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Variability in L1 and L2 French WH-Interrogatives: The roles of communicative function, WH-word, and metalinguistic awareness

Research on variability in French interrogatives and the factors affecting word order in questions has many foci, but largely centers around socio-stylistic factors. In contrast, this dissertation explores two under-investigated constraints on French questions: communicative function and WH-element. The central questions address the effects of communicative function and WH-word on the question variant selected by L1 and L2 French speakers, and what role metalinguistic awareness plays in the question structure produced.

A corpus of 1200 questions each for L1 (n=30) and advanced L2 (n=30) groups was collected via a Discourse Completion Task crossing five communicative functions (echo, presupposition, topic-introduction, rhetorical, and self-addressed) and four WH-words (où, pourquoi, combien, and qui). Post DCT, the participants were interviewed regarding metalinguistic knowledge affecting their question forms. Responses in the form of questions were analyzed for the effects of function, WH-word, and metalinguistic awareness.

Results suggest that communicative function and WH-element both play a role in determining which question variants are more likely to be produced in French questions. Clear patterns were seen in questions with certain functions and WH-words either favoring or disfavoring particular question types. Specific communicative functions and WH-elements were identified as stronger or weaker in the role they play in this variation. The effects of these constraints were evident in both L1 and L2 speakers with more robust effects in the L1 group. Metalinguistic awareness responses focused upon question variants in stylistic terms, and did not play a role in the selection of question structure in relation to the two central constraints of the study.

Findings from this study complement previous research on the variety of constraints affecting form in L1 French interrogatives, contributing new aspects to this body of work with implications for L1 and L2 pragmatics. The fact that L2 French speakers also respect these previously unexplored constraints, which are not consciously registered by L1 or L2 speakers, implies that the stronger tendencies these constraints exercise on question form also have pedagogical implications for the L2 French classroom, providing guidelines that could aid L2 French speakers in more closely approximating L1 use of questions.