

## Parametric change and the development of SVO interrogatives in the history of French

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### INTRODUCTION

#### (1) Old French subject-verb inversion

- A V2 language: Verb raising to Comp in both interrogatives and declaratives (e.g. Adams, 1987; Roberts, 1993; Vance, 1997)
- Both full NP subjects (simple inversion) and pronominal subjects (subject-clitic inversion) can be inverted

#### (2) Inversion in OF declaratives

- a. Einsi aama la demoisele Lancelot (Adams, 1987: 50)  
Thus loved the maiden Lancelot  
*Thus the maiden loved Lancelot.*
- b. Or voi ge bien.... (Roberts, 1993: 97)  
Now see I well  
*Now I see clearly....*

#### (3) Inversion in OF interrogatives

- a. Viendra le roi? (Damourette & Pichon, 1934: 329)  
will-come the king  
*Will the king come?*

Comment fu ceste lettre faite? (Roberts, 1993: 81)  
how was this letter made  
*How was this letter written?*

- b. Faites le vus de gret? (Foulet, 1921: 244)  
do it you of will  
*Do you do it willingly?*

Que vex tu faire? (Roberts, 1993: 92)  
what want you to-do  
*What do you want to do?*

#### (4) Loss of V2 in French

- Lost by the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century
- Attributed more or less directly to the loss of verb raising to Comp (e.g. Adams, 1987; Roberts, 1993; Vance, 1997)
- Subject-clitic inversion and complex inversion remain grammatical for both Yes/No and wh-questions

(5) Subject-clitic inversion (SCI)

a. Va-t-il au cinéma?  
goes-he to-the movies  
*Is he going to the movies?*

b. Où va-t-il?  
Where goes-he?  
*Where is he going?*

(6) Complex inversion (CI)

a. Jean va-t-il au cinéma?  
John goes-he to-the movies  
*Is John going to the movies?*

b. Où Jean va-t-il?  
Where John goes-he  
*Where is John going?*

(7) Modern French interrogatives

- Inversion in interrogatives is rare (e.g. DiVito, 1997)
- Instead, other question types that do not require verb raising to Comp are more frequent

(8) Intonation

a. Il va au cinéma?  
he goes to-the movies  
*Is he going to the movies?*

b. Jean va au cinéma?  
John goes to-the movies  
*Is John going to the movies?*

(9) *Est-ce que*

a. Est-ce qu'il va au cinéma?  
is-it that-he goes to-the movies  
*Is he going to the movies?*

Où est-ce qu'il va?  
where is-it that-he goes  
*Where is he going?*

b. Est-ce que Jean va au cinéma?  
 is-it that John goes to-the movies  
*Is John going to the movies?*

Où est-ce que Jean va?  
 Where is-it that John goes  
*Where is John going?*

(10) Question: Is the loss of inversion in Modern French interrogatives a new trend?

#### STUDY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF QUESTION TYPES

(11) Characteristics of the texts used

- Plays written in prose
- Number of pages kept constant across centuries

(12) Plays examined for the study

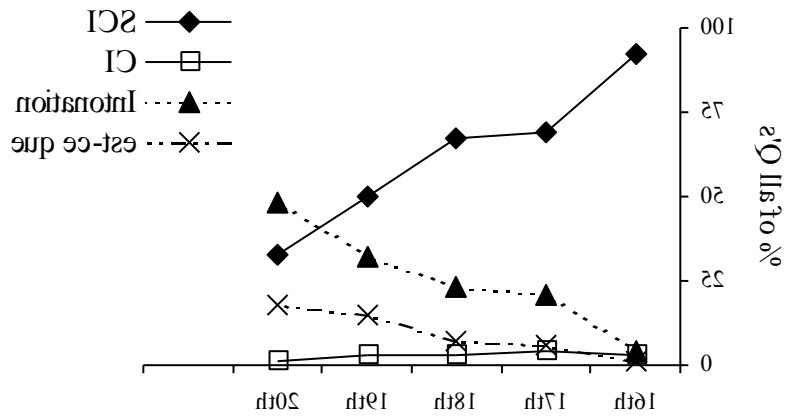
Century	Title	Author	# of Pages
16 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Les corrivaus</i>	Jean de la Taille	89
	<i>Les esprits</i>	Pierre de Larivey	140
17 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Attendez-moi sous l'orme</i>	Jean-François Regnard	28
	<i>La sérénade</i>	Jean-François Regnard	34
	<i>La devineresse</i>	Thomas Corneille & Donneau de Visé	137
18 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Le médecin malgré lui</i>	Molière	53
	<i>Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard</i>	Pierre Marivaux	23
	<i>Turcaret</i>	Alain-René Lesage	122
19 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Le philosophe sans le savoir</i>	Michel-Jean Sedaine	86
	<i>La dame aux camélias</i>	Alexandre Dumas (fils)	36
	<i>Le chandelier</i>	Alfred de Musset	66
20 <sup>th</sup>	<i>Le gendre de M. Poirier</i>	Emile Augier	30
	<i>Les corbeaux</i>	Henri Becque	103
	<i>Huis-clos</i>	Jean-Paul Sartre	55
	<i>La grotte</i>	Jean Anouilh	128
	<i>Jacques ou la soumission</i>	Eugène Ionesco	33
	<i>Le cavalier bizarre</i>	Michel de Ghelderode	15

(13) Method

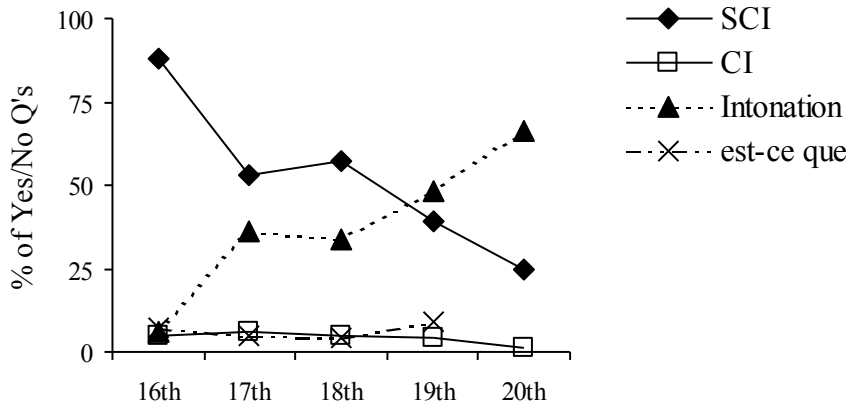
- Each question classified according to question-formation strategy
- Only sentences punctuated with a question mark
- Elliptical questions, set phrases, questions with *qui* 'who' and *quell(le)(s)* 'which one(s)' were not counted
- Questions involving stylistic inversion, a vestige of Romance free inversion, were also excluded

**RESULTS**

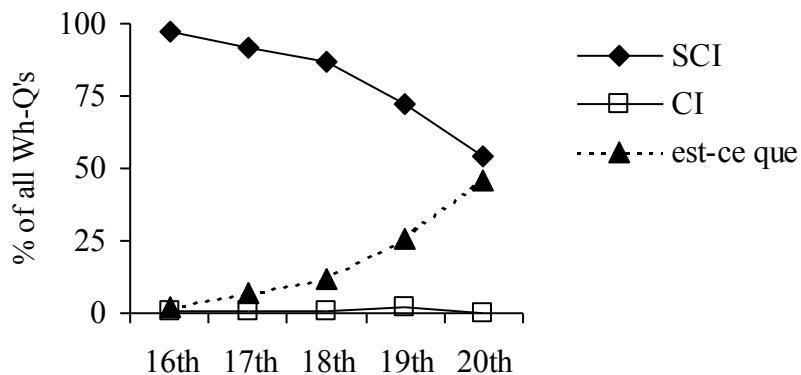
(14) Yes/No and wh-questions



(15) Yes/No questions



## (16) Wh-questions



## (17) Summary

- General decline in inversion from 16<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries
- Intonation is replacing inversion for Yes/No questions
- *Est-ce que* is replacing inversion for wh-questions
- Complex inversion never robust at any period

## DISCUSSION

### (18) The loss of inversion in interrogatives: New or old trend?

- Appears to be a trend that began in or before the 16<sup>th</sup> century and is continuing in the present
- This raises several questions:
  - Why was inversion lost in declaratives but not in interrogatives?
  - Why was inversion of a full NP subject lost in interrogatives but not other types of inversion?
  - Why is inversion being lost in questions in Modern French?
  - What explains the low frequency of complex inversion?

### *Loss of inversion in declaratives*

### (19) The V2 parameter

The inflected verb must raise to Comp:

- a. Overtly (Old and Middle French)
- b. Covertly (Modern French)

### (20) Factors contributing to the resetting of the parameter

- Constituent in first position in V2 clauses was generally the subject (e.g. Adams, 1987; Roberts, 1993)
- Increase in V3 or greater clauses in Middle French (e.g. Roberts, 1993)

### ***Inversion maintained in interrogatives***

#### (21) The Q parameter

The morpheme Q in Comp must be overt

- a. Yes (late Middle and Modern French)
- b. No (Old and early Middle French)

#### (22) Loss of simple inversion

- Q not realized in questions with simple inversion
- Result is the development of complex inversion (mid-15<sup>th</sup> century)
- Simple inversion dies out in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Roberts, 1998)

#### (23) Q and subject pronouns

- One realization of Q is a subject clitic (Roberts, 1998)
- Though Old and Middle French licensed *pro* postverbally (Vance, 1997), the majority of interrogatives had overt subject pronouns (Sprouse & Vance, 1999)

### ***Loss of verb raising to Comp in Modern French***

#### (24) Intonation in Yes/No questions

- In existence at least since the 12<sup>th</sup> century:  
Il m'aidera? (Posner, 1995: 228)  
He me-will help  
*Will he help me?*
- Initially emphatic or discourse-marked, similar to English echo questions (e.g. Ménard, 1994)
- Eventually come to be used as straightforward information questions

#### (25) Intonation allowed as part of competing grammars

- Individual speakers have more than one grammar (e.g. Kroch, 1994; Lightfoot, 1999)
- Language is diachronically unstable and in the midst of a transition

#### (26) *Est-ce que*

- A second way to realize Q
- Allows the inflected verb to remain in Infl

#### (27) Other factors contributing to the rise of *est-ce que*

- Loss of emphatic meaning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. Foulet, 1921; Price, 1971)
- Impossibility of inversion with *je* 'I' (e.g. Béchade, 1986; Foulet, 1921; Léard, 1996; L'huillier, 1999)
- Used for questions with 'what' *qu'est-ce qui* as subject (Blinkenberg, 1928; Deloffre, 1986)

- (28) English equivalents of emphatic and neutral *est-ce que*
- Emphatic: Why is it that you chose that book? (pre-17<sup>th</sup> century)
  - Neutral: Why did you choose that book? (17<sup>th</sup> century to present)

- (29) Questions with 'what' as the subject
- Modern French: Qu'est-ce qui se trouve sur la table?  
what-is-it that REFL find on the table  
*What is on the table?*
  - Old French equivalent: Que se trouve sur la table?  
what REFL find on the table  
*What is on the table?*

- (30) The low frequency of complex inversion
- Arose in the 15<sup>th</sup> century to replace simple inversion
  - At this same time, we see the beginnings of the trend toward SVO interrogatives
  - Competition with intonation and *est-ce que* may have prevented complex inversion from ever gaining a foothold

## CONCLUSION

- (31) Summary
- Trend away from inversion in interrogatives began several centuries ago
  - Loss of V2 in declaratives explained as change in parameter on verb raising to Comp
  - Inversion maintained in interrogatives due to requirement on realization of Q
  - Loss of inversion due to increased frequency of questions that do not require verb raising to Comp
  - Low frequency of complex inversion may have resulted from competition with intonation and *est-ce que*
- (32) Future research: Other question strategies not requiring verb raising to Comp
- Wh-in situ: Vous voulez aller où?  
you want to-go where  
*Where do you want to go?*
  - Fronting: Où (que) vous allez?  
where (that) you go  
*Where are you going?*
  - ti: Tu viens-ti?  
you come-WH  
*Are you coming?*

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