

Language and Variation: A Study of English and Persian Wh-questions

Laya Heidari Darani

Department of English, Falavarjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

heidari@iaufala.ac.ir

.....
Received: 2015.9.21

Revisions received: 2016.3.8

Accepted: 2016.7.17
.....

Abstract

It was claimed by variationists that languages experience variation at all levels, which is supposed to be patterned. The present study aimed at exploring how variation occurred in English and Persian wh-questions. More specifically, it investigated whether such a variation was systematic and patterned. To this end, a modified version of the Edinburgh Map Task was used in data collection. The population of this study was 60 Canadian and Persian native speakers who performed the task through the construction of wh-question variants. The results indicated that both languages experienced variation in the construction of wh-questions. However, Persian proved to be more variable than English because it allowed more wh-question variants to be produced. Moreover, this variation was patterned in English and Persian individually, yet a systematic variation could not be observed between these two languages. It followed that the different mind-sets of the Canadian and Iranian participants which were affected by social and cultural factors might account for such a variation.

Keywords: Variation, Systematic/Patterned Variation, Variationist Sociolinguistics, Wh-questions

Introduction

People from different geographical places speak differently and even within the same small community people might speak differently according to their age, gender, ethnicity and social or educational background, cultural or socio-economic background and even geographical location. Thus, there exists a broad range of factors leading to variation in language. Labov (1972), for instance, specifically pointed out that variables such as the listener, the context, and the objectives of the communication could be considered as the reasons for variation.

All native speakers adjust their speech patterns depending on context: from relaxed conversation in familiar surroundings to a more formal setting. We all have a range of different sentences—for talking to children, talking to friends, making a presentation or talking to a foreigner and we modify our speech accordingly. In most cases, the changes we make are extremely subtle but noticeable and a perfectly natural way of making the people we are talking to feel at ease. This process is often subconscious and we are simply expressing a shared identity or group solidarity or attempting to present a certain image.

The idea of variation in speech originates in the works of scholars working on Variationist Sociolinguistics. Tagliamonte (2005) claimed that the leading characteristics of language were in balance with each other—linguistic structure and social structure; grammatical meaning and social meaning—those properties of language which required reference to both external (social) and internal (systemic) factors if they were to be explained.

Considering the claims made on variation in language, two research questions are raised in this descriptive study: 1) How do English and Persian vary among its native speakers of the languages concerning the construction of wh-questions? The answer to this question leads to the second question: 2) Is this variation systematic and patterned? In addition to answering these questions, the present study compares English and Persian wh-questions produced by the native speakers of the languages in terms of type and frequency of the variants.

Variationist Sociolinguistics

The Variationist Sociolinguistics approach has evolved over four decades as a discipline that integrates the social and linguistic aspects of language. Tagliamonte (2005) claimed that Variationist Sociolinguistics is most aptly described as the branch of linguistics which studies the leading characteristics of language in balance with each other—linguistic structure and social structure; grammatical meaning and social meaning—those properties of language which require reference to both external (social) and internal (systemic) factors if they are to be explained. She added that among the factors upon which the essence of Variationsit Sociolinguistics depends is *orderly heterogeneity* or what Labov (1982) referred to as *normal heterogeneity*. Heterogeneity is essentially the observation that language varies. Furthermore, heterogeneity which was claimed by Labov (1982) was not random, but patterned. It reflects order and structure within the grammar. In this respect, the Variationist Approach to discourse which stems largely from studies of variation and change in language assumes that linguistic variation (heterogeneity) is patterned both socially and linguistically, and that such patterns can be discovered only through systematic investigation of speech community. Thus, variationists try to discover patterns in the distribution of alternative ways of saying the same thing; that is, the social and linguistic factors that are responsible for variation in ways of speaking (Schiffrin, 1994). Following the discussion, in his project of stylistic and social stratification of (*th*) in New York City, Labov (1972) observed that in every context, members of the speech community were differentiated by the use of the variable (*th*); nonetheless, every group behaved in the same way. However, individuals were not consciously aware of this general pattern for all groups because each individual was limited in his/her social contacts. Thus, this striking regularity of the overall pattern was impressive.

English Wh-questions

Goodall (2006) asserted that wh-questions are normally formed by movement of a wh word or phrase to the initial position, and they also require subject-auxiliary inversion in non-subject wh-questions, as in (1).

- (1) What will John say?

If no other auxiliary is available, the auxiliary *do* must be used, as in (2):

(2) Where does Mary live?

Rizzi (1991) argued that in wh-questions, the locus of the [+wh] specification must be the head that contains the independent Tense specification of the whole sentence; I-to-C raises [+wh] Infl high enough so as to establish the required checking configuration. The occurrence of [+wh] in an embedded Comp is determined by lexical selection, so I-to-C doesn't need to take place.

Following Chomsky (1995) and Radford (1996), Youhanaei and Gouniband Shoushtari (1999) assumed that English interrogative clauses are complementizer phrases (CPs) headed by a strong COMP (C) which contains the strong question affix [Q]. The strong Q affix needs an overt head to attach to. The shortest movement principle requires that this head must be the auxiliary in I. That is, auxiliary moves from the head I position in IP into the Head C position in CP. Since Q also carries a [wh] specifier-feature, the wh-operators move to spec-CP in order to check the interrogative specifier –feature carried by Q. Thus, the two properties of [Q] in English demand two types of movements: head movement to (C position) and operator movement to (spec-CP position).

(3) What did John buy?

[_{CP} What_i [_C did_j +Q [_{IP} John t_j [_{VP} t_j buy t_i]]]]

However, in the L1 acquisition process of English wh-questions, Tornyova and Valian (2009) maintained that English-speaking children failed to invert subject and the auxiliary as in (4) and (5). They did not follow the standard pattern of subject-auxiliary inversion; thus, they were recognized as ungrammatical structures. Although such structures were produced mainly by children and not the adults, they would be considered as a variant of English wh-questions.

(4) *Where daddy is going?

(5) *What mommy can do?

It was worthy of mentioning that despite the long history of research on children's acquisition of questions, the source of these errors was still unknown (Tornyova and Valian, 2009). Nevertheless, Rowland and Pine (2000) believed that the uninversion period in which the child failed to

invert the subject and the auxiliary in *wh*-questions was due to a function of the frequency of *wh*-word + auxiliary collocations in the input: the more frequent a particular collocation was in the input, the more likely it was to be inverted in the child's speech.

In his comprehensive book on English grammar, Cowan (2008) categorized English *wh*-questions to four types based on the purpose they served for the person who posed the questions. These four types were: *information wh*-questions, *repeat please wh*-questions, *elaborate please wh*-questions, and *alternative wh*-questions.

Information *wh*-questions

Information *wh*-questions are the basic type. They are used to request information which has not been previously mentioned (Cowan, 2008). They themselves are subdivided into four categories as well. The first type of information *wh*-questions indicated in (6) is the main type in which *wh*-fronting and inversion occur simultaneously.

- (6) a. You went to the concert with someone.
 b. Who did you go to the concert with?
 c. With whom did you go to the concert?

The second variant of an information *wh*-question is when the subject of a declarative sentence is questioned and no fronting or inversion rules apply. It is known as *wh*-questions about a subject as shown in (7).

- (7) a. Someone needs a life.
 b. Who needs a life?

Another form of information *wh*-questions are made with *How* + *Adjective/Adverb*. In these forms, *how* is combined with an adjective or adverb to form *wh*-questions such as *how many*, *how long*, *how often*, and so on, as shown in (8).

- (8) a. The press conference lasted for two hours.
 b. How long did the press conference last?

The last type of information *wh*-questions in Cowan's categorization is known as *embedded wh*-questions. The *wh*-question is, indeed, embedded inside a longer sentence.

- (9) a. What was she doing?
 b. I want to know *what she was doing*.

Repeat please wh-questions

Cowan (2008) asserted that repeat please questions were often uttered when the asker either did not hear or understand the information she or he was given or was having difficulty accepting it. This type of wh-question frequently functioned as a request for verification. Repeat please questions can have two word orders: question word order with the wh-word fronted, as in (10a), or normal declarative statement word order, shown in (10b). Both have rising intonation pattern. A greater degree of stress on the wh-word and a higher rise in the intonation patterns signal a greater degree of surprise on the part of the asker.

(10) Fred: When did Susan come home this morning?

Alice: At five o'clock.

Fred: a. When did she get in?

b. She got in when?

Elaborate please wh-questions

Elaborate please questions are used when the asker has already been told something but needs more information regarding what was said. A question is then posed about someone, something, or somewhere mentioned by the speaker. In (11), Al is trying to sell his car, and Fred has found a prospective buyer. He tells Al that this person will come and look at the car tomorrow. Al wants more information about the time that has been arranged for the inspection. In (12), the police officer needs more precise information about the person before he or she can act.

(11) Fred: He'll come by tomorrow and have a look at the car.

Al: When will he come by?

(12) Susan: Officer, that guy over there just stole my purse.

Police Officer: Which guy?

Elaborate please questions can either consist of a longer sentence such as (13a) or a shorter answer such as (13b). The wh-word is always stressed, and questions consisting of two or more words carry up-fall intonation.

(13) Sandra: We lived for over a year in France.

Joan: a. Where in France?

b. Where?

Alternative wh-questions

Cowan (2008) proceeded with his categorization of English wh-questions, suggesting *alternative* wh-questions. They offered a choice between at least two alternative answers. It was noted that the pattern of wh-questions in point was the same as a standard wh-question as in (14).

(14) Which color do you like best? Yellow or orange?

Persian Wh-questions

Pro-drop languages allow subjects to be phonetically covert in the sentence.

Chomsky (1988) claims that the subject of a clause, in a pro-drop language, can be suppressed. Persian which is a SOV language, unlike English and French, is a pro-drop language. Consider the following example in Persian (Vaez Dalili, 2009):

(15) *pro* *raftand* *be* *xaneh*.
pro go.PST.3pl to home.
 They went home.

As this example indicates, the subject of the sentence which is *ânhâ* is dropped and Persian speakers find out this pronominal subject is optional in the finite Persian clause due to its recoverability from the verb ending *-and*; in other words, it can be either present or absent (Vaez Dalili, 2009). Accordingly, a sentence can begin either with the subject or the verb whose ending represents the subject. This pro-drop property of the language exists in interrogatives, as well. While formulating a wh- or yes/no question, Persian speakers can drop the subject and begin the question with the verb. Again here, the verb ending shows the subject.

Persian is a wh-in-situ language; that is, wh-expressions do not get preposed, but rather occur in their base position (Karimi 1989; Lazard 1992; Bateni 1995; Mahootian 1997, Youhanaee 1997). On the contrary, Kahnemuyipour (2001) stated that Persian was neither a language with syntactic wh-movement (i.e., movement of a wh-phrase to [Spec, CP]) nor a wh-in-situ language; rather it should be classified with languages in which

wh-phrases have been argued to undergo focus movement. He argued that postverbal wh-arguments and wh-adjuncts moved to a preverbal position in Persian, as shown in (16).

(16) a. Ali ketâb-o gozâsht ro u miz.

Ali book-OM put.PST.3sg on table

Ali put the book on the table.

b. Ali ketâb-o kojâ gozâsht?

Ali book-OM where put.PST.3sg

Where did Ali put the book?

As the following example (17) indicates, this occurs to preverbal wh-arguments and wh-adjuncts as well, although movement in such instances does not result in a difference in word order.

(17) a. Ali ye sâat pish raft xune

Ali one hour ago go.PST.3sg home

Ali went home one hour ago.

b. Ali key raft xune?

Ali when go.PST.3sg home

When did Ali go home?

Thus, Kahnemuyipour (2001) proposed that in all wh-questions in Persian, the wh-word underwent syntactic movement to a focus position above vP (i.e., [Spec, vP]). It was noted that this movement was different from ordinary syntactic wh-movement, which was the movement of a wh-phrase to [Spec, CP], (perhaps) to type a clause as a wh-question.

The idea of Persian wh-questions was discussed by Adli (2010), too. He held that although Persian was said to be a wh-in-situ language, it exhibited a large number of word order variants. This was demonstrated with a set of wh-questions. Sentences (18a) and (18a') show two forms with the temporal wh-adjunct at preverbal (though non-initial) position. Their difference lies in the linear order of direct object and wh-adjunct. (18b) shows another possibility of 'rearrangement': The wh-adjunct is still preverbal (and follows the object as in (18a), but the subject stands in postverbal position. Also, wh-object NPs can occur in non-initial, preverbal position, as shown

in the examples (18c) and (18c'). OM represents an *object marker* modifying the whole phrase rather than the head noun, which has been analyzed by Ghomeshi (1997) as a phrasal affix (this notion goes back to Nevis' 1985 analysis of Finnish particle clitics).

(18) a. Sârâ ketâb-esh-o key xaride?

Sara book -her-OM when bought
'When did Sara buy her book?'

(18) a'. Sârâ key ketâb-esh-o xaride?

Sara when book-her-OM bought

(18) b. Ketâb-esh-o key xaride Sârâ?

book -her -OM when bought Sara

(18) c. Bâbak ki-ro emrouz zade?

Babak who-OM today hit

(18) c'. Bâbak emrouz ki-ro zade?

Babak today who-OM hit

Who has Babak hit today?

The following examples show that the wh-element can occur in initial position. (19a) is an example with a wh-adjunct, (19b) a variant of it with postverbal subject, and (19c) an example with a wh-NP.

(19) a. Key Sârâ ketâb-esh-o xaride?

When Sara book-her-OM bought

(19) b. Key ketâb-esh-o xaride Sârâ?

When book-her-OM bought Sara

(19) c. Ki-ro Bâbak emrouz zade?

Who-OM Babak today hit

However, it is unacceptable to place the wh-element into postverbal position.

(20) *a. Sârâ ketâb-esh-o xaride key?

Sara book-her-OM bought when

(20) *b. Xaride key ketâb-esh-o Sârâ?

bought when book -her -OM Sara

(20) *c. Bâbak emrouz zade ki-ro?

Babak today hit who-OM

Following these discussions, Sadat-Tehrani (2011) believed that the Persian wh-words remained in situ in their unmarked order. Consider the unmarked declarative in (21).

- (21) Bache-hâ az un maqâze ketâb xaridan.
Child-pl from that shop book buy.PST.3pl
'The children bought books from that shop.'

In this sentence, which has the order of S PP O V, every element can be questioned about using a wh-word. Three of the possible wh-questions for (21) are given in (22).

- (22) a. Kiâ az un maqâze ketâb xaridan?
b. bache-hâ az kojâ ketâb xaridan?
c. bache-hâ az un maqâze chi xaridan?

The above examples indicate that the wh-words are in their normal position. Such words can also be topicalized (Raghibdust, 1994) or moved due to scrambling (Karimi, 2003, 2005). The sentence in (23) exemplifies the topicalization of *chi*.

- (23) Chi bache-hâ az un maqâze xaridan?
'What was it the children bought from that shop?'

Method

Participants

The population of the current study consisted of 60 Canadian English and Persian native speakers. The Canadian group was composed of 30 male and female native speakers of English age-ranged between 18 and 26. They were all undergraduate students studying non-linguistics majors at Glendon College, York University, Toronto, Canada. They asserted that they were all born, raised, and still were residing in Toronto, Canada. Due to the socio-cultural background of the people who lived in Canada, there could have been the possibility of children who were born to non-Canadian parents;

hence, they could speak and be affected by other languages. However, the Canadian participants of this research project were assumed to be originally Canadian English native speakers. Most of them also worked in their leisure time after school. Based on the information given on the background information questionnaire about their professions and their parents' professions, they belonged to middle-class families.

Canada accommodates various nationalities in itself; it follows that multilingualism and thus multiculturalism is incontrovertible and students who are supposed to be Canadian might have been born to non-Canadian parents. In this case, finding undergraduate students who belonged to all originally Canadian ancestors was inconceivable. English and French are the dominant languages spoken in this country in spite of the fact that people could speak other languages at home. Although French is the second-dominant language spoken in Canada, it is commonly used by neither the students nor the people. The only French speakers are the residents of the Quebec Province whose first language is French and second one is English. In this project, one of the requirements of the Canadian participants was their level of French proficiency. To minimize the probable effect of French on the English native speakers' linguistic performance, the researcher orally questioned them about their level of French proficiency; they, indeed, were not evaluated through taking French tests. They all claimed to be elementary learners of French and affected by neither French nor their mother tongue. They affirmed on the background information questionnaires distributed among them that they conversed with their parents and siblings in English. The participation of them in this study was not random; rather, it was based on two criteria: the participants' nationality and thus their knowledge of French and their majors.

The Persian native speakers who formed the second group of the participants were 30 female undergraduate students studying at Falavarjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 26. Their selection was non-random from students majoring in Biology, Microbiology, and Biochemistry. They were all from middle-class families based on the information they provided on their background questionnaire which

contained questions about their profession as well as their parents'. Contrary to the Canadian participants, none of them worked.

The Persian participants were all born to parents from Isfahan. To reduce the probable effect of English on Persian native speakers' linguistic performance, the researcher assessed the level of English proficiency of the participants via their performance on the university entrance exam. On this test, no one had got the minimum score in English; accordingly, they were all required to take the Pre-requisite English course upon entrance to the university and starting to study.

Instrumentation

The data collection instruments used in this study including the background information questionnaire and Edinburgh map task are as follows.

Background Information Questionnaire

To select the participants and form a homogeneous sample population, a background information questionnaire in which the social and linguistic characteristics of the participants were generally required was used. The information including the participants' age, gender, profession, parents' profession, their mother tongue and the language spoken at home, and their region of origin were provided on the questionnaires distributed among Canadian and Persian native speakers. The number of years of learning English was also added to the Persian native speakers' questionnaires.

Edinburgh Map Task

Edinburgh Map Task (EMT) was the data elicitation tool used in this study. The Edinburgh Map Task was the modified version of the EMT compiled by Human Communication Research Center (HCRC, 2010). The HCRC Map Task Corpus was produced in response to one of the core problems of work on natural language. Much of the knowledge of language is based on scripted materials, although most language use taking the form of unscripted dialogue with specific communicative goals. The original Edinburgh Map Task is a cooperative task involving two participants. The

two speakers sit opposite one another and each has a map which the other cannot see as there is a barrier placed between them. One speaker—designated the Instruction Giver—has a route marked on his map; the other speaker—the Instruction Follower—has no route. The speakers are told that their goal is to reproduce the Instruction Giver's route by asking questions on the Instruction Follower's map. The maps are not identical and the speakers are told this explicitly at the beginning of their performance.

The modified EMTs in English and Persian were created by the researcher. They were two parallel maps for the Instruction Giver and the Instruction Follower (see the English EMTs in Appendixes A and B). The Instruction Giver's map had fewer items than the Instruction Follower's. The starting and finishing points were not specified on the Instruction Follower's map. There was a special maze inserted in the middle of the map. The maze had several pairs including people's names, objects, fruits, and times. The EMT was piloted twice by ten undergraduate students studying Political Sciences, Psychology, and International Studies at Glendon College, York University, Toronto, Canada. Afterwards, its validity was substantiated by four Canadian and Iranian experts. This task led to natural data collection; thus, it represented a partly real-life situation.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection in Toronto, Canada, and Isfahan, Iran was carried out by the researcher herself, first in Toronto, and then after a six-month interval in Isfahan. Participants of the study were non-randomly selected and paired for the data collection. To have a friendly communication in an informal context, the participants were asked to select their own partners and make the pair by themselves. The researcher did not intervene in pairing them off. Furthermore, the spoken mode was exploited rather than the written one so as to collect natural data. They were recorded in the university classes while they sat opposite one another and there was a barrier between them as they were supposed not to see the partner and his/her map. First, the researcher explained the situation and gave the instructions required for the performance. They were briefed on what the maps would entail and what the Instruction Giver and Follower would do from the beginning. The

Instruction Giver was asked not to give extra information while directing the Instruction Follower and to motivate him/her to inquire more information.

Giving directions essential to perform the task at the beginning, the researcher left the participants to do the task. Both participants in a pair were supposed to run the task; thus, a 4-5 day interval was applied between the recordings of each pair. The interval intended to avoid the probable imitation in the construction of the wh-question variants from the first Instruction Follower to the second in a pair. Accordingly, a pair did their performance in a session, then 4 or 5 days later, they met again, changed their roles as Instruction Giver and Follower, and performed the parallel task. The task was similar to what they had performed in the first session. The only difference on the maps used in the first and the second sessions was the location of the items, which was changed.

Each pair's conversation was recorded and transcribed. The frequency and percentage of each wh-question variant were calculated for each conversation. Moreover, the frequency and percentage of the variants were tabulated to clarify the differences in wh-question variants in these two languages.

Results and Discussion

Analyzing wh-questions that Canadian and Persian native speakers made during the conversations they had, the researcher found the following variants of English and Persian wh-questions.

English Wh-question Variants

The English wh-question variants produced by Canadian English native speakers were exemplified as follows.

- (24) a. *How* do you have your page oriented?
b. *Where* to next?
c. *Where*?
d. *How* about shirt or hat?
e. *What* do you mean?
f. *Which* direction should I go next?

- g. *Which* direction?
- h. *Which* time do I choose? 1:10 or 2:20?

Looking into the wh-questions produced by the English participants, the researcher discerned that the four categories found in Cowan's (2008) classification could be identified. They were *information* wh-questions, *repeat please* wh-questions, *elaborate please* wh-questions, and *alternative* wh-questions. The above classification seemed to have some pragmatic function; however, two English and Persian variants were found which could not be included in this classification as far as function was concerned.

The first question was "Where to go?" which was difficult to be grouped under the available categories. The infinitive followed by the wh-word was probably unimportant at first sight and could be ignored totally so that the wh-question could be categorized as an *elaborate please* wh-question. Nevertheless, as the answers to this type of question may vary based on the infinitive followed by the wh-word, the whole phrase should be considered as the wh-question and not just the wh-word. Further, as far as function was concerned, this type of wh-questions inquired information and not elaboration on the previous utterance. Thus, they should be included in information wh-questions; however, following Cowan's classification, they could not.

The second question was "How about shirt or hat?". Pragmatically speaking, such wh-questions are posed to suggest or offer something to someone. In such a context, it seemed that this wh-question inquired information, too. Hence, these wh-questions should be regarded as an information wh-question; nevertheless, considering Cowan's classification, it was not a permissible information wh-question syntactically.

Concerning these two wh-question variants which presumably did not follow Cowan's classification, the researcher revised the previous classifications and a new classification was proposed. In section "Revised Classification of English and Persian Wh-Questions" the wh-questions were categorized based on their syntactic structure rather than pragmatic function.

Persian Wh-question Variants

Examples of Persian wh-question variants produced by Persian native speakers were as follows:

- (25) a. Some'ye matroukeh *kojâ qarâr dâre*?
 Monastery-EZ disused where PAS.locate.PRS.3sg?
 Where is the disused monastery located?
- b. Daryâcheye sharghi *kojâst*?
 Lake-EZ East where be.PRS.3sg
 Where is the East lake?
- c. *Kojâye hesâre tiri mishe*?
 Where-EZ fence picket be.PRS.3sg
 Where is it in relation to the picket fence ?
- d. *Kojâst*?
 Where
 be.PRS.3sg
 Where is it?
- e. Az *kodoum* masir?
 from which way
 From which way?
- f. *Kodoumesho entexâb konam*?
 Which one-EZ-OM choose.PRS.1sg
 Which one do I choose?
- g. Maqâzeye *chi*?
 Shop-EZ what
 What shop?
- h. *Chi*?
 What
 What?
- i. *Chetor beram*?
 How
 go.PRS.1sg
 How do I go?
- j. Hâlâ *che kâr konam*?
 Now what do

PRS.1sg

Now what do I do?

Analyzing these Persian wh-question variants constructed by Persian native speakers in their conversations, the researcher could identify the variants mentioned by the Persian linguists (Kahnemouyipour, 2001; Karimi, 1989, 2003, 2005; Ghomeshi, 1997). However, one variant which was produced by the native speakers of the language was not considered by such linguists. Wh-questions such as *chi* or *kojâst* which were composed of single words were not located among the Persian wh-question variants. It seems that there was no room reserved for such wh-questions in those classifications.

To classify the Persian wh-question variants, the position of the wh-word and that of the subject and the object are of concern. Considering these positions, the wh-questions are classified into *preverbal* and *postverbal* wh-questions which themselves can be subcategorized; *wh-in-situ* questions; and *wh-word-initial* questions. In such a classification, the aforementioned wh-question variants—*chi* and *kojâst*—sound to be up in the air. The researcher recommended a new classification in which all Persian wh-question variants (even the above two variants) can be included. The following section deals with the new classification of such wh-question variants.

Revised Classification of English and Persian Wh-questions

This classification of English wh-question variants, which was mostly syntax-oriented, covered almost all types of variants; thus, no function was considered in it. Vermaat (2005) categorized English wh-questions to wh-ex-situ (wh-fronted) and wh-in-situ questions. The wh-word is kept in the initial position in wh-fronted questions while in wh-in-situ questions, the wh-word is in its original position. (26a-26c) exemplified the English wh-fronted questions.

(26) a. Wh-fronted (WHASV/WHAS)

Wh-word + Auxiliary + Subject + Verb/Wh-word + Auxiliary + Subject (Where do you work?)
(Where are you?)

- b. Wh-fronted (WHV) Wh-word + Verb What happened?

Who played the guitar?

- c. Wh-fronted (WHP) Wh-word + Phrase What?

Which book?

How about a shirt or hat?

In-situ wh-questions in English have the subject followed by the wh-word in post-verbal position as indicated in (27).

- (27) Wh-in-situ (SVWH)

Subject + Verb + Wh-word (You did what?)

Accepting this classification as a more inclusive one, compared to the function-directed ones as Cowan's classification, the researcher could encompass the two probably problematic English wh-questions. If function was disregarded, the questions such as "How about shirt or hat?" and "Where to go?" could be grouped in the wh-fronted (WHP) category. "to go" in "Where to go?" was not assigned any tense and number, and thus it was bare in this respect, the researcher preferred to put it under WHP rather than WHV. Thus, these wh-questions might assign a particular category to themselves.

Given Persian wh-questions, a similar classification was proposed with a specific concern for the location of the wh-word. Following Adli (2010), the researcher classified Persian wh-questions into two main distinct groups: (1) wh-ex-situ (wh-fronted) and (2) wh-in-situ questions. They were represented as follows.

(28) a. Wh-fronted (WHSV)

Wh-word + Subject + Verb

Kojâ to kâr mikoni?

Where you DUR.work.PRS.2sg

Where do you work?

b. Wh-fronted (WHV)

Wh-word + Verb

Kojâ kâr mikoni?

Where DUR.work.PRS.2sg

Where do you work?

c. Wh-fronted (WHVS)

Wh-word + Verb + Subject

Kojâ kâr mikoni to ?

Where DUR.work.PRS.2sg you

Where do you work?

d. Wh-fronted (WH)

Wh-word

Kojâ

Where?

In-situ wh-questions in Persian have the subject followed by the wh-word in pre-verbal position as shown in 29a-29d. 29b, 29c, and 29d, which were post-verbal wh-questions, were assumed to be ungrammatical (Adli, 2010).

(29) a. Wh-in-situ (SWHV)

Subject + Wh-word + Verb

To kojâ kâr mikoni?

You where DUR.work.PRS.2sg

Where do you work?

b. Wh-in-situ (SVWH)

Subject + Verb + Wh-word

To kâr mikoni kojâ?

You DUR.work.PRS.2sg where

Where do you work?

c. Wh-in-situ (VWH)

Verb + Wh-word

Kâr mikoni kojâ?

DUR.work.PRS.2sg where

Where do you work?

d. Wh-in-situ (VWHS)

Verb + Wh-word + Subject

Kâr mikoni kojâ to?

DUR.Work.PRS.2sg where you

Where do you work?

This classification could accommodate various kinds of Persian wh-questions particularly the ones which were disregarded by the Persian linguists. “Chi” or “kojâst” were the ones that were not found in any category. However, in this classification, they could appear under Persian wh-fronted questions (WH).

Concerning all the examples given by the aforementioned Persian linguists, presumably two of the three Persian wh-questions claimed by Adli (2010) as ungrammatical were conceivable. The wh-words in these questions were both in postverbal position. Although Persian allowed more variation to be produced with respect to the place of the wh-word, these two variants (SVWH and VWH) were supposed to be normally used by Persian native speakers, but not with a high frequency.

Frequency and Percentage of the English and Persian Wh-question Variants

Variation was expected to occur in English and Persian wh-questions and the results revealed it. Type, frequency, and percentage of both English and Persian variants were tabulated as follows.

Table 1

Frequency and Percentage of English Wh-question Variants

Variant	Frequency	Percentage (%)
WHASV/WHAS	931	77.49
WHV	48	4.05
WHP	167	14.00
SVWH	53	4.44
Total	1199	100

Table 2

Frequency and Percentage of Persian Wh-question Variants

Variant	Frequency	Percentage (%)
WHSV	15	0.94
WHVS	10	0.55
WHV	977	57.46
WH	224	13.34
SVWH	7	0.36
SWHV	400	24.48
VWHS	0	0.00
VWH	48	2.85
Total	1681	100

The context of all these conversations was informal and the mode was of spoken type.

Hence, it was anticipated that the participants would mostly construct informal wh-question variants. Among these English and Persian wh-question variants, the English WHASV/WHAS variant and all those Persian variants in which the subject was visible (WHSV, WHVS, SVWH, SWHV, and VWHS) seemed to be the formal variants. Nonetheless, the type of the wh-questions constructed by English and Persian participants was both formal and informal. The frequency of these produced variants varied, however, between English and Persian participants.

The English native speakers tended to use more formal variants rather than the less formal ones. The reasons behind might be two-fold; firstly, the Edinburgh map task was of a Question-Answer (Q-A) context; accordingly, requiring information was of utmost importance. In other words, following Cowan's classification, the speakers usually use formal wh-questions when they require information; thus, they might not have paid attention to the dominant friendly atmosphere. In addition, when they were explained that this task was a part of the research project, they would be expected to use more formal variants. Moreover, as Labov (1972) maintained, the listener and the objectives of communication were among the reasons for variation. In this context, it was assumed that the objective of communication which was participation in a project was preferred to the listener, whether a friend or a stranger. Secondly, the researcher's nationality was different from the participants'. Sociolinguistically speaking and as far as distance is concerned, the people's utterances are usually informal when the distance is kept minimized; consequently, they completely feel at home. In such a context, although the researcher was not present during conversations, the participants may not have felt at ease.

Persian participants, on the other hand, used informal variants in their conversations. Although the Edinburgh Map Task context was Q-A, they did not use the formal variants that much. They required information using the informal wh-questions unlike what Cowan suggested. They seemed to follow the informal context more strictly than the Q-A context. It seemed that Q-A context was not considered by them contrary to the English native participants. They probably paid more attention to the listener and the available informal relationship rather than the objective of communication which was participation in a project. The nationality of the researcher might be at work for these participants as well. As the nationality of the participants and the researcher was similar, they probably were at ease while the data were collected. Therefore, it enhanced the desired informal context of the conversations.

It was also noted that there was a higher tendency for the Persian native speakers to use wh-fronted questions rather than wh-in-situ questions. Persian linguists such as Karimi (1989), Lazard (1992), Mahootian (1997),

and Youhanaee (1997) specifically stated that Persian is a wh-in-situ language; however, the results indicated that in such a context where there was no limitation in the type of the wh-questions constructed in the conversations, the wh-fronted questions were more preferable. Remarkably, the WHV variant was the most frequently-used variant by the Persian native speakers. This may have emerged from the very fact that was also discussed by Raghbdoust (1994) as *topicalization* and Kahnemuyipour (2001) as *focus movement*. The wh-word was brought to the beginning of the clause to get topicalized and focused. If the two wh-questions “beram kojâ?” and “kojâ beram?” (Where do I go?) are compared, the former mostly centers on the action and not the place; while the latter puts emphasis more on the place. In other words, “beram” (go.PRS.1sg) is more focused in the wh-question “beram kojâ?” rather than “kojâ beram?”. This also applied to nearly all Persian wh-fronted questions produced.

Pattern in English and Persian Wh-question Variants

In each society, there are social factors which determine how language is used and how it can vary. Context is one of the social factors which strongly specify the type of the utterance. Systematic variation occurs when the type of utterances produced is what we have expected and also the type of utterances is the same among the speakers of the language.

Following the linguists' word about patterned or systematic variation (Labov 1972, 1982; Schiffrin, 1994; Tagliamonte, 2005), the results of this study revealed systematic variation in English and Persian wh-questions. Although the context was informal and the participants were expected to construct informal variants rather than formal ones, it was seen that English native speakers made formal variants more than informal ones. However, it was shown that they were systematic in their construction because almost all of them followed the same pattern.

Persian native speakers not only followed the informal context but also showed to be systematic in their linguistic behavior in this context. They were expected to construct informal wh-question variants and almost half of the variants produced by the Persian participants was informal.

Regarding patterned or systematic variation, it was indicated that pattern was observed among each individual group of the participants, yet the *same*

pattern was missing among all the participants. In other words, patterned variation was not observed among English and Persian native speakers while the context was similar and it was anticipated for all of them to have similar linguistic performance.

Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to explore how variation occurred in English and Persian wh-questions. Moreover, it was investigated whether such a variation was systematic and patterned. It is concluded that variation applied to English and Persian wh-questions as well. In general, neither a language nor its levels could dissociate themselves from variation. Linguistic variation does not happen overnight; further, its actualization does not occur by itself. It requires other factors which are mostly social. Even if one of these factors is available, variation in language is expected. These factors are high in number; age, gender, geographical location, socio-economic background, context, cultural background, politeness, power relation, and register could be listed. Thus, in this study, due to the presence of the effective factor of context, variation seemed to be inevitable.

The participants of this project varied their language, but not similarly. Both English and Persian participants used various types of wh-questions; however, English native speakers did not follow the context totally. It follows that there should be other cultural and social factors involved other than the context. Having no intimacy and not feeling at ease with the project and the researcher as well as the preference of communication objectives could be the factors that might induce the English participants not to consider the informal context. It could also be reasoned that Persian native speakers culturally pay more attention to the variety of language used for a particular purpose or in a particular social setting.

The second conclusion made is that Persian was a more variable language than English. With respect to the wh-questions, English allowed four variants while for Persian it was eight; thus, variation seemed to be more freely done in Persian rather than in English.

It is also concluded that structurally or syntactically classifying the wh-questions in both English and Persian was more advantageous than having a

functional classification. A syntactic classification could encompass more variants so that it would be a more comprehensive classification even for other structures of a language such as yes/no questions. All functions should usually be represented with a linguistic form; hence, there is no function without a form. That is why putting a function under a form category sounds easier than putting a form under a function category.

The next conclusion drawn refers to the fact that a patterned variation could be observed in both languages; nonetheless, this variation would be different from one language to another. Despite the fact that in this research study English and Persian proved not to be systematic in the variation of wh-questions, they vigorously showed that patterned variation existed among the native speakers of the respective language. This could reveal that the mind-set of the speakers of a language might be so similar that they linguistically behave similarly in the same condition, while the native speakers of different languages can perform completely different.

Eventually and as a suggestion for further research, the researcher recommends this research to be carried out in a research design that gender is regarded as a social effective factor. It would be interesting to compare male speakers of a language with female speakers of it as well as the males of the two or more languages with their females to see if gender would play an important role in the construction of wh-questions. Another line of research is suggested to explore the grammaticality/ungrammaticality of the wh-questions which were considered as ungrammatical by Adli (2010), but were used by the Persian native participants of this study. A grammatical judgment test is required to be taken by Persian native speakers to verify the status of such questions as grammatical or ungrammatical.

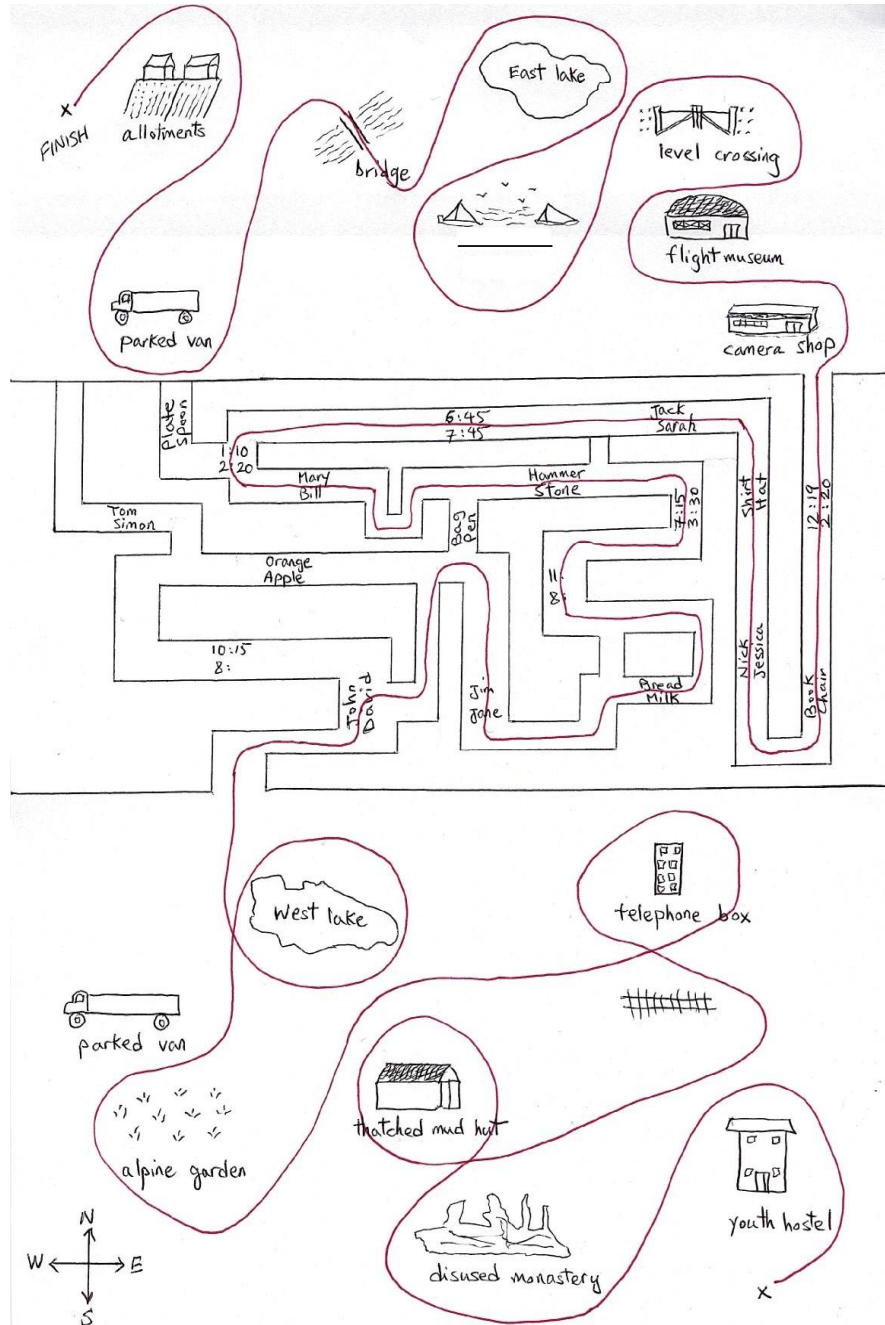
References

- Adli, A. (2010). Constraint cumulativity and gradience: Wh-scrambling in Persian. *Lingua*, 120, 2259-2294.
- Batani, M. R. (1995). *Tosif-e Sakhteman-e Dastury-e Zaban-e Farsi [Description of Persian Syntax]*. Tehran: Amir Kabir Publishers.
- Chomsky, N. (1995). *The minimalist program*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

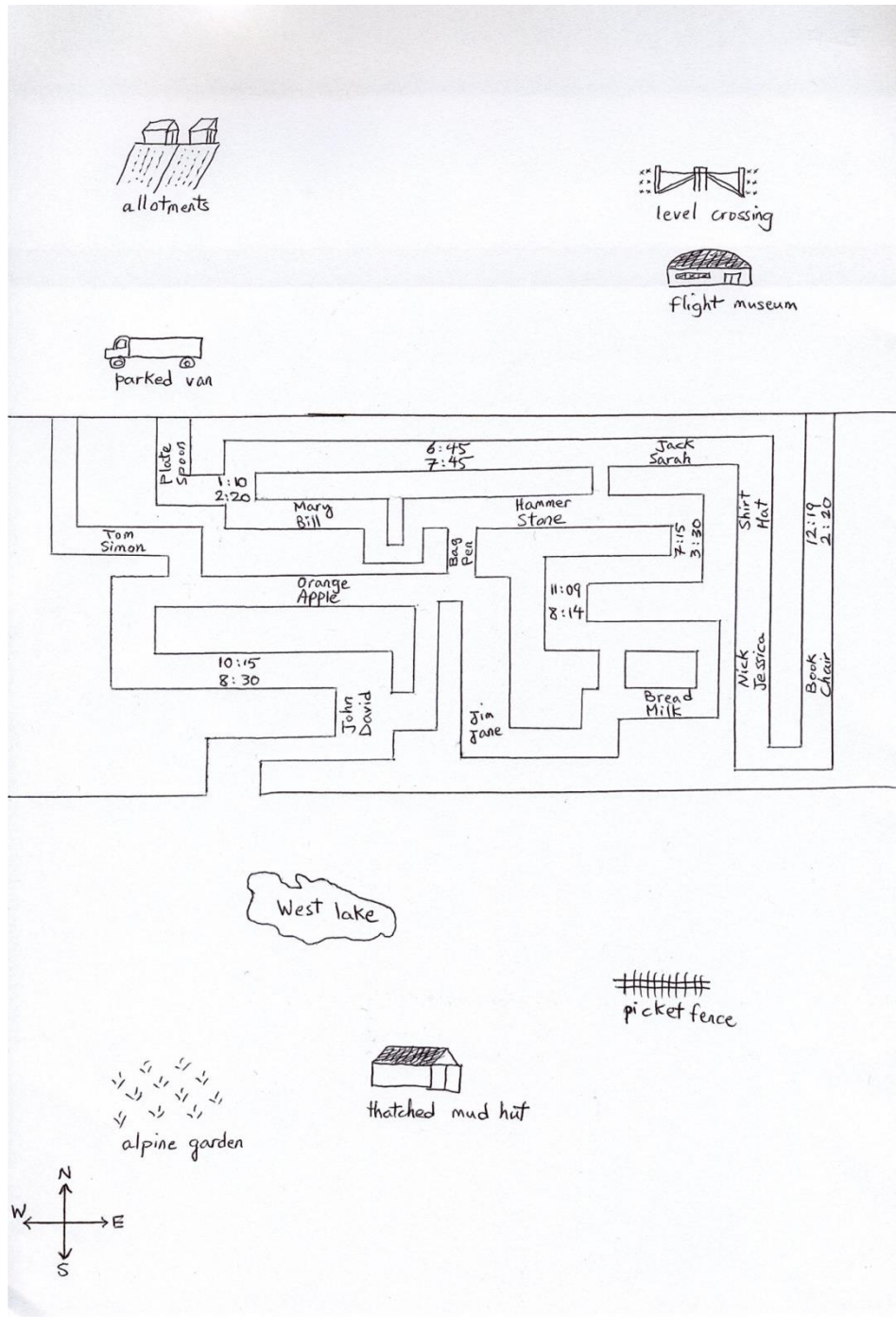
- Chomsky, N. (1988). Language and problems of knowledge. *The Managua Lectures*. Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- Cowan, R. (2008). *The teacher's grammar of English: A course book and reference guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ghomeshi, J. (1997). Topics in Persian VPs. *Lingua*, 102, 133-167.
- Goodall, G. (2006). Inversion in wh-questions in child Romance and child English. In *Proceedings of the Chicago Linguistic Society* 41.
- HCRC (2010). Human Communication Research Center. Available at <http://groups.inf.ed.ac.uk/maptask/index.html>.
- Kahnemuyipour, A. (2001). On wh-questions in Persian. *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*. 46(1/2), 41-61.
- Karimi, S. (2005). *A minimalist approach to scrambling: Evidence from Persian*. Berlin/New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Karimi, S. (2003). On object positions, specificity and scrambling in Persian. In S. Karimi, (Ed.), *Word Order and Scrambling*. Oxford/Berlin: Blackwell, 91-124.
- Karimi, S. (1989). *Aspects of Persian syntax, specificity, and the theory of grammar* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). MIT, Massachusetts.
- Labov, W. (1982). *The social stratification of English in New York City*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Labov, W. (1972). *Sociolinguistic patterns*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Lazard, G. (1992). *A grammar of contemporary Persian* (Sh. Lyons, Trans.) Paris: Klincksieck.
- Mahootian, Sh. (1997). *Persian*. New York: Routledge.
- Nevis, J. A. (1985). *Finnish particle clitics and general clitic theory* (Doctoral dissertation). Ohio State University, Ohio.
- Radford, A. (1997). *Syntactic theory and the structure of English: A minimalist approach*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Raghibdust, Sh. (1994). Multiple wh-fronting in Persian. *Cahiers Linguistics D'Ottawa*, 21, 27-50.
- Rizzi, L. (1991). *Residual verb second and the wh-criterion* (Technical Reports in Formal and Computational Linguistics 2). Retrieved from Université de Genève, Faculté des Lettres,

- Rowland, C. & Pine, J. (2000). Subject-auxiliary inversion errors and wh-question acquisition: "what children do know?" *Journal of Child Language* 27, 157-81.
- Sadat-Tehrani, N. (2011). The intonation patterns of interrogatives in Persian. *Linguistic Discovery* 9.1, 124-155.
- Schiffrin, D. (1994). Sociolinguistic interviews as discourse. *New Ways of Analyzing Variation*, XXV.
- Tagliamonte, S. A. (2005). *Analyzing sociolinguistic variation*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Tornyova, L. & Valian, V. (2009). The role of cross-linguistic variation in the acquisition of auxiliary inversion in wh-questions. In G. Crawford, K. Otaki & M. Takahashi (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 3rd Conference on Generative Approaches to Language Acquisition North America*. Cascadilla Proceedings Project, Somerville, MA.
- Vaez Dalili, M. (2009). Agreement (AGR) and the pro-drop/non-pro-drop variation: A meta-analysis of GB and MP accounts. *PhiN* 49.
- Vermaat, W. (2005). *The logic of variation: A cross-linguistic account of wh-question formation* (Doctoral dissertation). Utrecht Institute of Linguistics OTS, Utrecht University.
- Youhanaei, M. (1997). *The acquisition of English complementizer system by adult Persian speakers*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of Essex, Essex.
- Youhanaei, M. & Gouniband Shoushtari, Z. (1999). *Farâgirie sâxtâ r hâ ye porseshie sâdeye zabâne Engelisi tavasote gooyeshvarâne Fârsi zabân va dozabâne hâye Arab va Fârsi* [Acquiring simple English interrogative structures by Persian speakers and Arab-Persian bilinguals]. *Elmi-pazhooheshi Journal of Department of Literature and Humanities*, 2(52), 125-137.

Appendix A: The Edinburgh Map Task (Instruction Giver)



Appendix B: The Edinburgh Map Task (Instruction Follower)



Biodata

Laya Heidari Darani is an Assistant Professor in TEFL at Falavarjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran. Her research interests include applied linguistics, linguistics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, language and variation, systemic functional linguistics, and language and gender. She has attended several national and international conferences and published several articles.

Archive of SID