

## Prosody reflects semantic factors : evidence from French wh-words

Lena Baunaz, *University of Geneva* ([lena.baunaz@gmail.com](mailto:lena.baunaz@gmail.com))  
Cédric Patin, *LLF (CNRS / Université Paris 7)* ([cedric.patin@gmail.com](mailto:cedric.patin@gmail.com))

**Claim :** Building on an experimental study, we argue that prosody may mark different discourse status in colloquial French. In particular, wh-words (e.g., *qui* ‘who’, *quoi* ‘what’) are exponents of an accent when they involve specificity-based presupposition. This accent is not found on partitivity-based presuppositional French wh-words. We illustrate this claim with wh in-situ constructions.

**Assumption :** We distinguish among wh-words in semantic terms, and argue that these distinctions are syntactically grounded. Wh-words come in three-way fashion. A lexical form like *qui*, is (potentially) ambiguous between (at least) three interpretations : *partitive*, *specific* (both are *presuppositional*, where *existential presupposition* (pp) arises when the set to which the restrictor belongs is non-empty) and *non-presuppositional* (where *non-presuppositional* means *not-partitive/ not-specific*). Partitivity involves a finite set of alternatives : a partitive item is a subset that is extracted from a previously mentioned group (or list) (Enç 1991). Specificity slightly differs from partitivity and relates to individual(s) that are identified via a property that is known to the speaker, a case of *speaker-old*. In other words, a specific item refers to familiar discourse referent(s), i.e., it is an individual identified by the speaker with an intrinsic property.

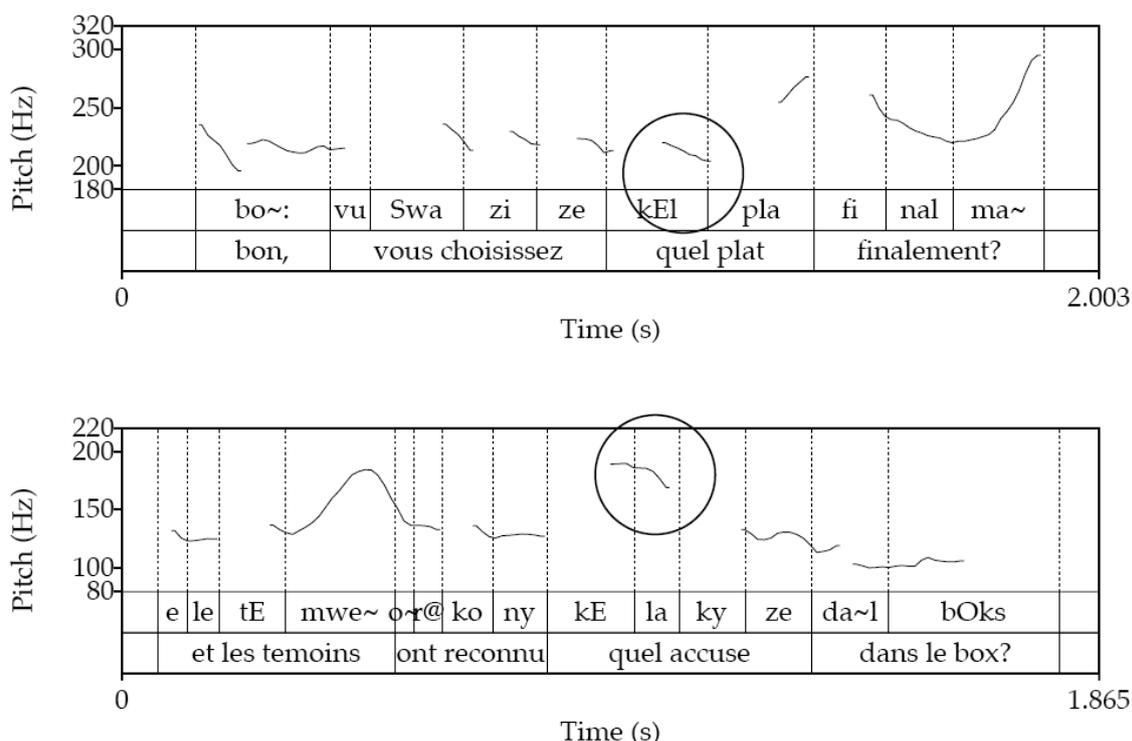
Wh-words can trigger an existential pp or not (1) ; when it triggers a pp, it can be either partitive (2) or specific (3).

- (1) out of the blue: A : **Tu vois quel ami vendredi?** ‘you see which friend Friday’  
B : personne. ‘Nobody’
- (2) Everybody is in line at the cafeteria. Several menus are proposed : steak, chicken, and salmon. The cooker asks Léa: **Bon, vous choisissez quel plat finalement?**  
‘Ok, you choose which menu finally’
- (3) After a murder, 3 guys have been arrested ; there are 4 witnesses. Defendants and witnesses have been confronted. One of defendants is recognized by all the witnesses. A journalist and one of the witnesses have a conversation about the trial that is about to end. The journalist asks: **et les témoins ont reconnu quel accusé dans le box?**  
‘and the witnesses have reconized which defendant in the box’

In addition to semantic differences, we claim that the contrast in presuppositional status is correlated to distinct prosody. In order to verify this claim, we conducted a pilot experiment.

**Experiment :** 6 subjects were required to read interrogative sentences in dialogues. 32 target sentences were created using 8 base sentences which differ in their polarity (positive, negative), in the place of the wh word (in-situ, ex-situ) and the form of the wh-word (*qui*, *quel* *N*). Each base sentence was associated to the three previously mentioned contexts (partitive, specific and non-presuppositional), to the extent the combination is available in the Grammar of French.

**Analysis :** Analysis was carried out using PRAAT (Boersma & Weenink 2007). In our results, speakers clearly discriminate between on the one hand specific and on the other hand partitive and non-presuppositional wh-words, regardless of their position (in-situ vs. ex-situ). In the former case, but not in the latter, an accent is associated to the wh-word (cf. figure 1). This accent is realized as a high tone. For some speakers, but not all, the high tone is associated with other factors such as increased intensity and lengthening of closure duration.



**Figure 1 - comparison of a partitive WISP sentence (top - cf. (2)) with a specific WISP sentence (bottom - cf. (3))**

No prosodic distinction between partitive and non-presuppositional items has been identified. Crucially, there is no high tone on non-specific wh-words (vs. the results obtained for English by Hedberg & Sosa (2002) and Dutch by Haan (2001)).

**Discussion :** We argue that *specific* and *partitive* involve different prosody when associated to wh-words: we show that wh-words are exponents of an accent when they involve specificity-based presupposition. This accent is not found on partitivity-based presuppositional French wh-words. The mechanism linking the referent of the *specific* wh in-situ with the existing discourse referent can get grammaticalized in natural languages (see also Geist & Onea (2009) for Russian indefinite pronouns and Romanian object marking): we argue that specificity is overtly marked in the prosody of wh-words in French, while syntactically grounded. The syntactic acceptability of wh-words is contingent on different semantic contexts that can be associated to distinct prosodic correlates in colloquial French. We conclude that wh prosody is crucially sensitive to specificity. It is an argument to distinguish partitivity vs. specificity within existential pps triggered by wh words.

**References :**

- Boersma, P. and Weenink, D. (2007) Praat: doing phonetics by computer (Version 4.5).  
www.praat.org
- Enç, M. 1991. 'The semantics of specificity'. *Linguistic Inquiry* 22: 1-25
- Geist, L. & E. Onea. 2009. Indefinite Scope and Referential Anchoring, *JSM 2009*, Paris, 04/09/09
- Haan, J., 2001. *Speaking of questions. An exploration of Dutch question intonation*. LOT dissertation series 52, LOT, Utrecht.
- Hedberg, N., Sosa, J.M., 2002. The Prosody of Questions in Natural Discourse. *Proceedings of Speech Prosody 2002*, 375-37