and language change:** I propose the following generalization: i) Languages with mobile stress have wh movement; ii) Languages with non-mobile stress have wh in situ (tone languages are often wh in situ languages precisely because they have no stress). Languages can go from i) to ii) or vice versa. On my view, it is not a coincidence that languages like Turkish and French have wh in situ: stress is always on the last syllable/always predictable in both languages. In that group are: Armenian1 and Persian.2 The present account makes better predictions than its competitors: wh in situ languages are not necessarily tied to the availability of Q particles (Cheng 1991). Bruening (2007:141) notes that across a typology of over 500 languages taken from Dryer (2004), there is no relationship between a question particle and wh in-situ, let alone wh particles. My account is also an improvement on Richards’s (2010) recent prosodic account of wh in situ where variation in Q patterns depends on prosody3 but for him wh variation depends on the position of the complementizer (left or right) and whether prosodic domains are aligned to the left or the right of the phrase (left-headed languages tend to have right end prosodic settings, and right-headed languages tend to have left end prosodic settings). Although supposedly a pure prosodic account, it relies too much on word order. It is not clear how Turkish or such languages can be explained under such a view. For me, wh in situ is tied to accent rather than word order. Wh variation is conditioned not by narrow syntax but by prosody. This case might be taken to show that syntactic variation and syntactic language change are outside narrow syntax. UG is invariant in line with recent reasoning (Chomsky 2005, Newmeyer 2005, Boeckx 2010). Since the wh parameter is not traditional, but might reduce to emergent properties of the language, it may not be categorical but only a tendency. Time permitting I will address the question as to why optionality is tolerated: most languages that have wh in situ have also wh movement.
(1) “The dominant factors in the evolution of pronunciation in Later Old and Middle French are the gradual lessening of the heavy tonic stress that characterized Period I and a new tendency to link closely together words closely connected in thought.” Pope (1934: 82) Period I = c. 500–1100 while Period II = [c. 1100–1600]

(2) « La proposition possédait, en ancien français, un accent de phrase initial en dehors de l’accent syntagmatique final… l’accent initial, tout en étant un phénomène phonétique, est étroitement lié à des facteurs sémantiques et syntaxiques. » (Herman 1954: 285)

(3) « Or, dans les langues à accent mobile, il n’y a aucune trace de renforcement du mot interrogatif au début de la principale : une légère accentuation individuelle suffit… » de Boer (1926: 320) This is enough to license the frontal wh element and primary stress is not needed (Culicover & Rochemont 1983), but see Engdahl (2006).

(4) Fotografie vs. fotografieren / photograph versus photographer / photo vs. [fotograf] (photographe)


Qu’est-ce que t’as mangé? J’ai mangé un sandwich. Qui a volé mon sandwich? *Daniel a volé ton sandwich

(6) a. Let me not to the marriage of true minds b. Si je la haïssais, je ne la fuirais pas. (Racine, Phèdre)
    Admit impediments. Love is not love
    Which alters when it alteration finds
    Or bends with the remover to remove.
    (Shakespeare, Sonnets)
    Dui citain de grant hautece (Pir. 1–4, dans Noyer 2002: 128)
    Furent dui home renomé De parenté et de richece

‘In the city of Babylon there were two famous men, two citizens of great stature, ancestry and wealth.’

(8) Ici est guerre, lairs la vo ester ?
    ‘Cette guerre, l’abandonnez-vous?’
    (Raoul de Cambray, 1162)

(9) de Boer (1926: 326) « Enfin, nous avons constaté que la cause essentielle de la formation et de la
    « grammaticalisation » des formules interrogatives du français doit être cherchée dans l’accentuation finale du
    français, rythme qui, d’un côté, invite la langue à placer le mot à accentuer sous l’accent final, et qui, d’autre
    part, rend la place initiale tellement faible, que cette faiblesse force presque la langue à renforcer le mot
    interrogatif, lorsque celui-ci se trouve au début de la phrase. »

(10) De Boer (1926: 313) « Mais en français on ne peut pas accentuer où on veut : l’accent d’intensité y est fixe. Au
    lieu donc de pouvoir placer, pour ainsi dire, l’accent sur le mot à accentuer, il faut placer le mot à accentuer
    sous l’accent, qui est final. »

(11) DENIS DIDEROT / Le Rêve de d’Alembert / 1784
    […] comparaison qui s’ensuivent nécessairement de toutes ces impressions qui font la pensée et le
    raisonnement.
    - Mademoiselle De L’Espinasse. Et cette comparaison se fait où ?
    - Bordeu. à l’origine du réseau.

(12) K568/ COLETTE / Claudine à l’école / 1900
    Luce et Anaïs. La porte s’ouvre violemment, Luce, en chemise courte, se jette dans la chambre, éperdue :
    -je t’en prie, défends-moi, Anaïs est si méchante ! …
    -elle t’a fait quoi ?
    -elle m’a versé de l’eau dans mes bottines, […]

(13) K568/ COLETTE / Claudine à l’école / 1900
    sous le nez de Luce, portant le chiffre 22.850. La gamine, joyeusement, m’envoie un « oui » de la tête ; ça va
    bien. Satisfaite, je demande alors à ma voisine :
    « vous avez combien ? » elle hésite et murmure, réservée : « j’ai plus de 20.000 francs. »

(14) R580/ *Anonyme / Sottie des sots ecclesiastiques qui jouent leurs bénéfices / 1511 page 353 / XVI.
    Dieu scet combien j’euz de maux
    En tracassant parmy la ville.

(15) R944/ *Anonyme / Ulenspiegel / 1530 page 177 / [Histoire 19]
    Quartement demanda le rector : « Combien y a il de la terre jusques au ciel ? »

1 In Armenian the stress always falls on the last syllable, unless it contains [ə], in which case it falls on the penultimate one.
2 There are exceptions in Persian: verbal prefixes. But as argued by Kahnemuyipour (2000), these can be shown to enter the combination as phonological words with their own stress (on the last/unique syllable).
3 Prosodic accounts of wh in situ have flourished in recent years (Adli 2004, Hamlaoui 2010, etc.). The idea that French wh phrases get main/nuclear stress just like embedded elements in declaratives (cf. Zubizarreta 1998) can be found in Mathieu (2002, 2004) where it is claimed that that the rising intonation mentioned by Cheng & Rooryck (2000) is too strong (see Déprez et al). For the idea that wh in situ is licensed prosodically, see Ladd (1996), Zubizarreta (1998) and Kahnemuyipour (2004), among several others.