

ARTICLE

# Partial interrogatives in Quebec French: a diachronic look at a spreading variant

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## Abstract

This study offers a diachronic look (1840–today) into the direct partial interrogation system in Quebec French. The main goals are to provide empirical evidence of the rise of the *in situ* variant within the Quebec French system, and to understand how the system evolved over centuries, independently from Hexagonal French. The data (based on more than 1600 tokens) show that the emergence of the *in situ* variant seems to depend on the *wh* word itself, but its usage seems to be more important in Montreal. There are a few examples of *in situ* found before the 1970s, but this variant was never publicly condemned nor associated to “bad usage”. This article, inspired by a historical sociolinguistics approach, provides much needed original data from five different corpora, both (written) historical and (oral) contemporary, and shows that the partial interrogative system in Quebec is not stable over time. The Montreal data suggests a system evolving differently in this city than in other regions of the province, and the data from each *wh* word show that interrogatives with *comment* still only marginally allow the *in situ* variant.

Cette étude offre un portrait diachronique (1840 à aujourd’hui) global de la variation à l’intérieur du système d’interrogation partielle directe en français québécois. L’objectif principal est de contribuer de façon empirique à la compréhension du développement de la variante *in situ* en français du Québec, et d’en arriver à montrer l’évolution, indépendante de celle ayant lieu en France, sur plus d’un siècle. Nos données (plus de 1600 occurrences) montrent que l’émergence de la variante *in situ* dépend du mot *wh* utilisé, et qu’elle semble plus avancée à Montréal qu’ailleurs. Nous avons trouvé quelques traces de la variante *in situ* avant 1970 dans les documents métalinguistiques, et montrons que cette variante n’a jamais été condamnée. Le présent article s’inscrit dans une approche de sociolinguistique historique et fournit des données originales, tirées de corpus historique (écrit) et contemporains (oraux). Ce portrait quantitatif montre à quel point le système d’interrogation directe partielle n’est pas stable dans le temps, et suggère une évolution dans la communauté montréalaise qui se distingue des autres communautés étudiées. Le mot interrogatif *comment* résiste encore à la variante *in situ*, mais les taux globaux d’utilisation nous permettent de considérer la variante *in situ* comme faisant partie intégrante de l’interrogation en français québécois oral.

**Keywords:** Quebec French; wh/partial interrogative system; historical sociolinguistics; variationist sociolinguistics corpus; private correspondence corpus; wh in situ

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The French language in Quebec benefits from decades of interests by sociolinguists that aimed to describe the specificities of the oral variety, through the use of specially constructed corpora of sociolinguistic interviews (for a complete account, see Thibault, 2001). Despite this relative profusion of data, most existing corpora have not been searched for interrogatives (notable exceptions are described in Barbarie, 1982; Elsig, 2009); as a consequence, we lack a systematic, quantitative portrait of usages in Quebec.

Yet, we know that the Quebec French interrogative system, both total and partial, has some interesting properties in terms of variation, which makes it a perfect paradigm for theoretical and empirical case studies. This study proposes two objectives in order to partially fill the gap of knowledge concerning the most recent innovation of the Quebec French system, the *in situ* variant:

- i. provide a global diachronic portrait of the wh interrogative system in Quebec French, from 1840 to 2010s;
- ii. offer empirical evidence for the development of the *in situ* variant within the Quebec French partial interrogative system, which has been said to be not identical to the France one (Elsig, 2009).

We know that the *in situ* variant is attested in today's spoken Quebec French, as found in this corpus recorded in the 1980s in the western part of the province of Quebec (Ottawa-Hull Corpus, Poplack, 1989):

- (1) Que c'est que j'allais dire, tu pourrais repasser quand? (OH.115.302)  
(Elsig, 2009: 146)

However, we do not know much about its specificities, nor its origins. In France, the wh *in situ* variant was extremely rare (in writing) before the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Coveney, 2011; Farmer 2015; Guryev and Larrivé, 2021). Based on these chronological facts, this research tests the hypothesis that the *in situ* variant was not, in fact, part of the wh interrogative system of the first settlers coming to New France (French Canada, which will later become the Province of Quebec, where Quebec French is spoken) during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, and that its evolution is parallel and independent from what is described in France. This article aims to verify this hypothesis through the study of different types of documents throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to track the appearance of the variant in the Quebec variety with the five following wh words: *quand*; *comment*; *où*; *qui* and *combien*.

Examining the partial interrogative system in Quebec French to confront the findings to what we know about the France partial interrogative system will not only bring extra – and different – arguments to the table about the characteristics of each variant, but will also contribute to reinforcing the idea that this particular paradigm is unique in the language in so many ways. It is the perfect language element to

explore language change and the spread of innovations within a specific language paradigm, across language varieties. We will show that traces of *in situ* can be found early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but that it is only after the 1970s that we see its usage grow.

This article is divided into the following parts: section 2 briefly exposes relevant pieces of knowledge about the emergence and usage of the *in situ* variant in France. Section 3 is dedicated to the partial interrogative system in Quebec French; what do we know about it and how is it different from what is found in France? This section presents the results of the diachronic search done from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on to try to understand the evolution of the system for Quebec French speakers. I will show that, as is put forward by Lauersdorf (2018), a historical sociolinguistics approach benefits from considering as many different types of data as possible, to make up for the famous ‘bad data’ problem (Labov, 1994: 11). The discussion section will be dedicated to exposing hypotheses about the different uses of an innovative variant in distinct French language communities.

## 2. PREVIOUS STUDIES

### 2.1 *The partial interrogative system in Quebec French*

There is not a great variety of studies to know what is precisely going on with Quebec French speakers’ interrogative grammar. Most studies about Quebec French interrogatives have focused on the total interrogative system, since Quebec French is quite special in having kept in a productive way the particle *-tu* (formerly *-ti*).

(2) Tu y vas-tu lundi prochain?

(Le Plongeur 207, Auger and Villeneuve, 2021: 59)

The presence of an interrogative particle in a Romance language (even within the Indo-European family) is unexpected, therefore many studies have proposed distributional facts and theoretical explanations for this specific variant (Fox, 1989; Picard, 1992; Vecchiato, 2000; Elsig, 2009; Morin, 2017; Auger and Villeneuve, 2021; among others).

A few recent studies have also looked at the indirect interrogatives system, which also displays a great amount of variation. Blondeau and Ledegen (2021) show that in oral French, the *in situ* variant in subordinate contexts is attested in a variety of francophone areas, including in Quebec French, as early as the 1970s (Blondeau and Ledegen, 2021: 175).

(3) personne sait c’est qui (*Les Parent*, saison 2, épisode 3)

(Blondeau and Ledegen, 2021: 173)

As for direct partial interrogatives, the studies available are even scarcer. For the various forms possible in today’s Quebec French, I rely mainly on Elsig’s published doctoral thesis (2009), which adopts a variationist approach. Using two corpora of ethnographic and variationist interviews, one recorded in the 1940s and 1950s and one in the 1980s, Elsig described the language-internal and (socially) external factors that influenced the choice of one variant over the other. His results are still the most detailed portrait of the usage of the partial interrogative system in two Quebec

French speech communities. His study is used throughout the present article as a point of comparison.

As is found in oral France French today (but contrary to what was found in a beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century written corpus, see section 3.3), the standard form with inversion of the subject and the verb (QVS word order) is almost absent of Elsig's two corpora: "As the results show, [...]. **Inversion does not play any role in wh-questions.**" (Elsig, 2009: 53, emphasis added). The majority variant in partial interrogatives in both corpora is the one with a reinforcer of the *est-ce que* kind, in the *qu'est-ce que* form (4), of course, but not only (5).

- (4) C'est toujours, tu sais, (inc) toujours, faut tu leur dises hey, **qu'est-ce que tu as dit là**, tu sais là?  
(OH.111.1951, Elsig, 2009: 52)
- (5) **Quand est-ce que c'est que** vous allez vous marier? Dans trois jours.  
(RFQ.044.1204, Elsig, 2009: 146)

This variant represents more than 70% of all variants in both corpora (Elsig, 2009: 147; 149) and one form or the other of the *est-ce que* reinforcer is represented with all wh words (Elsig, 2009: 152). The second most used variant is the fronted wh word variant without inversion of the subject and the verb, representing around 15% of all occurrences:

- (6) L'union c'est supposé de t'aider, **comment ça se fait** qu'il y en a qui travaillent jusqu'à neuf, dix heures puis toi tu es t icitte, assis?  
(OH.088.924, Elsig, 2009: 52)

Finally, and this is the most interesting piece of evidence for our purposes, Elsig showed that in Quebec French, just like in France (Coveney, 2002; Coveney, 2011), the *in situ* variant spread in usage during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Quebec French results are different from the Coveney's ones though; in Elsig's corpora, the *in situ* variant is not playing a role nearly as important to what it plays in the France French wh interrogative system. In the 1950s corpus (only speakers born before 1900), the *in situ* variant represents less than 1% (7 occurrences out of 813; Elsig, 2009: 149), and in the 1980s, it represents 7.6% of the total number of occurrences (73 occurrences out of 959; Elsig, 2009: 147), making it the third variant most used. This is the only variant for which Elsig found a significant rate of use difference between his two corpora, which allows him to conclude that this variant is on the rise during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The predominance of *est-ce que* variants in the Quebec French partial interrogation system is not surprising – it seems to be a continuation of what was found in 17<sup>th</sup> century French, in which the *est-ce que* variants were very strongly associated to the partial interrogative system, despite not being majority variants at that time (Ayres-Bennett, 2004: 54-55), which will be discussed in the next subsection. As for the *in situ* variant, Elsig's study gives empirical evidence for its presence in the Quebec French system. I will show however that it might be underrepresented in his corpora compared to other oral corpora examined for the purpose of the present study.

## 2.2. The evolution of the partial interrogative system and the appearance of *in situ*

As mentioned in the previous section, in addition to the standard QVS variants, *wh-est-ce que* variants were found in 17<sup>th</sup> century French (Ayres-Bennett, 2004: 54), but “[the] *wh*-interrogatives in the late Middle and Classical French data shows that there was hardly any variation” (Elsig, 2009: 162). Inversion variants (pronominal and complex) were found almost categorically in the corpus of plays and literature (15<sup>th</sup> to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries) that he examined (N=1309, Elsig, 2009: 159). Mathieu (2009) gives an example of *in situ* from Diderot during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and suggests a spread of the variant at that time, but he does not base his hypothesis on a systematic corpus search.

In contrast, Guryev and Larrivé (2021) manually searched for the *wh in situ* variant in the Frantext corpus, in texts dating from 1100 to 1840. They extracted 6750 occurrences of sentence-final interrogative sequences, and out of those, only 32 were analyzed as “true” *in situ* (see Guryev and Larrivé, 2021: 78–79, for details about the way they sorted the data). It is therefore a very rare structure in written texts. Guryev and Larrivé convincingly argue that the discursive context that contributed to the emergence of the *in situ* variant is very restricted from the beginning, appearing only in questions referring to already known information (“questions à valeur d’information explicitement ancienne” Guryev and Larrivé, 2021: 78).

Given the diachronic development of the variant, we can therefore expect to find instances of SVQ word order in Quebec French even before it becomes “an option of French grammar” (Guryev and Larrivé, 2021: 78), but it should appear in discursive contexts where a regular *wh* question could not be uttered.

## 3. USAGE DATA AND METALINGUISTIC DOCUMENTS: A DIACHRONIC STUDY

### 3.1. Theoretical assumptions and methodology

In this section, I give an extensive summary of what we know about the *in situ* variant in Canadian French, and what this study brings in terms of empirical evidence. As was mentioned in preceding sections, we know that the *in situ* variant is present in today’s spoken Quebec French (Barbarie, 1982; Elsig, 2009), but not to the extent that it is in France French (Adli, 2015; Guryev, 2017). This section offers details about the state of knowledge about partial interrogatives for three distinct periods:

- 1) before 1840 (section 3.2);
- 2) from 1840 to 1970 (section 3.3);
- 3) from 1970 to today (section 3.4).

The division between the first and second periods corresponds to the rise of metalinguistic documents during the 1840s, and the division between the second and third periods corresponds to the gathering of the first sociolinguistic oral corpora during the 1970s. To get a complete picture, various types of linguistic evidence had to be examined, since the variant under study is both new and

associated to informal registers, at least in France (Coveney, 2011: 124). In historical sociolinguistics, “Given that the available data is ‘imperfect’ (i.e., limited, fragmentary, or incomplete), it is imperative to gather as much of it as possible for a given investigation, from all interrelated sources, linguistic and socio-historical – in other words, it is imperative to use all the data!” (Lauersdorf, 2018: 111-112). This is why we present in this section the results of our investigation that includes both ‘real’ usage data from written and oral corpora, but also data from metalinguistic documents and commentaries. The adopted approach is global: despite the sociolinguistic angle, the aim of the present study is to get a global picture of the interrogation usage in Quebec French, diachronically. The exact value of each variant as well as specific sociohistorical factors may be overlooked, but we hope to make up for the lack of details by giving an overview that will be as complete as possible in terms of types of sources and timespan (two centuries are covered).

### 3.2. Before 1840

Historical data for Quebec French before the 19<sup>th</sup> century is scarce and varied, and it is not an easy task to distinguish, amongst the documents that are left from the New France period (17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries), which writer is Canadian and which is French (but see Martineau, 2009). The society in New France at that time was less divided and stratified than France society at the same time; in fact, a good proportion of settlers had a fairly educated and urban background (Choquette, 2001). Most of the traces that we have from the language of the time came from travelers’ notes, remarks, and diaries (Caron-Leclerc, 1998), but mostly concern pronunciation and lexicon. There is therefore no systematic study of wh interrogatives for this period, and it remains to be done. For the purpose of this study, I searched four documents for any direct partial interrogatives: three private texts and one grammatical ‘testimony’.<sup>1</sup> Two texts didn’t contain any interrogatives, and the few that were found in the other two were inversion variants. In fact, very few direct questions are found in letters, memoirs and diaries from the period, and as far as our research went, there are no traces of the *in situ* variant in New France.

### 3.3. 1840-1970

If the *in situ* variant followed a similar pathway in Quebec/Canadian French as it did in France French, this period should correspond to the appearance of the variant in various texts, and its spread during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I will show that in Canada, the evidence for the spread of the variant is not as strong as what is found in France (see for instance Rossi-Gensane and al., 2021 on the spread of the variant in plays). Elsig (2009) mentions that it did exist, since he found seven occurrences in the

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<sup>1</sup>Two texts (from the LFFA Corpus, Martineau (dir.), 2005-) written by women, the nun Marie Morin, who wrote from 1697 to 1725 and Elizabeth Bégon, a higher-class writer who wrote letters to her son-in-law between 1748 and 1753. Our warmest gratitude to France Martineau from the University of Ottawa, who took the time to look into these two texts for us (see Martineau, 2009 for details about these texts and the period). The two other texts are the writings of a miller from the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Juneau and Poirier, 1973), and the remarks about the French language in Canada made by Père Potier (1743-1758) (Halford, 1994).

corpus that was recorded in 1940-1955 (ethnographic interviews with older rural people). Although it represents less than 1% of all partial interrogatives, it proves that the SVQ word order existed. The first direct written evidence of the existence of the variant in Quebec was found in 1922 in a newspaper language chronicle.

### 3.3.1. *Metalinguistic documents and commentaries*

Quebec has a strong tradition of language chronicles and commentaries, ever since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century (Remysen 2012). This has to do with a redefinition of the normative locus as well as a constant quest by French-Canadians for identity definition; stuck between the anglophone population who held the economic and social power and a *mère-patrie* with whom they had less and less in common, French-Canadian *bourgeois*, in particular, were trying to find their place (Martineau and Remysen, 2019). The date of 1840 was selected as a somewhat arbitrary cutoff between significant periods because the 1840s saw many descriptive and prescriptive documents published about the French language in Quebec.

3.3.1.1. *Metalinguistic documents.* It is therefore in this context that we are looking for any traces of the *in situ* variant mentioned during this period. For this study, 16 metalinguistic documents were selected, ranging from 1841 to 1980. They all have the French language as a topic, and are dictionaries, commentaries, manuals, etc. (Maguire, 1841; Boucher-Belleville, 1855; Gingras, 1867; Caron, 1880; Dunn, 1880; Manseau, 1881; Clapin, 1894; Dionne, 1909; Goeffrion, 1924; Barbeau, 1939; Massignon, 1962; Turenne, 1962; Barbeau, 1963; Société du parler français au Canada, 1968 [1930]; Rogers, 1977; Dulong and Bergeron, 1980). We searched manually in all documents for each *wh* expression, as well as for words such as “interrogation, question, interrogative, etc.”. Every time the *wh* word or expression was the subject of the entry, or if it was an example of a direct partial interrogative, the occurrence was kept.

Our investigation shows that during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Quebec, the focus of descriptive and prescriptive documents when it came to nonstandard interrogatives was unequivocally the presence of the complementizer *que*. Out of the 16 metalinguistic documents that were surveyed, eight mentioned direct partial interrogation. These documents all focus on nonstandard constructions, and the mentions of partial interrogation are no exceptions to this: those mentions were to insist on forms that did not follow the standard *wh*-verb-subject (QVS) pattern.

All eight of the documents mentioning partial interrogatives focus on one or multiple form(s) of the reinforcer *est-ce que*. The following example was found in a glossary published in 1930:

- (7) **Où c'est que, où ce que c'est que** loc. adv.  
 || Où (est-ce que). Ex. : Où c'est que tu vas? = où vas-tu?  
 Dial. – M. s., Anjou, Normandie.

(Société du parler français au Canada, 1968[1930]: 485).

This entry is typical of what our investigation found, although some documents also include stylistic comments about various forms – in general, the *wh* question with *renforcer*, excluding *qu'est-ce que*, is considered informal but typical of oral Quebec French at the time. The *in situ* variant is not mentioned explicitly, but we found, in a document published in 1939, the following example:

- (8) Pour conjuguer le verbe interrogativement on laisse le pronom devant le verbe.  
 Ex. Je vous dois combien? Il s'appelle comment? Il va où?  
 (Barbeau, 1939: 184<sup>2</sup>)

This same example is reproduced in a later book published by the same author:

- (9) Pour conjuguer le verbe interrogativement, on laisse le pronom devant le verbe.  
 Ex. *Il s'appelle comment lui? – Il va où ton frère?*  
 (Barbeau, 1963)

Barbeau used these examples in the section about “The verb”, and not in the section about interrogatives – he insists on the fact that there is no subject-verb inversion, but does not comment on the fact that the *wh* word is not fronted. As for the interrogation section in these two books, it only contains examples with the *est-ce que* *renforcer*. We'd like to bring attention to the fact that in 1963 (example 9), Barbeau chose to repeat the subject after the *wh* element. This yields a nonstandard word order, but unmarked for oral Quebec French. It is not clear what the connection is between subject doubling and SVQ, but it might be the case that Barbeau found it more natural to use *in situ* with either a non-standard word order, or with a word order most typical of oral Quebec French (Auger 1994).

3.3.1.2. *Language chronicles (ChroQué)*. In addition to metalinguistic (mostly descriptive) documents, in order to get a better idea of the stylistic value of the *wh in situ* if it appears, a corpus much more prescriptive in nature was surveyed: ChroQué (Verreault, Mercier and Remysen, 1998–2011). This corpus contains 7936 language chronicles published in newspapers from around the province of Quebec between 1865 and 1996 (see <https://fdlq.recherche.usherbrooke.ca>). Given the extensive size of this corpus, only the *wh* words *où* and *combien* were extracted. These two *wh* words were selected since Coveney (2002: 220) mentions that *combien* favours the *in situ* variant, and Druetta (2009) mentions that both *où* and *combien* favour the SVQ word order (see also Rossi-Gensane and al., 2021: 183). This search yielded a total of 169 occurrences, out of which six mentioned the *in situ* variant; five with *combien* (in 1922, 1929, 1960, 1967 and 1977) and only one with *où* (in 1976). Examples (10) and (11) show the two earliest examples: the first one is a prescription from 1922, correcting a variant reinforced with a *que* only by suggesting a nonverbal variant or an *in situ* variant, and the second one is a usage in 1929 by the commentator himself.

<sup>2</sup>Thank you to France Martineau for finding this early quote.



- (10) « D. – Comment que ça coûte pour entrer ? R. – Combien pour entrer ? L'entrée est de combien ? »  
 (Lefranc, Paul [pseud. d'Étienne Blanchard], « Autour de la langue française », La Presse, **Montréal**, 1er juillet 1922, p. 37. [ChroQué])
- (11) « ...est complément circonstanciel, là, il est complément direct : d'une part, vous obtenez dix sous **de quoi** ? du pouce ; d'autre part, vous vendez le pouce **combien** ? dix sous. »  
 (Degagné, Narcisse, « Questions de français », Le Progrès du Saguenay, Chicoutimi, 30 décembre 1929, p. 3. [ChroQué])

The most interesting element to retain from these results is that although the aim of these chronicles was to condemn certain usages, none of the six mentions of the *in situ* variant were part of the condemned constructions. Of course, this investigation is not complete since we only looked at two *wh* words, but it still shows that despite interrogation being a topic of choice for many language chronicles during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (our search did yield a total of 169 occurrences only with *où* and *combien*), the *in situ* variant is very rarely found, and never condemned as “bad usage”.

### 3.3.2. Usage study based on written corpora

As for actual usage during this period, I chose to investigate a corpus of correspondence (1893-1939, Tailleur, 2014-),<sup>3</sup> from which I extracted all *wh* words, in all contexts – matrix and embedded, with or without a form of the *est-ce que* reinforcer. The results were sorted to keep only the direct questions, the results of which are presented in this section.

The Dubuc-Palardy family corpus was chosen because it represents direct evidence from the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The data is written and the five writers are highly educated, but the register is very intimate; members from a single family write to each other while they are away on trips, at school or at work. Previous studies done on a subset of this corpus (Tailleur and Rouillard, 2020; Tailleur and Saint-Gelais, 2018) showed that the results for the expression of the future matched results done on contemporary oral corpora, and that communication strategies typically associated to oral registers such as accommodation can be found in this corpus. This is why, in addition to the fact that it contains 1481 manuscript pages approximating to a total of 139 000 words written by five different writers from two generations, this corpus is a good source of data to examine usage of partial interrogation.

Despite what one might think about such a corpus that is not akin to a conversation, questions are reasonably common in our data. However, all question words are not equally represented, since we find an overwhelming number of *comment* “how”, given that writers almost systematically ask about “how” their

<sup>3</sup>The corpus Tailleur (2014-) comes from the archive center BAnQ Saguenay, *Fonds Famille Dubuc* (P1). The original manuscripts were numerised and diplomatically transcribed to respect not only orthography and word boundaries, but also line breaks, page breaks, etc.

**Table 1.** Usage data: correspondence by the Dubuc-Palardy family (1890-1935)

	QVS	With reinforcer	QSV	SVQ
<b>Qui</b>	9 <sup>4</sup>	–	–	1
<b>Comment</b>	44	–	–	–
<b>Pourquoi</b>	1	–	–	–
<b>Où</b>	15	–	–	–
<b>Quand</b>	13	–	–	–
<b>Combien</b>	1	–	1	–
<b>Total</b>	74	0	1	1

addressee has been, about “how” life is going, etc. The detailed results of our extraction are presented in Table 1.

This corpus does not present any variation in the use of partial questions. All members of the family used the standard variant with inversion, and the wh element used does not influence the choice of variant.

The only two variants found that did not fit this pattern are presented in (12) and (13) (reproduced without modifications):

- (12) Et **combien** de temps cela represente ces approches  
(QSV – Esther Dubuc, 1924)
- (13) Elle se dirige devinez sur **qui** ? sur un pauvre matelot qui s’était jeté à la mer dans l’esperance de gagner terre avant d’être aperçu.  
(SVQ – Vincent Dubuc, 1912)

Example (12) is clearly an example of fronted wh without inversion, despite the fact that the writer didn’t use a question mark. According to the context it might be a rhetorical question, but it definitely is a question nonetheless. The second example (13) was classified in the table as an *in situ* variant, but the discourse situation is definitely marked. In fact, Guryev (2021: 98) considers these kind of examples elliptical wh- constructions, in which the sequence is used to project a subsequent answer or expectation. This example is quite interesting in a letter from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which the “dialogue” is not immediate, and the writer is using a discourse strategy that clearly creates an interaction with the reader of the letter. However, even if we cannot posit that this is a true case of an interrogative *in situ*, we see that the SVQ order is possible for this writer, but in a very marked discourse situation.

<sup>4</sup>These 9 occurrences are actually QV, since *qui* is the subject:

« Qui choisira pour elle dans la vie [...] ? » (AMP, 1927).

There are no occurrences of *qui* as an object, except for the ‘*in situ*’ occurrence presented in (13).

Interestingly, while the descriptive grammars and manuals contemporary to the writings of the Dubuc-Palardy family almost all described the various ways to ask a partial question with reinforcers, as seen in section 3.3.1 above, these variants are completely absent from this written corpus for direct interrogation. It therefore seems that for these (highly educated) French Canadian writers, forming interrogatives with inversion was the only acceptable interrogative form in writing (while Tailleux and Rouillard (2020) show that they all use English words and expressions in their French letters, despite the intimate but highly formal register).

These usage results do not inform us about the possible presence or spread of the *in situ* variant at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Quebec French, but the empirical implications of the absence of variation in partial interrogative usage will be briefly addressed in the Discussion section below.

### 3.4. 1970-today

The previous sections showed that the *in situ* variant is somewhat attested before the arrival of major sociolinguistic oral corpora, but nothing can be said of its actual importance within the system. For the period post-1970, it was possible to focus solely on usage data, since this is the only period for which major oral corpora exist. This section provides the results of systematic extractions of wh interrogative variants from the spoken French of different regions of the province of Quebec.

Four major corpora were investigated, one recorded during the 1970s in the Estrie region of Quebec (which is about 100 km south-east of Montreal) (Beauchemin, Martel and Théorêt, 1971-1974), two corpora from Montreal (Thibault and Vincent, 1984; Vincent, Laforest and Martel (eds), 1995) (these three latter corpora are available fully transcribed through the project *Fonds de données linguistiques du Québec*, whose main investigator is Wim Remysen [<https://fdlq.recherche.usherbrooke.ca>]) as well as one corpus recorded in 2012 and 2014 in a working-class neighborhood of Montreal, Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (Corpus FRAN, Martineau et al., 2011-)<sup>5</sup>. With this 30 years timespan between the two corpora (and Elsig's (2009) most recent corpus being in between), I am hoping to find out if the *in situ* variant 1) is present in the interrogative system of the speakers; and 2) is taking on more importance within the system as we get closer to today's.

All of these corpora consist of sociolinguistic interviews with speakers of various ages, males and females, and are hundreds of thousands of words in size. The Hochelaga-Maisonneuve corpus also contains one ecological interview (four speakers between the ages of 21 and 23 years old). We extracted all occurrences involving direct interrogatives involving these five wh- words: *quand* (example 14), *comment* (example 15, excluding *comment ça*, which means *pourquoi*), *qui* (example 16), *où* (example 17) and *combien* (example 18).

<sup>5</sup>The FRAN corpus, also fully transcribed, is available online at <https://www.usherbrooke.ca/crifuq/recherche/corpus/corpus-heberges/corpus-fran>. I would like to thank France Martineau for allowing me a special access to her corpus for the purpose of this study.

**Table 2.** Usage data: oral data Estrie 1971-1974 (Beauchemin, Martel and Théoret 1971-1974)

	Standard		With reinforcer		Without inversion		In situ	
	QVS		<i>est-ce/c'est que/ ce que/que</i>		QSV		SVQ	
<b>Quand</b> (2 occ.)	0	–	1	<b>50%</b>	0	–	1	<b>50%</b>
<b>Comment</b> (14 occ.)	0	–	4	29%	10	<b>71%</b>	0	–
<b>Qui</b> (4 occ.)	0	–	2	<b>50%</b>	1	25%	1	25%
<b>Où</b> (92 occ.)	1	1%	38	41%	53	<b>58%</b>	0	–
<b>Combien</b> (15 occ.)	0	–	0	–	6	40%	9	<b>60%</b>
<b>Total</b> (127 occ.)	1	1%	45	35%	70	<b>55%</b>	11	9%

(14) Tu me rembourses **quand**? (SVQ)  
(Roseline, HoMa Montreal, Martineau and al., 2011-)

(15) **Comment** ça se fait? (QSV)  
(Fernande B.\_59'84, Montreal, Thibault and Vincent, 1984)

(16) **Qui** est-ce que vous avez favorisé pour gagner la coupe Stanley cette année? (QesqSV)  
(interview 215, Estrie, Beauchemin, Martel and Théorêt, 1971-1974)

(17) Mais les conflits commencent **où**? (SVQ)  
(Martine\_1'95, Montreal, Vincent, Laforest and Martel, 1995)

(18) **Combien** tu as à mettre? (QSV)  
(Yannick C. 126'85, Montreal, Thibault and Vincent, 1984)

We searched by wh word (and not by the interrogative punctuation, since these corpora are oral) and we kept a 30-words context before and after the occurrence. We rejected all nonverbal occurrences and for each occurrence kept, we made sure that an actual answer could be given to eliminate rhetorical questions or *préannonces* (Coveney, 2011).

For the Estrie corpus of the 1970s (Beauchemin and al., 1971-1974), 127 occurrences of direct questions were found, and the distribution of each variant (in raw numbers) is presented in Table 2.

We can see that the fronted wh without inversion is the majority variant, and that the standard fronted wh with inversion is virtually absent. Despite the fact that the *in situ* variant (SVQ) only represents 9% of all occurrences (11 out of 127), it is not equally represented through each wh words: *combien* alone represents 9 out of 11

**Table 3.** Usage data: oral data Montréal 1984 (Thibault and Vincent, 1984)

	Standard		With reinforcer		Without inversion		In situ	
	QVS		<i>est-ce/c'est que/ce que/que</i>		QSV		SVQ	
<b>Quand</b> (26 occ.)	0	–	15	<b>58%</b>	4	15%	7	27%
<b>Comment</b> (290 occ.)	6	2%	77	27%	196	<b>68%</b>	11	4%
<b>Qui</b> (9 occ.)	2	22%	0	–	5	<b>55%</b>	2	22%
<b>Où</b> (93 occ.)	4	4%	21	23%	20	22%	48	<b>52%</b>
<b>Combien</b> (46 occ.)	0	–	1	2%	9	20%	36	<b>78%</b>
<b>Total</b> (464 occ.)	12	3%	114	25%	234	<b>50%</b>	104	22%

occurrences of *in situ*. This corroborates Coveney's findings (2002: 220) that the wh word *combien* seems to favour the SVQ word order. The wh words *où* and *comment* favour the variant fronted without inversion (QSV), but in variation with fronted with reinforcer. As for *quand* and *qui*, the low number of tokens makes them not significant, but they both display variation. This portrait is slightly different from what Elsig found in his 1950s corpus, in which variants with *est-ce que* were overwhelmingly used, around 70% of the time (Elsig, 2009: 149). However, with a closer look, we notice that the wh word *combien*, even in Elsig's corpora, is the only one that does not favour the *est-ce que* variant: it is used 39% of the time as an SVQ, and only 30% of the time with *est-ce que* (Elsig, 2009: 157).

For the Montreal corpus recorded a decade later (Thibault and Vincent, 1984), the amount of data is more substantial: we extracted 464 occurrences of direct questions, distributed through four variants (Table 3).

Similar to the Estrie corpus, it is the fronted variant without inversion (QSV) that is the overall majority variant, but there is much variation according to the wh word. The word *combien* favours once again the appearance of the *in situ* variant, but so does *où* (to a slightly lesser extent). *Quand* is found most often used with the reinforcer (QesSV). Finally, we notice that in this corpus, the *in situ* variant is used with all wh words, and at an overall rate of more than 20%. If around 1 occurrence of direct question out of five uses the *in situ* variant, we can no longer consider it a marginal usage (in Estrie a decade earlier, it was only 1 out of 10).

The third corpus consulted is the Montreal 1995 corpus (Corpus Montréal 1995), from which we extracted 166 direct questions of the five wh words under study. The results are presented in Table 4.

The portrait is somewhat similar to the Montreal 1984 corpus: the preferred overall variant is the QSV one, but each wh word has a different distribution. Again,

**Table 4.** Usage data: oral data Montréal 1995 (Vincent, Laforest and Martel, 1995)

	Standard		With reinforcer		Without inversion		In situ	
	QVS		<i>est-ce/c'est que/ ce que/que</i>		QSV		SVQ	
<b>Quand</b> (15 occ.)	1	7%	5	33%	0	–	9	<b>60%</b>
<b>Comment</b> (84 occ.)	2	3%	14	17%	65	<b>77%</b>	3	4%
<b>Qui</b> (36 occ.)	5	14%	6	17%	14	<b>39%</b>	11	31%
<b>Où</b> (19 occ.)	2	11%	4	21%	6	32%	7	<b>37%</b>
<b>Combien</b> (12 occ.)	0	–	0	–	8	<b>67%</b>	4	33%
<b>Total</b> (166 occ.)	10	6%	29	17%	93	<b>56%</b>	34	21%

the *in situ* variant is used with all *wh* words, and it is the preferred variant for *où* and *quand* (it is the second most preferred variant for both *qui* and *combien*). The overall rate of usage of the *in situ* is almost exactly the same as the 1984 rate (21 % compared to 22 %), but what is significant is that it is for the first time more used than the variant with reinforcer (which is something that Elsig, 2009 didn't find in his 1989 corpus; the QeskSV was the majority variant).

Finally, for the last corpus recorded in Montreal (Corpus FRAN, Martineau et al., 2011-), 261 occurrences of direct questions were found, and the distribution of each variant is presented in Table 5.

The portrait is quite different from what was found 40 years before: the *in situ* variant is now the second most used variant with an overall use of 42%, not far behind the fronted variant without inversion (46%). The variant with reinforcer lost a lot of importance in this corpus, since it is only used with 17% of all occurrences.

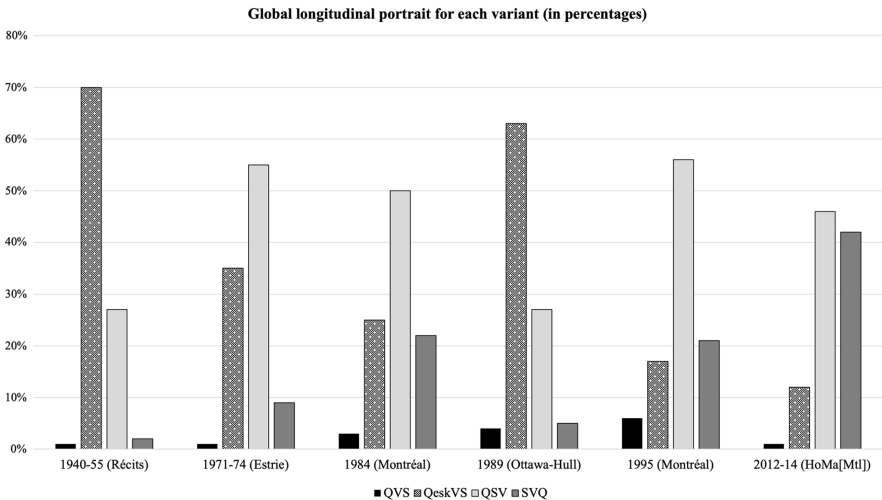
## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Summary: a longitudinal glance

The wide survey of different corpora from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows that the *in situ* variant did indeed enter usage and started competing with the other variants during this period. In terms of language change within the partial interrogative system, it is difficult to explain the mechanisms behind this innovation. We knew, thanks to Elsig's very detailed study (2009) and through the data from metalinguistic documents since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (section 3.3), that in vernacular Quebec French, it had been the QeskSV variants that took over the majority of usages (and comments) within the partial interrogative system. The multiplicity of *est-ce que* variants and the specialization of each of them for

**Table 5.** Usage data: oral data Hochelaga-Maisonneuve (Montreal, Corpus FRAN Martineau, 2012; 2014)

	Standard		With reinforcer		Without inversion		In situ	
	QVS		<i>est-ce/c'est que/ ce que/que</i>		QSV		SVQ	
<b>Quand</b> (7 occ.)	0	–	1	14%	0	–	6	<b>86%</b>
<b>Comment</b> (122 occ.)	1	1%	11	9%	94	<b>77%</b>	16	13%
<b>Qui</b> (19 occ.)	0	–	4	21%	6	32%	9	<b>47%</b>
<b>Où</b> (92 occ.)	1	1%	14	15%	18	20%	59	<b>64%</b>
<b>Combien</b> (21 occ.)	0	–	0	–	1	5%	20	<b>95%</b>
<b>Total</b> (261 occ.)	2	<1%	30	12%	119	<b>46%</b>	110	42%



**Figure 1.** Global longitudinal portrait for each variant (in percentages).

specific stylistic purposes (see Tailleur, 2013) made them almost sufficient, and Elsig’s data led us to believe that other variants played a negligible role in today’s system. However, a closer look at other oral corpora and at different types of data complicates this picture: Figure 1 shows that it is only in Elsig’s both corpora, 1940-1955 and 1980s, that the QeskSV variant is indeed the majority one. Note that Figure 1 only includes the five wh- words under study (we excluded *quoi*, *pourquoi* and *quel+NP* from Elsig’s data).

Figure 1 summarizes all usage data for 20<sup>th</sup> century Quebec French. It is based on a total of 1,666 tokens of direct interrogatives, for five different *wh*- words, and it shows to what extent variant distribution differs greatly among the six corpora. Based on these data, we can no longer say that the QeskSV variant is the majority one in Quebec, since the QSV variant is the most common in all corpora, except in Elsig's *Récits* and *Ottawa-Hull*. It is hard to explain these facts, since Elsig's corpora are different from each other. To make the comparison easier, we divided the variants the same way as Elsig did, so we cannot explain the differences this way; for instance, we considered examples like (19) as *in situ* just like he did, despite the fact that diachronically, they would be better explained as variants of *est-ce que* (see Tailleux 2013).

- (19) Si il se produit pas là, c'est **quand** qu'il va se produire?  
(Roland M.\_83'84, Mtl, Thibault and Vincent, 1984)

We therefore suggest that the high rates of *est-ce que* variants in Elsig's 1940-55 corpus comes from the fact that it is a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century corpus, and that if we believe the content of metalinguistic documents from the same period, this variant did indeed have much importance in the grammar of Quebec speakers of that generation. As for the Ottawa-Hull corpus of 1989, the explanation is not clear, and we are not sure why the rate of *wh est-ce que* is higher than for the Estrie corpus.

Finally, it is important to point out that globally the *in situ* variant is more common in Montreal than in rural regions (1940-55; Elsig, 2009), in Estrie (1971-1974) or in Ottawa-Hull (1989; Elsig 2009). The three Montreal corpora also have fewer QeskSV variants than the three other corpora.

It is also worth mentioning that the correspondence data presented in section 3.3.2 was excluded from Figure 1 (and from Figure 2 below), since for the partial interrogation system, the type of data is crucial and the difference in results between this written corpus and the others is too important to have a meaningful comparison – the writers from the Dubuc-Palardy family used the inversion variant 98% of the time (N = 76). These results are interesting for methodological reasons, since they show that a corpus of written but intimate correspondence is truly a hybrid form of language when it comes to registers; sometimes it aligns with oral data (see Tailleux and St-Gelais, 2018 about the expression of future in the Dubuc-Palardy corpus), sometimes it aligns with standard language, such as is the case with the partial interrogative system (see Martineau, 2014 for a discussion about the use of such documents in usage studies). In contrast, the oral data presented here has a very clear pattern: the inversion variant is clearly disfavoured and marginal in all corpora (between 0 and 6% of all data).

As mentioned in the previous section, the actual *wh* word used seems to influence the choice of the variant. Figure 2 illustrates this in a diachronic way.

The number of tokens is not equivalent for each *wh* word, and of course we have more occurrences of *comment* than the others, given the nature of the corpus: sociolinguistic interviews are likely to contain many *comment* questions (*Comment ça va? Comment ça a été? Comment ça s'est passé? Etc.*). It is likely that the resistance of the *comment* *wh* word to the *in situ* variant comes from these more or less fixed expressions found in conversation (this is also noteworthy since Larrivée (2019)'s



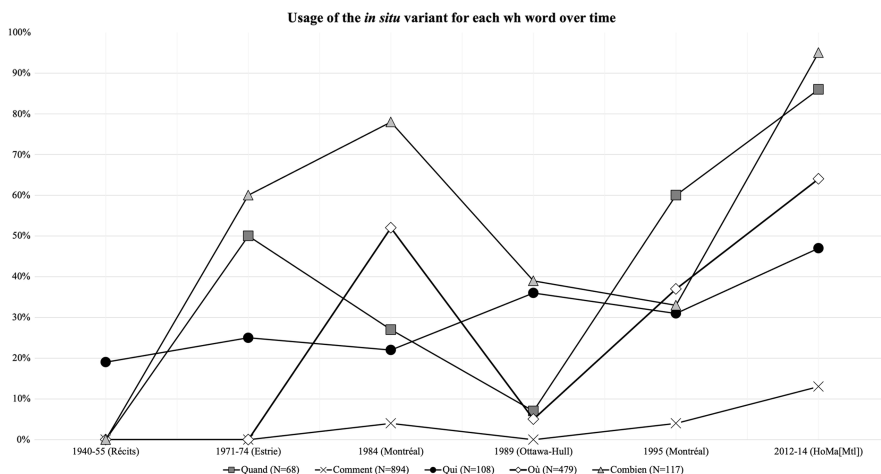


Figure 2. Usage of the *in situ* variant for each wh word over time.

study on the pragmatic value of *in situ* focuses solely on *comment*). Figure 2 shows very clearly that the HoMa (Montreal) corpus has a higher rate of *in situ*, since all wh words except *comment* are used with the *in situ* variant more than 40% of the time. It also shows that each wh word has its own trajectory, and that the rate of *in situ* usage for all is going up over time. However, the curbs are not clean (the varied number of tokens is partially to blame – for instance, *quand* in the Estrie corpus has a rate of 50% usage of *in situ*, but it is only based on two tokens), and the tendency could be reversed, since each corpus yields its own results, despite having a single way of being collected (with the exception of Elsig’s *Récits*, which are ethnographic interviews). These empirical and methodological considerations are discussed in the following section.

#### 4.2. Linguistic innovations and methodological considerations

The facts outlined in the previous section show that we cannot conclude that the *in situ* variant came to Quebec during the New France period (17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries) – this is what was proposed for the particle *-tu* (or *-ti*) variant in total interrogatives, which survived in Quebec but has virtually disappeared from Europe (see Morin, 2017; among others) – nor can we conclude that the variant is completely independent from the one that developed in France. The metalinguistic documents as well as usage data from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century point towards a certain presence of wh *in situ* (or at least of a construction with the SVQ word order), but no direct evidence was found that it was actually in competition with other variants of the partial interrogative system, which is quite similar to what was found in France (Rossi-Gensane 2021). The discourse situations in which the few pre-1980s examples were found seemed to be all marked, therefore not completely part of the unmarked interrogation system. This corroborates Guryev and Larrivé (2021) and Guryev (2021), who show that diachronically, this variant

comes from discursively and pragmatically marked situations; it was still the case in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Quebec French. In terms of usage, it is interesting to note that the data from this research softens the claim that “[I]nterrogation est un des domaines où les variétés canadiennes et américaines se distinguent le plus du français de référence” (Coveney, 2011: [en ligne]). Indeed, for oral spontaneous speech, Coveney (2011, based on Coveney, 1996) gives between 31 and 46% rates of usage of QSV (our 3 corpora from the 1970s to the 1990s show rates between 50% and 56%), and he shows rates between 12 and 33% of *in situ* (our three corpora show rates between 9 and 22%). These rates are different, yes, but the corpora are not perfectly comparable, and the relative importance of each variant is more similar than we would have thought, given only Elsig’s (2009) study, which showed that the QesksV variant occupied a much greater place in the system. Similarly, Larrivée (2019: 119-121) shows how much of an increase of usage *in situ* underwent between the 1969-1974 corpus and the 2014 corpus of sociolinguistic interviews from Orléans that he examined (from less than 1% to 6.8 %, but these low overall rates could be explained by the fact that he only extracted *comment*).

Since it was shown, through a detailed review of metalinguistic documents over more than a century (section 3.3), that *in situ* occurrences are not very salient for users of the language (or at least are not overtly condemned) in Quebec, we can consider this variant a non-stylistically marked linguistic innovation. Coveney (2011) gives it the tag “familiar but not stigmatized”, which would seem to be fitting for our data (Barbarie (1982), based on the Estrie corpus, deemed it “stylish”). In the absence of a detailed study of a contemporary written corpus, however, we cannot conclude, like Coveney (2011), that this variant is associated to an oral register. Despite not being able to test it, we believe it to be the case, since based on work presented in Tailleux (2013), the SVQ variant would be only compatible with a system lacking inversion, which is the case of oral Quebec French (data from Figure 1), but not of spontaneous written French (data from Table 1 – although this is not contemporary data).

In terms of methodological and empirical considerations, the question remains if sociolinguistic interviews constitute ideal data for the study of direct partial interrogation. The number of tokens is quite low, despite the considerable size of each corpus, and the representation of each *wh* word is not equal. However, given its status as non-stylistically marked, the *in situ* variant would be expected to appear in such corpora of spontaneous speech, and indeed it does. The high degree of variability exhibited by the direct partial interrogative system requires a variety of linguistic genres and registers to get the complete picture. We believe that this complete picture is still lacking for Quebec French, but that this contribution represents another step closer to it.

The evidence presented in this article allows for a proposal of two main observations, which are linked to the two objectives presented at the beginning of this article:

- i. the Quebec French partial interrogative might not be as different to the France one as was previously thought, since the variant with *est-ce que* and the *in situ* variant respectively had less and more importance within the global portrait presented here (contra Elsig 2009), and that the distribution of variants differs

- for each wh word (as was already observed for France *in situ* in Druetta (2009) and Coveney (2002));
- ii. the *in situ* variant, or, more accurately, the SVQ word order was attested in Quebec at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but only in marked discourse situations. The spread of the variant seems to be as recent as the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and not equal in all regions, as shown in the higher rates of usage in the Montreal corpora (1984; 1995 and 2012-14).

Of course, more data (i.e. all wh words and more corpora, especially contemporary written ones) should be included in a future study, but for now data suggest that the spread of the *in situ* variant might be coming from Montreal. Is it an urban feature, or is it an influence of the important French population living in Montreal? This would bring us back to the contact hypothesis, but without very recent data from regions outside of Montreal, this question cannot be answered. An anonymous referee mentions the possible influence of media: this hypothesis could not be completely disregarded, of course. However, it would be surprising that media would have an influence on this feature but not on the rest of the Quebec French system; Quebec French speakers have historically had much contact with the European French variety through media, and it hasn't had much impact beyond an enhanced interdialectal intelligibility.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The wh interrogative system represents a unique case study for so many important theoretical, pragmatic and variationist questions about French. In this contribution, I showed how various types of data over a long period of time are necessary to get but a glimpse of the spread of a 'new' variant within a system. The findings from both usage and metalinguistic corpora show that the *in situ* variant in Quebec French seemed to start spreading only during the 1980s. Before then, the only occurrences found were in restricted and marked discursive patterns (Guryev and Larrivée, 2021). This points to a diachronic pathway almost identical to the one described for Hexagonal French (Coveney, 2002; Rossi-Gensane and al., 2021; Larrivée 2019), which goes against what was previously assumed for the Quebec French system, mainly based on Elsig (2009)'s work. Such a similarity in the two systems, from France and from Quebec, suggests that the variable status of the French partial interrogative system has in fact internal causes – there is something about the system which makes it susceptible to variation. This “something” still needs to be understood, just like the fact that different factors seem to influence each wh word's usage, resulting in a considerable difference between each wh word's variant distribution. Finally, more data is still necessary to understand the distribution of variants from region to region within Quebec, and to confirm if the spread of the variant would be a linguistic change starting from the urban area, maybe influenced by the higher rates of direct contact with Hexagonal French speaking communities (see Auger and Fournier, 2022 for work related to this new Montreal reality).

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