What does a corpus of text messages tell us about syntactic variation?
The case of yes/no questions in European French

Alexander Guryev (*University of Neuchâtel*)

The aim of the present contribution is to show that a traditional explanation of the variation in French yes/no questions, which is widely used in L2 French classroom learning, and according to which French interrogatives express different socio-stylistic values, needs to be challenged. The main result of this research, based on a study of 1'659 yes/no questions (YNQ) extracted from 4'624 text messages taken from the Swiss SMS Corpus (http://www.sms4science.uzh.ch), suggests that one should consider communicative and linguistic constraints to account for the variety of interrogative forms in French.

In European French, three main variants can be used to construct a yes/no question: (i) intonation question *Tu vas au cours?* (SV), (ii) 'est-ce que' question *Est-ce que tu vas au cours?* (ESV), and (iii) subject clitic inversion *Vas-tu au cours?* (V-Scl). A possible explanation would be to consider these variants as expressing different socio-stylistic values: respectively informal, neutral, or elevated. However, this explanation is ruled out by the study of interrogative forms in SMS communication. First, in spite of the usually quite informal character of texting, the distribution of YNQ in SMS is not comparable to that of Spoken French Corpora (Coveney 1996, Mosegaard Hansen 2001). In spoken European French, SV is the most frequent variant ($\approx$82.7%), followed by ESV ($\approx$17.3%), while V-Scl is almost absent from ordinary speech. The picture is opposite for SMS. The Swiss SMS corpus too attests the high frequency of informal SV use (87.1%), but V-Scl clearly overcomes ESV: 8.4% > 4.5%.

Second, although V-Scl use is usually considered to be elevated, in our corpus it is widely used in young users' informal texting. So that we cannot predict the use of variants exclusively on the basis of their respective socio-stylistic values, we should also consider communicative parameters. Compared to spoken language, SMS is a written asynchronous communication with no direct feedback and it is limited to 160 characters per message. From this point of view, the unusual distribution of variants in SMS, when compared to Spoken French, could be attributed to the communicative constraints of texting.

Third, the choice of variants appears to be sensitive to a syntactic configuration: the chi-square test shows that the distribution of variants is not the same with respect to multiple verbs constructions *vs* one verb constructions (x^2=51.08 df=2 p<0.0001). Furthermore, when analyzing one verb constructions, 84.6% of all V-Scl and ESV uses are realized in constructions with a non-clitic complement, whereas SV use is wider and not limited to any particular construction.

Taking into account the above-mentioned facts, one should therefore consider multiple factors to trigger variation in French YNQ, among which we at least have communicative and linguistic constraints. Notably, the study of SMS offers a new insight into syntactic variation: even within informal use, interrogative variants are still sensitive to the form of communication and its specific constraints. From this perspective, the study of new forms of communication may reveal itself fruitful for a better understanding of syntactic variation.

References

ADLI, A. (2013). Syntactic variation in French Wh-questions: A quantitative study from the angle of Bourdieu's sociocultural theory. *Linguistics* 51(3), 473-515.

ANIS, J. (2007). Neography – Unconventional Spelling in French SMS Text Messages. In: Brenda Danet and Susan C. Herring (Hrsg.). *The Multilingual Internet – Language, Culture and Communication Online*. New York: OxfordUniversity Pres, 87-115.

BERRENDONNER, A. (2003). Grammaire de l'écrit vs grammaire de l'oral: le jeu des composantes micro-et macro-syntaxiques. In : Rabatel, A.(éd.). *Interactions orales en contexte didactique. Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon*, 249-264.

COVENEY, A. (2011). L'interrogation directe. *Travaux de linguistique* 63, 112-145.

COVENEY, A. (1996). *Variability in interrogation and negation in spoken French*. Exeter: Elm Bank Publications.

ELSIG, M. (2009). *Grammatical variation across space and time: the French interrogative system*. John Benjamins.

FOULET, L. (1921). Comment ont évolué les formes de l'interrogation. *Romania* 47, 243-348.

GADET, F. (2007). *La Variation Sociale en Français*. Collection l'Essentiel Français. Paris : Ophrys.

HASPELMATH, M. (1999). Optimality and Diachronic Adaptation. *Zeitschrift für Sprachwissenschaft* 18, 180-205.

KLEIN, W. (2012). The information structure of French. In: Krifka, M., & Musan, R. (Eds.). *The expression of information structure* (Vol. 5). Walter de Gruyter.

KOCH P. & OESTERREICHER W. (2001). Gesprochene Sprache und geschriebene Sprache / Langage parlé et langage écrit. *Lexicon des Romanistischen Linguistik* 1/2. Tübingen, Max Niemayer Verlag, 584-627.

LAMBRECHT, K. (1987). On the status of SVO sentences in French discourse. *Coherence and grounding in discourse*, 217-261.

MOSEGAARD HANSEN, M.-B. (2001). Syntax in interaction. Form and function of yes/no interrogatives in spoken standard French. *Studies in language*, 463-520.

QUILLARD, V. (2000). *Interroger en français parlé: études syntaxique, pragmatique et sociolinguistique*. Thèse de doctorat. Université de Tours, France.

STARK, E. (2013). Clitic subjects in French text messages: Does technical change provoke and/or reveal linguistic change? In: Lene Schøsler et al. (Hrsg.), *Deixis and Pronouns in Romance*. John Benjamins.