“De quoi tu parles?”: A diachronic study of interrogative variation in French films
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The French interrogative system, which allows for variation among several distinct syntactic structures, constitutes a domain in which normative prescription and actual usage differ greatly (Elsig, 2009). (1) illustrates a few ways of saying “Are you talking” while (2) illustrates “What are you talking about”; their sociolinguistic evaluations range from formal (1a, 2a) to very informal (1c, 2e).

1) a. Inversion: Parles-tu?
   b. Est-ce que: Est-ce que tu parles?
   c. Rising intonation: Tu parles?

2) a. Inversion: De quoi parles-tu?
   b. Est-ce que: De quoi est-ce que tu parles?
   c. Wh- in situ: Tu parles de quoi?
   d. Fronting: De quoi tu parles?
   e. Clefting: C’est de quoi que tu parles?

Although many sociolinguistic studies have examined this variation (e.g., Ashby, 1977; Behnstedt, 1973; Coveney, 1989, 2002; Fox, 1989; Myers, 2007; Quillard, 2000), most can be characterized as synchronic. This study traces and contrasts the increased usage and decreased stigmatization of the nonstandard interrogative variants—wh- in situ (2c) and fronting (2d)—with the decline of prescriptive forms—inversion (2a)—in French films spanning the 1930s to present day.

While the performed speech of actors is not equivalent to spontaneous speech, it provides a legitimate corpus for linguistic study (Abecassis, 2005; Elliott, 2000). As artifacts of 70+ years of recorded speech, motion pictures make it possible to gauge how the interrogative system has changed over time and how each interrogative structure is evaluated at different times. An example of the variation observed in movies is provided in the excerpts from La bête humaine (1938), (3a), and Ne le dis à personne (2006), (3b). Both examples are spoken by a female character to her male lover in intimate situations and use the same wh- interrogative (pourquoi), but they feature different pronouns (informal tu vs. formal vous) and interrogative structures (inversion vs. fronting).

3) a. Pourquoi n’avez-vous rien dit? “Why haven’t you said anything?”
   b. Pourquoi t’es comme ça avec elle en ce moment? “Why are you like that with her now?”

An analysis of the social variables of sex and social class in a corpus of 20 films reveals that (a) yes/no questions—as opposed to wh- interrogation—have not changed over time, showing an overwhelming and constant preference for rising vocal intonation (as in 1c); (b) different interrogatives pattern differently such that certain polysyllabic wh- words prefer fronting whereas monosyllabic ones generally remain in situ—contra Coveney (1995); (c) post-1960, there is a robust increase in the rates of fronting and wh- in situ that directly opposes a sharp decline in inversion; (d) working class usage of nonstandard forms is shown to be relatively stable whereas usage by middle- and high-class speakers has shown an increasing preference for nonstandard forms; finally (e) across decades, men use more nonstandard forms than women; post-1960, women’s and middle- and upper-class men’s usage of nonstandard forms appears to be on the rise.