The Pragmatics of Wh-in-situ Questions in Brazilian Portuguese: Data from Child and Adult Language

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1. Introduction

Natural languages are divided into three main groups\(^1\) regarding the possibility of Wh-movement: there are languages, like Chinese, in which the Wh-phrase stays *in situ* (1); languages in which the Wh-phrase obligatory moves, like English (2); and languages in which the Wh-phrase can be fronted or stay *in situ*, like Brazilian Portuguese (3), French and Spanish. In these languages, the two question strategies are apparently interchangeable:

(1) Hufei mai-le shenme? (Cheng, 2003:1)
   Hufei buy-ASP what
   ‘What did Hufei buy?’

(2) **What** did John buy?

(3) a. **O que** Pedro comprou?
    What Pedro bought
   ‘What did Peter buy?’

   b. Pedro comprou **o quê**?
    Pedro bought what
   ‘What did Peter buy?’

English and Chinese-speaking children typically do not show difficulties in learning whether their target language requires the Wh-phrase to move or to

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\(^1\) We will not be considering languages with multiple wh-fronting like Bulgarian.

remain *in situ* (Stromswold (1995), Chang (1992)). However, in languages with optional movement, the issue can become challenging.

The examples in (3) show that in adult Brazilian Portuguese (BrP) both moved-Wh and *Wh-in situ* are possible, and that there is no subject-auxiliary inversion or *do*-support in either strategy. The *Wh-in situ* option seems more economical, given that the Wh-phrase does not move to Spec,CP overtly.4

In this paper, we focus on the acquisition of *Wh-in situ* by children acquiring BrP as their mother tongue. The curious fact is that, although *Wh-in situ* is apparently more economical than the moved-Wh counterpart, children acquiring BrP do not produce *Wh-in situ* in spontaneous settings. This is even more surprising given that *Wh-in situ* is productive in adult spontaneous speech.

In a diachronic study on wh-questions in BrP, Lopes-Rossi (1996) found in her corpus of Brazilian TV data that adults produced 32.4% of *Wh-in situ* and 67.6% of moved-Wh. In contrast, studies have shown that Brazilian children never (or almost never) produce *Wh-in situ* in spontaneous production: Grolla

2 In these languages, the Wh-phrase can stay *in situ* under two circumstances: in information-seeking questions, like (3b) above, and in echo-questions, like (i) below, in which B is not sure what he heard, or he is showing surprise or shock by what has been said. In this paper, we are confined to information-seeking questions only.

(i) A: Eu comprei um avião. B: Você comprou O QUÊ?
   I bought an airplane. you bought what
   ‘I bought an airplane.’ ‘You bought WHAT?’

3 In Brazilian Portuguese, there are variations to the moved-Wh strategy: (i) with a null complementizer; (ii) with Comp doubly filled with an overt complementizer “que” (that); (iii) with “é que” (is that), a cleft structure; and (iv) with a complementizer added to the cleft-structure. In this paper, we are analyzing all of these as part of the same category “Moved-Wh”.

(i) **Quando** Pedro saiu?
   When Pedro left
   ‘When did Pedro leave?’

(ii) **Quando que** Pedro saiu?
    When that Pedro left
    ‘When did Pedro leave?’

(iii) **Quando é que** Pedro saiu?
    When is that Pedro left
    ‘When was it that Pedro left?’

(iv) **Quando que é que** Pedro saiu?
    When that is that Pedro left
    ‘When was it that Pedro left?’

4 Evidence that *Wh-in situ* involves no movement to the left periphery comes from island contexts, where moved-Wh is impossible, but *Wh-in situ* is possible:

(i) a. *Que livro,* você conversou com o autor [ que escreveu t_i ]?
   *What book* you talked *with the author* that wrote
   ‘Which is the book such that you talked to the author who wrote it?’

   b. Você conversou com o autor *que escreveu* _**que livro**_?
      you talked *with the author* that wrote _*what book*
      ‘Which is the book such that you talked to the author who wrote it?’
(2000) found 1.7% of Wh-*in situ* in a corpus of 500 Wh-questions and Sikansi (1999) did not find Wh-*in situ* questions in her corpus of 839 Wh-questions. Therefore, the apparently more economical option is the least frequent in child spontaneous data, even though it is productive in adult speech.

In addition, Wh-*in situ* is the last question strategy to emerge on spontaneous child data: Grolla (2009) conducted a longitudinal study with two children, Luiza and Natália. Questions with moved-Wh emerged at 2 years of age for Luiza and at 2;2 for Natália. Wh-*in situ* emerged at 3;9 years for Luiza and at 3;11 for Natália. Therefore, Wh-*in situ* emerges very late, after all the other moved-Wh options have emerged.

It is not the case that all children acquiring optional Wh-movement languages display this pattern. In French, another language where Wh-*in situ* and moved-Wh are possible, children prefer the Wh-*in situ* alternative, as Hamann’s (2006) data shows: children start producing Wh-*in situ* at an early age (around 1;8 years of age) and this is the preferred strategy, with frequencies varying between 62.5% - 94.4% of Wh-*in situ* for all children combined. However, in adult French, this construction is the least produced one: in Zuckerman’s (2001) study, adults produced only 5% of Wh-*in situ*. French children’s preference for Wh-*in situ* becomes even more curious when we consider that there are several restrictions imposed on Wh-*in situ* in French, as opposed to BrP, where the construction is more freely allowed, as discussed in the next session.

Given minimalist assumptions (Chomsky (1995)), movement is never optional. Either elements must move overtly to check their strong features or they have weak features that have to be checked covertly. In this sense, Wh-movement in BrP or French cannot be completely optional. Studies in different languages have tried to explain the difference between the two question types in terms of pragmatics. In French, for example, Chang (1997) considers Wh-*in situ* to be felicitous only in contexts with enriched presupposition, which would not be the case for moved-Wh. In BrP, a similar proposal has also been put forth, as we will see in section 3. If these proposals are on the right track, it could be proposed that young children, facing difficulties in analyzing the pragmatic aspects of Wh-*in situ* questions, prefer the moved-Wh strategy, which is a neutral question, occurring both in neutral contexts and in contexts with strong presupposition.

To test this hypothesis, we devised an experiment manipulating the presuppositional context in order to check children’s production of Wh-*in situ* in BrP. The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 describes Wh-*in situ* in Romance languages with optional Wh-movement, considering the restrictions to its occurrence. Section 3 discusses the Wh-*in situ* in BrP. Section 4 presents the experimental study conducted in BrP with adults and children. Section 5 is the conclusion.

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5 Natália’s data comes from the University of Campinas project on Language Acquisition. It contains 53 audiotape-recording sessions. The child was recorded for 30 min once a week, every week, from 2;0 to 4;0 years of age. Luiza’s data comes from the University of Sao Paulo project on Language Acquisition. It contains 65 videotape-recording sessions. She was recorded for 30 min once a week, every week, from 1;10 to 5;6 years of age.
2. Restrictions on Wh-*in situ* in languages with optional Wh-movement

In languages that have optional Wh-movement, this so-called optionality is not total. For example, French and Spanish, like BrP, display some restrictions on Wh-*in situ*. In French, for example, the Wh-phrase is not allowed *in situ* in embedded clauses (4), in indirect questions (5), and with negation, quantifiers and modals (6):

(4)  *Jean crois que Marie a vu qui*  
Jean believes that Marie has seen who  
‘Who does Jean believe Marie saw?’

(5)  *Pierre a demandé tu as vu qui*  
Pierre has asked you has seen who  
‘Pierre asked who you saw’

(6)  a.  *Tous les étudiants ont rencontré qui?*  
All the students have met who  
‘Who did all the students meet?’

b.  *Il n’a pas rencontré qui?*  
He NE has not met who  
‘Who didn’t he meet?’

c.  *Il peut rencontrer qui?*  
He can meet-INF who  
‘Who can he meet?’

As for Spanish, differently from French, Wh-*in situ* is allowed in embedded clauses, but it is not allowed in indirect questions (7). Also, according to Uribe-Etxebarria (2002), Spanish displays the Sentence Final Requirement, which prevents the Wh-word from remaining *in situ* if it is not clause final. This is shown in (8b), where “cuándo” is not the last word in the sentence, which makes the sentence degraded:

(7)  *Juan ha preguntado María ha visto a quién*  
Juan has asked María has seen to who  
‘Juan asked who María saw’

(8)  a.  *¿[Y] Sergio llegó cuándo?*  
[and] Sergio arrived when  
‘And when did Sergio arrive?’

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6 There is some disagreement on these issues. Some studies, like Boeckx, Stateva & Stepanov (2001), Adli (2006) and Oiry (2011), have challenged these restrictions for French, arguing that Wh-*in situ* can occur in contexts with modals, quantifiers, negations and in embedded clauses. In this paper, we will not contribute to this debate, and will consider the ‘classic’ data reported in the literature.
b. * ¿[Y] Sergio llegó cuándo en bicicleta?
    [and] Sergio arrived when by bike
    ‘And when did Sergio arrive by bike?’

These restrictions show that Wh-in situ and moved-Wh do not occur in the exact same syntactic contexts, with the in situ strategy being more restricted than the moved one in these two languages.

Another central point often brought to light with respect to Wh-in situ has to do with the pragmatic aspects of these questions. It is observed that these two question strategies differ concerning the pragmatic contexts in which they are allowed. In French, Chang (1997) proposes that Wh-in situ is associated with a strong presuppositional context, similar to cleft sentences, like (9A), which requests an interpretation of obligatory focus. That is why both clefts and Wh-in situ do not naturally accept a negative answer:

(9) A: C’est quoi que Marie a acheté?  (Chang, 1997:42)
    EXPL what that Marie has bought
    ‘It was what that Marie bought?’
A’: Marie a acheté quoi?
    Marie has bought what
    ‘What did Marie buy?’
B: ?? Rien
    ‘Nothing’

In the example above, the answer with “nothing” unexpectedly denies the presupposition already established by the question itself that “Marie bought something”. It is not infelicitous, because A can accommodate the new presupposition that “Marie didn’t buy anything”, but it is indeed peculiar. To Chang and DeRomma (2011), what allows A to ask using Wh-in situ is the supposedly enriched presupposition salient in the context. So, it is unexpected when B suddenly denies it. According to Chang’s proposal, if A’ was a moved-Wh instead of a Wh-in situ question, there would be no problem with the negative answer, given that the moved-Wh is a neutral strategy that does not require a strongly enriched context.

On a similar vein, Biezma (2016) examines the role of context on the use of Wh-in situ in Castilian Spanish. Her proposal is that Wh-in situ requires a specific discourse condition to be felicitous. She argues that Wh-in situ needs “an immediately preceding discourse utterance with assertoric force” (p. 2) and, based on this utterance, it requests for more information or for a complete answer to resolve the Question Under Discussion.

Let us consider the example below (Biezma, 2016:7) where A introduces the Question Under Discussion “who bought what”, which is partially answered in “Ana bought herself an amazing skirt”. Then, the Wh-in situ question is uttered to obtain a complete answer to the ongoing questioning: we know that Ana bought a skirt, but what about Susana? To completely resolve the Question Under Discussion, we still lack the part about Susana and that is where the question in B
enters. Hence, the Wh- in situ in B is a follow-up question “that is part of a strategy to answer the closest yet unanswered Question Under Discussion” (p. 12).

(10) A: Ana y Susana fueron ayer de compras. Ana se compró una falda preciosa. 
and Susana went yesterday shopping. Ana herself bought an amazing skirt
‘Ana and Susana went shopping yesterday. Ana bought herself an amazing skirt’

B: Y Susana se compró qué?
‘And what did Susana buy?’

For Biezma, the Wh- in situ triggers a discourse-structure presupposition. So, in (10), the choice for the Wh- in situ strategy conveys the fact that there is an ongoing questioning and, consequently, the question has a previous statement to which it relates. This is what distinguishes Wh- in situ from moved-Wh, since the in situ version can only appear following a more enriched context, while the movement strategy occurs both in enriched and in more neutral contexts.

3. Wh- in situ in Brazilian Portuguese

In BrP, Wh- in situ is not restricted as in French or Spanish. It can co-occur with modals (11a), negation (11b), quantifiers (11c), and in embedded clauses (12a). It is not under any word order restriction such as the Spanish Sentence Final Requirement (12c):

(11) a. Ela pode pagar quanto?
she can pay how much
‘How much can she pay?’

b. Ela não viu quem?
she NEG see who
‘Who didn’t she see?’

c. Todos os estudantes vão para onde?
all the students go to where
‘Where do all the students go?’

(12) a. Maria pensa que Pedro viu quem?
Maria thinks that Pedro saw who

b. Quem Maria pensa que Pedro viu?
who Maria thinks that Pedro saw
‘Who does Maria think Pedro saw?’

c. Maria pensa que Pedro viu quem na festa?
Maria thinks that Pedro saw who at the party
‘Who does Maria think Pedro saw at the party?’
The only restrictions usually observed are the following. The Wh-phrase cannot remain *in situ* (i) when there is an overt complementizer in C (13b), and (ii) in embedded interrogative clauses, like (14b).

(13)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>a. Como <strong>que</strong> você consertou o carro?</th>
<th>(Hornstein et al., 2005:42-43)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>how  that you fixed the car</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. * Que você consertou o carro <strong>como</strong>?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>that you fixed the car how</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘How did you fix the car?’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(14)  

| a. Eu perguntei **como** (que) você consertou o carro. |
|------|---------------------------------------------------|
| I asked how that you fixed the car              |
| b. * Eu perguntei (que) você consertou o carro **como**. |
| I asked that you fixed the car how              |
| ‘I asked how you fixed the car.’                 |

To account for the apparent optionality in BrP, Hornstein, Nunes & Grohmann (2005) propose that “there are two matrix null interrogatives C₀, one with a strong *wh*-feature and the other with a weak *wh*-feature” (p. 44). Under this view, there is no real optionality, for each strategy is associated with a different C₀: C₀ with a strong *wh*-feature forces the Wh-phrase to move overtly, while C₀ with a weak *wh*-feature forces the Wh-phrase to remain *in situ*.

This proposal accounts for the existence of both options, but it does not explain what is the main difference between the two question-strategies. For example, what leads someone to choose one strategy over the other?

BrP is similar to French and Spanish in that there seems to be a pragmatic difference between Wh-*in situ* and moved-Wh. Analyzing data from English and BrP, Pires & Taylor (2007) propose that the *in situ* option is felicitous only when the context has a shared Common Ground. In other words, Wh-*in situ* is possible when both speaker and hearer have previously shared an information in the discourse, the speaker knows this information and knows that the hearer knows it too, and vice-versa. In (15), the Wh-phrase “what kind of dessert” can remain *in situ* because it has been previously shared that A made desserts and B is requesting for more information regarding that statement. Furthermore, the authors propose that the Wh-phrase remains *in situ* because the possible answers to the question are all part of the Common Ground. So, in (15) there is a set of possible desserts that A could have made, and that set is shared between speaker and hearer.

(15)  

| A: I made desserts.                         |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| B: You made what kind of desserts?         |

DeRomma (2011) agrees with Pires & Taylor in that Wh-*in situ* is only felicitous when the presupposition of the question is assumed to be part of the conversational background. However, for the author, examples like (16) weakens the claim that it is necessary to share the set of possible answers. Based on this
dialogue alone, it is not possible to assume that A and B share the possible answers to why A does not want to go:

(16) A: Ah mãe, não vou lá não! (DeRomma, 2011:118)  
   ‘No, mom, I’m not going there!’
B: Mas não vai por quê?  
   ‘But why not?’

DeRomma proposes that what needs to be in the Common Ground are not the possible answers, but rather the non-Wh portion of the question itself. So, in (16), the Wh-*in situ* is felicitous because the non-Wh portion of the question “not go” was previously mentioned by A, and as such it is part of the Common Ground. Under this proposal, the Wh-*in situ* needs an antecedent to refer to, either established in the discourse or in the extra linguistic context. This would be the reason why a negative answer is considered unacceptable, as it would entail that the speaker is denying what is in the Common Ground. It would also be the reason why Wh-*in situ* questions are infelicitous in out-of-the-blue contexts, with no presupposition to relate to.

If these proposals are on the right track and the *in situ* option needs a more prominent Common Ground to be felicitous in BrP, we could hypothesize that this is the reason why they are rare in children’s productions. It is possible that children did not produce Wh-*in situ* in spontaneous settings due to a lack of appropriate contexts in the recording sessions. It is also possible that children may not be sensitive to this pragmatic distinction between the two question strategies in the first stages of acquisition. This would lead them to opt for the most neutral option, the moved-Wh, which can appear both in contexts with prominent and non-prominent Common Ground.

We developed a production experiment manipulating the prominence of Common Ground in order to observe children’s behavior. This allowed us to observe both the influence of Common Ground on the production of Wh-*in situ* in the adult language and also to check how sensitive children would be to this variable. The next section is devoted to the experimental study.

4. Experiment on Wh-*in situ* in Brazilian Portuguese

*Participants.* We interviewed 52 children between the ages of 4;6 and 5;6 (mean = 5;1) and 60 adults as a control group. All the participants were native speakers of BrP.

*Method.* The experiment was an elicited production task, described in detail below.

*Hypothesis.* Based on the studies previously discussed, our hypothesis is that the Wh-*in situ* strategy needs a context with enriched presupposition to be felicitous, otherwise, it is preferable to opt for the moved-Wh strategy.
Prediction. We expect that there will be higher rates of Wh-*in situ* in the condition with an enriched presupposition than in the condition without it.

Design. The variable being manipulated was the prominence of Common Ground (CG) in the context, with two conditions: prominent CG and non-prominent CG. The task was conducted in a Between Subjects design, so children who were tested in one condition did not participate on the other, to avoid any possible bias.

Prominent CG condition: the experiment was presented to the children as a game, where they needed to build a card just like the one the puppet had. The trick was that they could not see the puppet’s card, so that they needed to ask him questions in order to discover what was on his card. The puppet had a set of cards with complete scenarios (Figure 1) and children received an incomplete scenario (Figure 2) and stickers to glue on it (Figure 3). Then, the puppet would provide a hint (a partial description of his card), such as: “My cat is playing something”. This worked as a salient antecedent that became part of the CG between puppet and interviewee. After that, the child asked a question like “What is your cat playing?” or “Your cat is playing what?” to get further information. At last, the puppet answered the question and handed over the appropriate sticker for the child to glue on the card. The game continued until all the scenarios were built.

![Figure 1](image1.png) ![Figure 2](image2.png) ![Figure 3](image3.png)

Non-prominent CG condition: in this condition, a different game was presented to children. They had to build a scene using stickers and the puppet (who could not see what was built) needed to build an identical scene. The child’s task was to ask questions to the puppet so that he could guess what was going on in the card. The child received a set of cards with scenarios, like a train or a pool (Figure 4); a set of stickers with animals (Figure 5) and a set of objects (Figure 6). After she built her card with one of each (for example, a cat inside a train wearing a crown), the puppet, who did not have access to the child’s card, had to guess the scenario and the objects. For that, the interviewer helped the child by pointing to one of the objects at her card. For example, he would point to the crown and say: “Let’s ask about that”. The child, then, asked questions like “What is my cat wearing?” or “My cat is wearing what?”. The puppet tried to guess and children would say if he was right or wrong. The game continued until all the cards were played.
In the prominent CG condition, CG was clearly established. The puppet’s partial description of his card and the visual display of stickers in front of the child worked to provide the CG. In the non-prominent CG condition, the child had the cards and the stickers in front of her, however the puppet did not have access to them, as they were hidden by a cardboard wall. Also, no partial description of the cards was provided. With no previous information linguistically or visually shared by the puppet and the child, the CG was much less prominent.

Before starting each session for both conditions, the experimenter explained to the child how the game worked, producing questions as examples. Two questions were provided, one with moved-Wh and another with Wh-in situ.

Results. The experiment was very successful in eliciting Wh-questions from children and adults. In total, children produced 839 Wh-questions and adults produced 1,477 Wh-questions. The method was also successful in eliciting Wh-in situ: 20.6% of children’s questions and 43.9% of the adult’s questions were Wh-in situ questions. Some of the children’s constructions are shown below:

\[(17) \text{Wh-in situ questions:}\]
\[\text{a. T\'a voando em cima \underline{do qu\'e}?} \quad (4;6)\]
\[\text{is flying on top of what} \]
\[\text{\`On top of what is he flying?}\]
\[\text{b. Ela t\'a segurando \underline{o qu\'e}?} \quad (4;9)\]
\[\text{she is holding what} \]
\[\text{\`What is she holding?}\]

\[(18) \text{Moved-Wh questions:}\]
\[\text{a. O que ela t\'a segurando?} \quad (4;8)\]
\[\text{what she is holding} \]
\[\text{\`What is she holding?}\]
\[\text{b. Aonde o porquinho est\'a?} \quad (5;6)\]
\[\text{where the piglet is} \]
\[\text{\`Where is the piglet?}\]

These are the total numbers of Wh-questions produced (including both moved-Wh and Wh-in situ). Excluded from these figures are: questions with ellipsis of the verb (“What?”), Yes/No questions (“Is it a cake?”), and the formulaic question “What is it?”, which some children used consistently throughout their sessions.
Chart 1 shows the results for the adults, with the production of both Wh-*in situ* and moved-Wh for both conditions:

![Chart 1: Rates of Wh-questions according to context type, Adult data (N=60)](chart1_adults.png)

In total, adults produced 648 questions with Wh-*in situ*. In the prominent CG condition, adults did not favor any Wh-question strategy, producing both moved-Wh and Wh-*in situ* similarly (50.5% vs 49.5%). However, in the non-prominent CG condition, adults favored the Moved-Wh strategy (66.5% vs. 33.5%) and this was statistically significant (chi-square test: p < .01).

Comparing both conditions, we see that the Wh-*in situ* was favored in the prominent CG condition and disfavored in the non-prominent CG condition (49.5% vs. 33.5%) (chi-square test: p < .01). There was no prediction for the Moved-Wh option, given that this is a neutral question strategy that can occur in both contexts.

Children’s results are provided in Chart 2, which reports the production of Wh-questions for the two conditions:

![Chart 2: Rates of Wh-questions according to context type, Child data (N=52)](chart2_children.png)
Children overall preferred moved-Wh in the two conditions. This is not surprising, given that children show this tendency in spontaneous productions. What is surprising is that children produced a fair amount of Wh-in situ (with a total of 173 Wh-in situ questions produced) and that these productions were not randomly distributed between the two conditions: Wh-in situ was statistically more productive in the prominent CG condition than in the non-prominent CG condition (26% vs. 15.7%) (chi-square test: p <.01).

Discussion. Comparing the two age groups, we see that adults produced more Wh-in situ than children, who, in general, preferred the moved-Wh strategy. Nonetheless, both groups were sensitive to the variable manipulated here, producing Wh-in situ more often in the contexts with a prominent CG.

These results are important for two main reasons: they indicate that BrP Wh-in situ questions are restricted by pragmatic principles related to CG and they also indicate that children are sensitive to this restriction, although they have not completely acquired the relevant aspects of it yet.

Corroborating this latter claim, we report some data showing that children avoid the Wh-in situ construction in contexts where adults massively produced it. In contexts with complex PP’s ((19) below), adult BrP has three options: leaving the whole PP in situ (19a), moving the whole PP to Spec,CP (19b) or moving only the wh-portion of the PP (19c):

(19)  a. O gatinho está **em cima do quê**?  (Wh-in situ)
    The kitten is on top of what
    b. **Em cima do que** o gatinho está?  (Moved-Wh)
    On top of what the kitten is
    c. **O que** o gatinho está **em cima**?  (‘Partial’ movement)
    What the kitten is on top
    ‘On top of what is the kitten?’

In trials like this, children tended to move only the Wh-phrase, leaving the rest of the PP in situ (19c), producing 73.1% of this strategy and 26.9% of Wh-in situ (19a). Conversely, adults used only 0.9% of this strategy (19c) and 99.1% of Wh-in situ (19a). Therefore, adults prefer the more economical strategy of leaving the heavy PP in situ instead of moving it. Children prefer to move part of the PP. The high frequency of this construction is one more indication that even at 5 years of age children are not adult-like with respect to Wh-in situ yet.

5. Final remarks

This study investigated children’s production of Wh-questions in BrP, a language where both moved-Wh and Wh-in situ are possible. Spontaneous production data indicate that Wh-in situ is rare in child’s speech although it is productive in the adult language. Other Romance languages where Wh-movement is optional were also discussed and it was observed that in these languages Wh-in situ is associated with a strong presuppositional context. In order to check if Wh-in situ is also related to pragmatic restrictions in BrP, we conducted a study with
children and adults, manipulating the prominence of Common Ground in the context. We predicted that Wh-in situ would be more productive in contexts with enriched presupposition and less productive in contexts with poorer presupposition. Our main finding is that both adults and children produced more Wh-in situ in contexts with more prominent CG, confirming our prediction.

The lack of Wh-in situ in children’s spontaneous production data might be explained in light of these results. It could be the case that the recording sessions did not bring the appropriate contexts for their production or it could be the case that these pragmatic restrictions are still being figured out by children, who then opt for the more neutral strategy, which is moved-Wh.

The different rates of production of Wh-in situ for adults and children indicate that even at 5;0 years of age children have not fully acquired this construction yet. Further experimental investigation is necessary, in order to observe at what age children start producing these questions and at what age they reach adult performance. This means that both younger and older children need to be tested for a complete picture to emerge.

References


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8 Vieira (2018) carried out this experiment with children between 2;6 and 3;6 years of age. However, the author faced the Ask/Tell problem, described in Crain & Thornton (1998): in production tasks eliciting questions, 3-year-olds systematically try to provide an answer instead of asking a question. Improvements on the methodology are being made in order to circumvent this problem.


