

A corpus-based contrastive study of questions in Mandarin and French

The topic of questions has received relatively little attention in contrastive studies to date (Coveney 2011, Curry & Chambers 2017), especially when it comes to pairs that involve languages other than English. The present paper aims to fill this gap by examining questions in Mandarin and French, as regards question types (i.e. polar questions, disjunctive questions and *wh*-questions; see examples in Table 1) and their respective structures (declarative forms, subject-verb inversion, question particles such as French *est-ce que* or Mandarin *ma* and *ne*, A-not-A constructions, fragments, etc.). Preliminary findings, based on Mandarin and French web data derived from the zhTenTen17 and frTenTen17 corpora (Jakubiček et al. 2013), show that in the two languages polar questions are more frequent than the other question types, which is in line with the theory of social economics of questions (Lavinson 2012) and results of studies devoted to English (Stivers 2010, Siemund 2017). An interesting cross-linguistic difference that emerges from the web data is that *wh*-questions are significantly more frequent in French than in Mandarin, possibly due to the high number of different structures available in French to express *wh*-questions, namely inversion, declarative forms, *est-ce que* particle, *wh*-in-situ, and fragments (Guryev 2017:1). However, these two trends remain tentative in view of the fact that web corpora contain all kinds of registers, which can potentially jeopardize the cross-linguistic comparability of the findings. Therefore, I build on these preliminary results and examine the distribution of question types on the basis of a 1-million-word self-compiled bilingual comparable corpus of contemporary fictional texts (detective stories and fantasy). More specifically, I set out to test two hypotheses: (1) polar questions are the most frequent question type in the two languages and (2) *wh*-questions are more widespread in French than in Mandarin. The comparable corpus has been uploaded on Sketch Engine (Kilgarriff et al. 2004) and questions in the two languages extracted by the CQL query [word = “\?”], which makes it possible to extract all question marks (see Biber et al. 1999, Axelsson 2020 for a similar approach). The query returns more than 3,000 occurrences in each language (see Table 2). The questions are then coded for question type and syntactic structure. In my presentation, I will report on the results of the analysis with a view to sketching the main commonalities and differences between questions in Mandarin and French.

References

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Table 1 Question types in Mandarin and French

	Mandarin	French
Polar questions	<i>Nǐ zài gǎoxiào ma?</i> Are you joking?	<i>Serons-nous en contact?</i> Will we be in contact?
Disjunctive questions	<i>Jiàshǐ shì nán de nǚ de?</i> The driver is a man or a woman?	<i>Était-il en migration lui aussi, ou en fuite?</i> Was he on the move too, or on the run?
Wh-questions	<i>Shénme rén huì chóushì lǎorén?</i> What people hate the old men?	<i>Qu'y a-t-il là-dedans?</i> What is in there?

Table 2 Question marks in the self-compiled bilingual comparable corpus

	Mandarin	French
Raw frequencies	3,211	3,573
Relative frequencies per 100,000 tokens	770	649
Corpus size (tokens)	417,049	550,807