
What parallel texts can tell us about word order variation and change. A case study on *wh*-interrogatives in Romance

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(Old and Modern) Romance languages are characterized by a relatively high stability with respect to word order in *wh*-interrogatives. They generally exhibit the fronting of the *wh*-phrase (*wh*-*ex-situ*) in combination with subject-verb inversion. In Modern Romance, however, there is some variation with respect to these word order constraints. On the one hand, many (varieties of) Modern Romance languages exhibit, mostly under very specific conditions, *wh*-*ex-situ* interrogatives without subject-verb inversion. On the other hand, (Modern) Romance languages allow the *wh*-phrase to remain in its base position (*wh*-*in-situ*) in some (restricted) contexts.

The aim of this presentation is to discuss whether and how parallel texts can help to explain the (diachronic) emergence and the constraints of these word order strategies. Firstly, we will present an investigation on Bible translations into different Romance languages and from different periods of time. A preliminary analysis based on an automatic compilation of interrogative clauses reveals that *wh*-*in-situ* is completely absent in all Bible translations under investigation. A second result is that *wh*-*ex-situ* without subject-verb inversion is rare in almost all Bible translations.

In order to verify these results we will present further pilot studies of colloquial parallel texts. Given some diverging results in a pilot study on translations of an Italian and a French detective story, we will present some reflections about these differences. In particular, we will explain them by claiming that the (new) word order strategies under investigation are (still) optional rules in Romance and that their choice depends on a number of factors (e.g. speech situation, colloquiality, translator). As a consequence, we propose a coding system for the analysis of parallel text data in which these features are encoded.