



On the left periphery of ‘optional’ wh-in-situ: Evidence from Greek*

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Citation: C. Vlachos (2024)
On the left periphery of ‘optional’ wh-in-situ: Evidence from Greek. *Qulso* 10: pp. 79-88.
doi: <https://doi.org/10.36253/qulso-2421-7220-16567>

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Data Availability Statement:
All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

Abstract:

A recent generalization about ‘optional’ wh-in-situ states that wh-in-situ questions are blocked in selected contexts, where the only grammatical option is wh-fronting. In this squib, I show that the generalization is misplaced: Wh-in-situ is not actually blocked in selected contexts, it is simply not visible to selection as a wh-construction. To this end, I provide empirical evidence from Greek wh-in-situ questions, concentrating on issues revolving around selection, movement and the discourse. The analysis proposed treats wh-in-situ as a construction in its own right, being open to labeling possibilities that its wh-fronting counterpart cannot have.

Keywords: *Labeling, Movement, Selection, Speech Act, Wh-in-situ*

1. Introduction

Modern Greek (hereafter, Greek) is a wh-fronting language that may optionally allow true ‘information-seeking’ wh-in-situ questions (for a discussion in a crosslinguistic context, see Vlachos 2012). This is illustrated in (1).

- (1) a. Pu su ipan oti tha pane?
where you-CL say-3PL that will go-3PL
‘Where did they say that they’ll go?’
- b. Su ipan oti tha pane pu?
you-CL said-3PL that will go-3PL where
‘They said that they’ll go where?’

* Parts of the research reported here have been presented at the 26th International Symposium on Theoretical and Applied Linguistics (ISTAL26; Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, 2024). I thank the audience of ISTAL26, as well as, Nikos Angelopoulos, George Kotzoglou, Dimitris Michelioudakis and Anna Roussou for useful comments. Also, for helpful comments and suggestions, I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers.

(1a) is a long-distance wh-question: the wh-adjunct *pu* ('where'), which is associated with the embedded predicate *pate* ('go'), surfaces at the left-periphery of the matrix clause. (1b) is the wh-in-situ counterpart of (1a): the corresponding wh-adjunct, despite appearing in the embedded clause, yields a true 'information-seeking' reading that is available in the matrix clause.¹

Now, while wh-in-situ appears 'optional' to wh-fronting, the only context where the latter seems to be blocked is in embedded wh-questions, as in (2).

- (2) a. Rotisan pu tha pate.
 asked-3PL where will go-2PL
 'They asked where you'll go.'
- b. *Rotisan tha pate pu.
 asked-3PL will go-2PL where
 '*They asked you'll go where?'

Predicates like *rotisan* ('asked') in (2) are so-called rogative, in the sense that they typically select interrogative complements (see Grimshaw 1979 for an early categorization, and Lahiri 2002 for a more recent discussion). Descriptively speaking, the ungrammaticality of (2b), compared to the grammatical (2a), appears to suggest that a wh-in-situ question cannot be selected by rogative predicates, as opposed to wh-fronting.

Evidently, the contrast in (2) is not idiosyncratic to Greek, but, as suggested by Bobaljik and Wurmbrand (2015), seems to be attested in all 'optional' wh-in-situ languages, and can be captured under the generalization in (3).²

- (3) DSQ/*wh-in-situ* generalization:
 If a language has wh-movement (to Spec,CP), then wh-movement is obligatory in indirect questions.
 Equivalently: If a wh-movement language allows 'optional' wh-in-situ, the in-situ construction is blocked in selected questions.

For Bobaljik and Wurmbrand (2015), wh-in-situ is a 'question with declarative syntax' (DSQ), meaning that the C-head introducing wh-in-situ questions bears no Q-feature. This, according to the authors, explains why wh-in-situ is ungrammatical in selected questions.³

Returning to Greek, we may take the ungrammaticality in (2b), compared to the licit (2a), to provide empirical support to the generalization in (3). However, in the present paper, I show that, despite appearances for the opposite direction, Greek wh-in-situ constructions are not blocked in selected questions. In fact, I show that wh-in-situ constructions are not blocked in selected contexts, more generally. This is because, as I show, C introducing a wh-in-situ clause bears no association with the wh-in-situ element. This predicts that a clause containing a wh-in-situ element may be the complement of any type of clause-selecting predicate provided that C heading the clause (selectee) satisfies the selectional requirements of the predicate

¹ Unless otherwise noticed, all wh-in-situ instances in the English translations in the glossings are intended with a true 'information-seeking' (i.e., non-echo) interpretation.

² While Bobaljik and Wurmbrand (2015) argue that the generalization in (3) in the text extends to all 'optional' wh-in-situ languages, I am aware of one exception, namely Lombard varieties, which seem to permit wh-in-situ in selected questions, as reported by Manzini and Savoia (2011).

³ Contrary to true wh-in-situ languages, like Japanese, where wh-in-situ is the default wh-strategy of selected questions (see Bobaljik and Wurmbrand 2015 for a discussion).

(selector). In other words, a wh-in-situ element surfacing in an embedded clause has always a long-distance question reading (marked in the matrix clause), with the wh-in-situ element having no association with the embedded C. From this perspective, wh-in-situ is not ‘optional’ to wh-fronting, but a wh-strategy in its own right. The rest of the discussion unfolds as follows: after I present some basic properties of Greek wh-in-situ (section 2), I provide an analysis that places the generalization in (3) in more formal terms (section 3). Section 4 is the conclusion.

2. Some basic properties of wh-in-situ in Greek

In this section, I consider wh-in-situ questions in Greek, in terms of selection, movement and the discourse.⁴ Let us begin with selection, in the context of the grammatical wh-in situ question in (4).

- (4) Rotisan an pighate pu?
 Asked-3PL if went-3PL where
 ‘They asked if you went where?’

Wh-in-situ is embedded within an interrogative clause, headed by *an* (‘if’), which is selected by the rogative predicate *rotisan* (‘asked’), and the result is grammatical. Notice that (4) yields a wh-question interpretation (from *pu* ‘where’) and a polar question (yes/no) reading (from *an*). It would be counterintuitive to assume that the embedded, interrogative C is associated both with *if* and the wh-in-situ, for the simple reason that the two readings are mutually exclusive. Even more so, the question reading of the wh-in-situ element travels all the way up to the matrix clause, and is not trapped in the embedded clause. This means that the C heading the embedded interrogative clause is not associated with the wh-in-situ element (and cannot be after all). So, the grammaticality of (4) says that wh-in-situ may be embedded within a clause selected by a rogative predicate as long as the embedded C satisfies the predicate’s selectional requirements for a Q(uestion)-complement. In short, (4) is a long-distance wh-in-situ question that bears no association with the embedded C.

Lack of association between embedded C and long-distance wh-in-situ is rather obvious in grammatical cases like (5).

- (5) a. Ipan oti pighate pu?
 said-3PL that went-2pl where
 ‘They said that you went where?’
 b. Kserun oti pighate pu?
 know-3PL that went-2pl where
 ‘They know that you went where?’

In both (5a) and (5b), the clauses hosting the wh-in-situ *pu* (‘where’) are headed by the declarative *oti* (‘that’). (5a) is complement to the antirogative predicate *ipan* (‘said’) and (5b) to the responsive *kserun* (‘know’). Similarly to (4), both (5a) and (5b) discharge wh-question readings that cannot possibly be associated with the embedded declarative C. Besides, just as in (4), in (5), the question-reading of the wh-in-situ element is available in the matrix clause.

Turning to issues revolving around movement, witness (6).

⁴ Unless otherwise noticed, all the empirical facts to be discussed are from Vlachos (2012) and Vlachos and Chiou (2020).

- (6) a. Se timorise [_{CP} epidhi ipes ti]?
 you-CL punished-2SG because said-2SG what
 ‘S/he punished you because you said what?’
 b. *Ti se timorise [_{CP} epidhi ipes <ti>?]
 what you-CL punished-2SG because said-2SG
 ‘*What did s/he punish you because you said?’

As we may observe in (6a), *wh*-in-situ is grammatical inside an adjunct clause, which constitutes a strong island for typical cases of movement, as the ungrammaticality of (6b) shows (a lexical item enclosed within angle brackets stands for a copy).

Next, consider *wh*-in-situ inside a weak island, as in (7).

- (7) Ala dhen tha pane pu?
 but NEG will go-3PL where
 ‘But they won’t go where?’

Typically, weak-island effects are not evidence for ‘overt’ movement (akin to strong islands in (6b)), but for ‘covert’ (see Szabolcsi 2006 for an overview). Negative operators are usually assumed to induce a weak-island effect. So, (7) says that a negative operator scoping over a *wh*-in-situ element does not lead to ungrammaticality. Or, to put it in a way consistent with strong-island effects, (7) shows that *wh*-in-situ does not move ‘covertly’, either; hence, the absence of the relevant weak-island effect. To bring the argument about islandhood (both strong and weak) home, the grammaticality of both (6a) and (7) strongly suggests that *wh*-in-situ bears no association with the C that heads the clause hosting the *wh*-in-situ element.

A piece of corroborating evidence for the lack of ‘covert’ movement of *wh*-in-situ comes from the scope of *wh*-adjuncts, as in (8).

- (8) a. Ke efighes toso noris apo to parti pos?
 and left-2SG such early from the party how
 (i) ‘How did you leave the party that early?’
 (ii) #‘How come you left the party that early?’
 b. Ke pos efighes toso noris apo to parti?
 and how left-2SG such early from the party
 (i) ‘How did you leave the party that early?’
 (ii) ‘How come you left the party that early?’

The *wh*-in-situ adjunct *pos* (‘how’), in (8a), may only yield an event-reading related to the clausal predicate (here, *efighes* ‘left’). This reading surfaces at the vP-area of the clause. So, a possible continuation of the question in (8a-i) is ‘by car or taxi?’. On the other hand, a fact-related reading that inquires about the entire proposition, namely ‘the fact you left the party’ is infelicitous (cf., (8a-ii); the sign ‘#’ shows infelicity to context). To be sure, a continuation of the short ‘you said you’d stay longer’, would be quite odd in the context (8a-ii). As Starke (2001) shows, who is the first to discuss the argument vis-à-vis (8) in the context of French *wh*-in-situ questions, fact-related readings are licensed at the clausal left-periphery, in the CP-area. As we may observe in (8b), both event-related (cf., (8b-i)) and fact-related (cf., (8b-ii)) readings are available in *wh*-fronting. In short, empirical evidence of the kind in (8a) suggest lack of (‘covert’) *wh*-movement, which in turn, implies lack of association of *wh*-in-situ with C.

The final property of *wh*-in-situ that I want to discuss in this section concerns the relation of *wh*-in-situ questions with the discourse. To be more precise, witness (9).

- (9) a. Speaker A: To leoforio ksekinise apo tin afetiria ikosi lepta prin
 the bus started from the terminal twenty minutes ago
 ‘The bus left the terminal twenty minutes ago.’
 b. Speaker B: #(Ke) ftani pote?
 and arrives when
 ‘And arrives when?’

In examining the pragmatic properties of wh-in-situ questions in Greek (among others), Vlachos and Chiou (2020) go in great lengths to show that wh-in-situ always implies the presence of a conjunctive *ke* (‘and’), which requires that the question expressed is linked to an available discourse. This is illustrated in cases like (9), where the wh-in-situ question in (9b), becomes infelicitous without *ke*.

To be sure, the necessity of anchoring wh-in-situ to the discourse is evident in ‘out-of-the-blue’ contexts like (10).

- (10) *Ja xara, jinete ti?
 hello is-happening what
 ‘Hi there, how’s it going?’

In (10), wh-in-situ is not just infelicitous but leads to a downright ungrammatical result.

To sum up, the empirical evidence discussed in the present section shows that embedded wh-in-situ always has a long-distance reading. That is, the embedded C bears no relation to the wh-in-situ element. The embedded clause may be selected by any type of clause-selecting predicate, as long as C introducing the embedded clause (selectee) satisfies the selectional requirements of the predicate (selector). Despite being ‘in-situ’, in that there is no movement whatsoever, wh-in-situ has a matrix question reading, and is always tied to the discourse.

The analysis I put forward in the next section, derives all the above properties of wh-in-situ questions and formally predicts Bobaljik’s and Wurmbrand’s (2015) generalization in (3).

3. The building blocks of ‘optional’ wh-in-situ questions

The approach to wh-in-situ I wish to take in the present section extends the analysis offered by Vlachos and Chiou (2020), which places wh-in-situ questions in Greek at the Syntax-Pragmatics interface. To be more precise, consider (11).

- (11) [_{SAP} [_{SA} Ke [_{CP} C [_{TP} idhes [_{v/VP} pjon]]]]]
 and saw-2SG who-ACC
 ‘And you saw who?’

Vlachos and Chiou (2020) argue that a S(peech) A(ct) layer (*a la* Speas and Tenny 2003 and Haegeman and Hill 2013) projects on top of the wh-in-situ clause (CP). This SAP is headed by an optionally realized ‘ke’, which anchors wh-in-situ to the discourse (for details on how this is done, see Vlachos and Chiou, 2020). The authors also argue that C introducing the wh-in-situ clause bears no Q(uestion)-feature, so C establishes no relation with the wh-in-situ element. Instead, wh-in-situ yields a question interpretation because wh-elements in Greek are inherently interrogative.⁵

⁵ Although see Roussou and Vlachos (2023) for a morphosyntactic treatment that takes Greek wh-elements to be (bare) indefinites, to which the interrogative property is supplied word-externally (by a relevant operator at C).

The analysis in (11) captures the lack of association between C and the wh-in-situ element (due to the absence of a relevant feature on C), along with the fact that wh-in-situ is tied to the discourse (due to the presence of *ke* at SA). However, it does not explain yet the other two properties of embedded wh-in-situ examined in the previous section. Specifically, embedded wh-in-situ: (i) is available to selection by any type of clause-embedding predicate (rogative; responsive; antirogative); and (ii) has a long-distance reading (available in the matrix clause) despite the lack of movement (and a corresponding association with embedded C). These are the properties of wh-in-situ I want to concentrate on for the remaining of the present section, beginning with selection, while the long-distance reading enters the discussion at the end.

Clearly, the fact that C heading the clause that contains the wh-in-situ element can be selected by any clause-selecting predicate, means that this C labels the clause. Let us phrase this labeling in more formal terms. On empirical grounds independent to ‘optional’ wh-in-situ, Cecchetto and Donati (2010) propose that the label of any syntactic object is predicted by the algorithm in (12).

(12) *Probing Algorithm*

The label of a syntactic object $\{\alpha, \beta\}$ is the feature(s) that act(s) as a probe of the merging operation creating $\{\alpha, \beta\}$.

(Cecchetto and Donati 2010: 245)

For Cecchetto and Donati (2010), who elaborate on Chomsky (2008), the notion of Probe implicates selection, triggering External Merge (see also Chomsky 2013, and Cecchetto and Donati 2015). Although this is not specifically discussed by Cecchetto and Donati (2010), it is natural to extend their (12) to Internal Merge, established under Probe-Goal (Agree) relations. More precisely, we may assume that if a head acts as a Probe for Merge, then this happens globally, that is either for External (selection) or Internal (Agree), on the standard assumption that there is no formal predisposition for any of the two types of Merge (see Chomsky *et al.* 2023 for a recent elaboration). So, for our present purposes, the relevant C-head that provides the label acts as a Probe, which may trigger either External or Internal Merge. Now, as we saw in the previous section, C is actually dissociated from the wh-in-situ element. Under current terminology, this means that C does not probe for the wh-in-situ element. To make this point more precise, consider the examples in (13) below ((13a), (13b) and (13c) are repeated from (4), (5), and (2a) respectively).

- | | | | | | |
|------|----|----------------------------------|---|---------------------|------------------|
| (13) | a. | Rotisan
Asked-3PL | $[\text{CP}, +\text{Q}]$
an
if | pighate
went-3PL | pu]?
where |
| | | ‘They asked if you went where?’ | | | |
| | b. | Ipan/Kserun
said-3PL/know-3PL | $[\text{CP}, -\text{Q}]$
oti
that | pighate
went-2pl | pu]?
where |
| | | ‘They said that you went where?’ | | | |
| | c. | Rotisan
asked-3PL | $[\text{CP}, +\text{Q}]$
pu
where | tha
will | pate].
go-2PL |
| | | ‘They asked where you’ll go.’ | | | |

The embedded C may be either ‘declarative’ or ‘interrogative’, carrying either a ‘-Q’ or a ‘+Q’ feature respectively. A declarative C surfaces as *oti* (‘that’), while an interrogative C is lexicalized as *an* (‘if’). In (13a), the label of the embedded clause is +Q, and as such, it can be selected by the ‘rogative’ predicate *rotisan*. In (13b), the label is -Q, and the embedded clause may be selected either by the ‘antirogative’ predicate *ipan* or by the ‘responsive’ *kserun*. Now, under (12), if there

hence, trigger Internal Merge. SA_{ASK} makes sure to turn wh-in-situ into a ‘question’, assigning matrix scope to the wh-element, despite the lack of movement. Moreover, I assume that Dayal’s (2023) SA_{ASK} is implicitly occupied (and optionally lexicalized) by Vlachos’s and Chiou (2020) conjunctive *ke* (‘and’), which anchors the wh-in-situ question to the discourse.⁶ (15b-d) are instances of embedded wh-in-situ: In (15b), embedded C_{+Q} is lexicalized by *an*, and is selected by the matrix rogative predicate *rotisan*. I propose that the question-reading of the wh-in-situ element travels all the way up to the matrix clause due to SA_{ASK} ; hence, the long-distance effect in the interpretation of wh-in-situ, despite the lack of the corresponding syntactic movement.⁷ Likewise, in (15c), the embedded C_Q is selected by the matrix antirogative predicate *nomizun*. Crucially, notice that despite the declarative interpretation of the embedded C, the wh-in-situ discharges a question-reading licensed in the matrix clause due to SA_{ASK} . This is exactly the situation in (15d), with the only difference being that the selecting predicate belongs to the class of responsives (carrying the relevant change in the meaning).

The proposal developed in the present section about wh-in-situ allows us to place Bobaljik’s and Wurmbrand’s (2015) generalization on more principled grounds. Consider again their generalization in (3), repeated below in (16) for convenience.

(16) DSQ/*wh-in-situ* generalization:

If a language has wh-movement (to Spec,CP), then wh-movement is obligatory in indirect questions.

Equivalently: If a wh-movement language allows ‘optional’ wh-in-situ, the in-situ construction is blocked in selected questions.

Viewed from the perspective of the present account of wh-in-situ, the generalization in (16) follows straightforwardly from the assumption that wh-in-situ is never selected. In other words, the in-situ construction *per se* is not blocked in selected contexts, it is simply ‘invisible’ to selection as a wh-construction because, as we have seen, wh-in-situ is not associated with C heading the clause that the wh-in-situ element surfaces at. What is available for selection is the C-head itself, which must yield the right label for Merge (i.e., selection by a matrix predicate). Dissociation of C from wh-in-situ opens the way for more labeling possibilities of the clause containing a wh-in-situ element (i.e., declarative or interrogative).

To put this section together, the interpretation of a wh-in-situ question is always long-distance, despite the lack of the relevant syntactic movement, due to a Speech Act layer that projects on top of the wh-in-situ construction and bears the illocutionary force of asking (from the part of the speaker). This layer is implicitly occupied by a conjunctive operator ‘and’ that anchors the wh-in-situ question to the discourse. A matrix wh-in-situ construction lacks a C-layer to probe for the wh-element and trigger wh-movement (via selection). In embedded wh-in-situ constructions, the C-head on top of the clause containing the wh-element may be either interrogative or declarative, as is not associated with the wh-element; hence, the clause as such is open to selection by any clause-selecting predicate.

⁶ A reviewer suggests that ‘ke’ might surface in PersP, as the latter phrase actually links the sentence to the discourse, and ‘ke’ is not a marker of ASK as such. This is an interesting suggestion that I will leave to future research.

⁷ A reviewer points out that the present account of the long-distance reading of wh-in-situ in terms of Dayal (2023) could equally be replaced by more standard treatments such as Nishigauchi (1990), Reinhart (1997), or Cable (2010). Due to the ‘squib’ nature of the present paper, a comparison among Dayal’s (2023) proposal and more standard approaches to question-formation, on the basis of wh-in-situ, has to be left to future research.

4. Conclusion

The main argument developed in the present paper is that a wh-in-situ question in Greek does not behave as a typical wh-question because C heading this question bears no association with the wh-element (unlike standard wh-questions). This is why C introducing wh-in-situ may be not necessarily interrogative, but may also be declarative. So, what is actually selected by an appropriate matrix predicate is not a wh-construction, but a clause that contains a wh-element. Wh-in-situ surfaces ‘in-situ’ because there is no left-peripheral Probe that this element can merge. Despite its lack of movement, the wh-in-situ element acquires a matrix scope due to the illocutionary force of ‘asking’ (from the part of the speaker), which is carried over by a Speech Act layer that surfaces on top of the wh-in-situ construction and anchors the latter to the discourse. So, strictly speaking, ‘optional’ wh-in-situ is not the counterpart of wh-fronting, but a construction in its own right. This means that any generalization about wh-in-situ should not be stated in terms of wh-fronting.

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