

On What Grounds – Information and Authority in French *Wh*-Questions

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Background and Purpose

French allows both the moved (1) and the in-situ (2) form in information seeking questions. In (1) the *wh*-word has moved to the front of the question, whereas in (2) it has remained in place, where its answer would appear. This is what we might call *optional in-situ*.

- (1) **Où** tu vas? (moved)
where you go?
'Where are you going?'
- (2) Tu vas **où**? (in-situ)
you go where?
'You are going where?'

It is not clear we should treat both (1) and (2) as syntactically interrogative, despite interrogative syntax being traditionally associated with questions. Bobaljik & Wurmbrand (2015), propose we treat in-situ questions in French and other optional in-situ languages as syntactically declarative. In-situ questions are *Declarative Syntax Questions (DSQs)*.

This raises new issues with respect to the way in which these in-situ constructions derive their questioning force pragmatically. Taking a cue from biased questions in English, we explore how speaker and hearer authority, as a function of information access, plays a role in determining which form to use. We conducted two surveys, one exploring the role of the addressee's information (**Exp. 1 – Expertise**), and one exploring the role of the speaker's information (**Exp. 2 – Knowledgeability**).

Declarative Syntax and Question-Force:

- We differentiate declarative and interrogative syntax based on commitment to a proposition (Gunlogson, 2004):
 - Declaratives express commitment to the truth of a proposition. Interrogatives do not.
 - Question-force* conveys the locus of action – questions are associated with the addressee, whereas statements are associated with the speaker.
- Thus, **DSQs** express commitment on the part of the addressee, whereas statements express a commitment of the speaker.
- Declaratives require **information/authority** to express a commitment.
- Interrogatives, by virtue of not expressing commitment, imply the addressee is authoritative.

Hypotheses

Exp. 1 – French speakers will use *in-situ* questions less often when their interlocutor has access to greater information ('addressee expertise')

Exp. 2 – French speakers will use *in-situ* questions more often when they have access to greater information ('speaker knowledge')

Method

PCIBex was used to build two online surveys, which consisted of a series of forced choice tasks. The participants were prompted to read a context, and then decide between the moved or in-situ form of the question.

- Each survey consisted of 36 experimental items, 18 target items and 18 filler items.
- The participants were first presented with instructions, and then asked to complete two practice items before beginning the main portion of the survey.
- The contexts for the experimental items were composed of two lines, a scenario followed by an initial line of dialogue:

Scenario: Deux amis dans un restaurant :
'Two friends in a restaurant:'

Dialogue: Comme tu viens ici tous les jours, dis-moi...
'Since you come here every day, tell me...'

Exp. 1 - 'Addressee Expertise'

- We manipulated the information the addressee was perceived to have access to:
- Expert Condition** – The addressee has access to extra information (i.e. they are a regular at a restaurant)
- Non-Expert Condition**

Exp. 2 - 'Speaker Knowledge'

- We manipulated the information the speaker had access to
- Partial-Knowledge Condition** – The speaker has information that restricts the answers to their question (i.e. they can see the ingredients purchased for dinner)
- No-Knowledge Condition**

Results

Exp. 1 – 'Addressee Expertise'

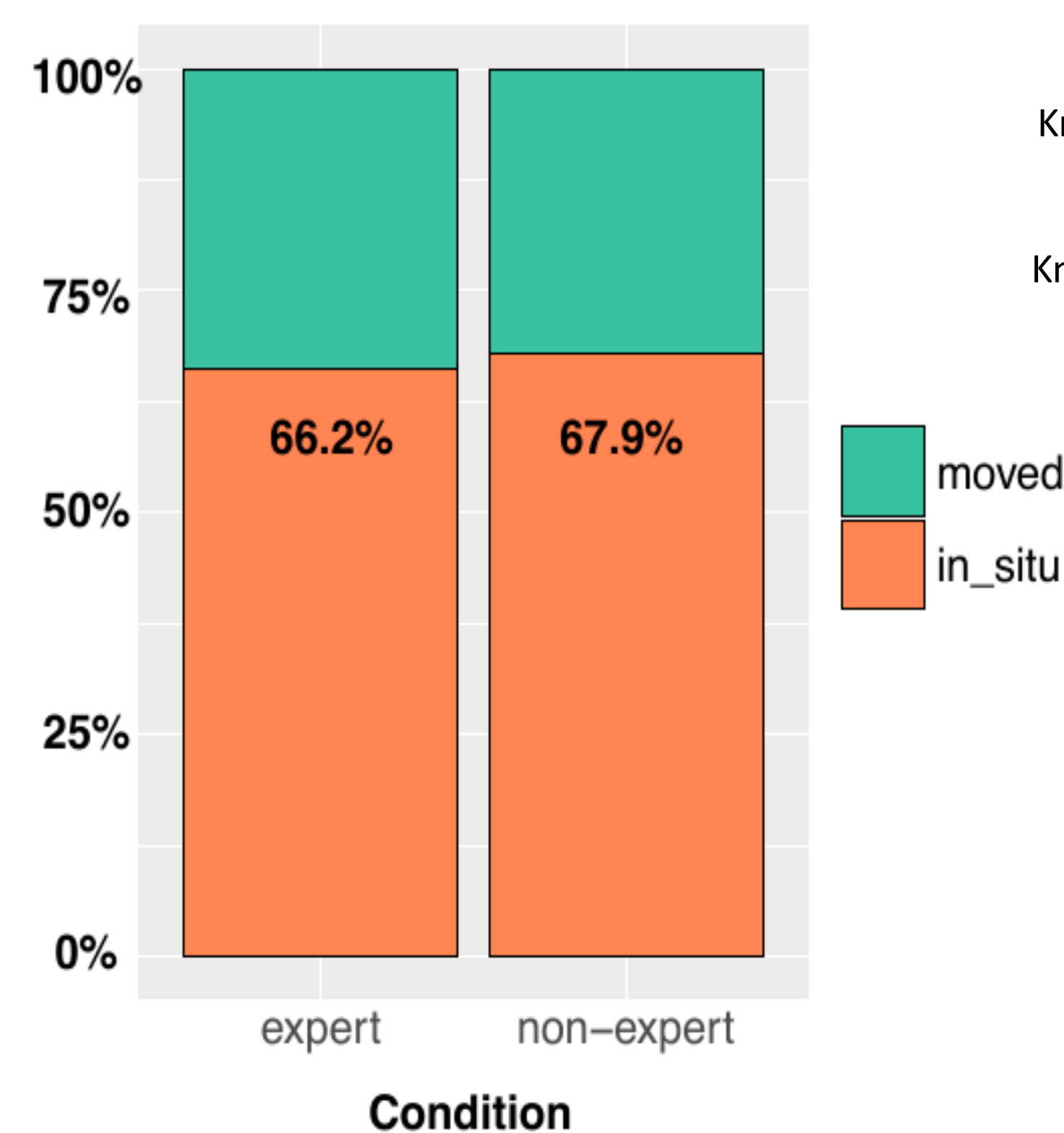


Fig. 1. Percentage of moved and in-situ questions in expert and non-expert conditions

- No difference across conditions in Exp. 1.

Exp. 2 – 'Speaker Knowledge'

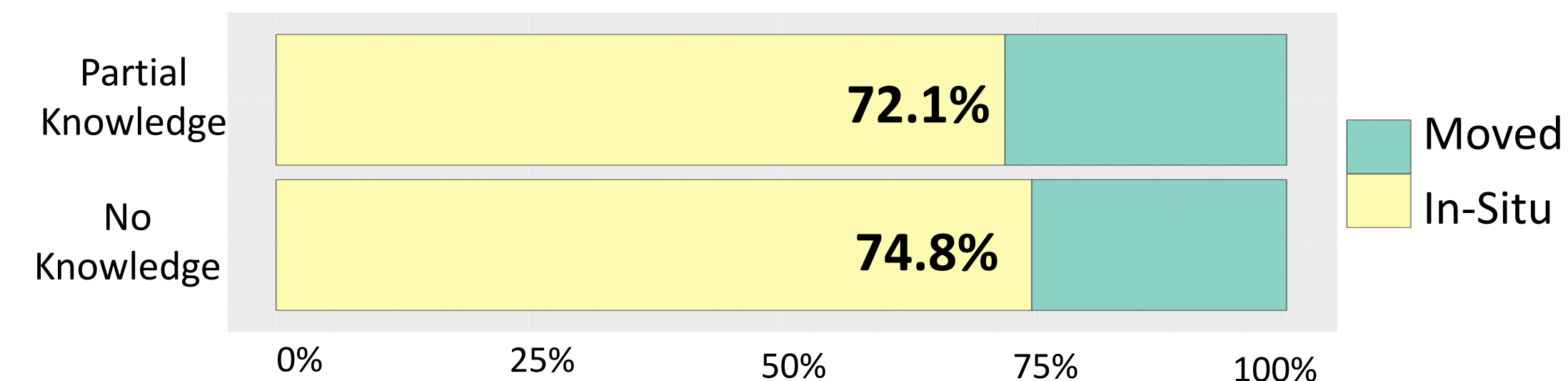


Fig. 2. Percentage of moved and in-situ questions in partial and no-knowledge conditions

- No difference across conditions in Exp. 2.
- Question words behave differently (Fig. 3)
- Où* questions were in-situ more often with more information ($p < 0.05$)
- Combien* questions performed in the opposite way ($p < 0.01$)

Question Word	Partial-Knowledge (% in-situ)	No-Knowledge (% in-situ)
Où (where)	80.0%	69.1%
Combien (how much)	71.5%	84.8%

Fig. 3. Percentage of in-situ questions by question word in partial and no-knowledge conditions

References

- Bobaljik, J., & Wurmbrand, S. (2015). Questions with declarative syntax tell us what about selection? *Ángel Gallego & Dennis Ott (eds.)*, 50, 13–31.
- Déprez, V., Syrett, K., (2013). The interaction of syntax, prosody, and discourse in licensing French *wh*-in-situ questions. *Lingua*, 124, 4–19. & Kawahara, S.
- Gunlogson, C. (2004). *True to form: Rising and falling declaratives as questions in English*. Routledge.
- Myers, L. L. (2007). *Wh-interrogatives in spoken French: A corpus-based analysis of their form and function* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation).

Discussion

Exp. 1 – 'Interlocutor Expertise'

- The data fail to support our hypothesis, that greater addressee expertise predicts decreased use of *wh*-in-situ in French.
- However, these results also fail to support other predictions in the literature, that greater addressee expertise predicts *increased* usage of *wh*-in-situ (Myers, 2007).
- We suggest that speaker knowledge may be a more important factor than addressee expertise.

Exp. 2 – 'Speaker Knowledge'

- Overall, the data fail to support our hypothesis. However, they suggest, that there is more going on:
- Different question words behaved in markedly different ways with respect to the experimental conditions, suggesting that fine-grained structural differences may play a role. It is not immediately clear why this should be the case.
 - The items with 'où' (where) patterned in the way that we expected, with speakers using the in-situ form more often when they had access to some information than when they didn't.
 - 'Combien,' which is structurally more complex patterned in the opposite way. The additional structure may have played a role in this.
- We may have targeted the wrong kind of information:
 - We focused on information relevant to answering the question
 - The relevant information may be that which sets up or grounds the question.

Future Directions

We plan to follow this study with another experiment, exploring the role of contextual information:

- Isolate and test the effect of information about the context, not the answers of the question.
- Consider more carefully the role that different question words might play.
- Carefully design scenarios to make the task easier for participants.

The behavior of individual question words is more complicated than this picture suggests:

- Previous accounts of in-situ in French have not considered this variation.
- Future corpus work may target key differences in the way these question words are used.

This work has implications for our understanding of how syntactic structure interacts with pragmatic force more generally:

- The link between form and usage has never been perfectly understood.
- There may be even more variation in how syntactic forms align with their force.



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