Background

Sluicing is a type of ellipsis in which an entire clause has been omitted but a wh-remnant remains:
(1) Alex read something, but I do not know what.

Sluicing has traditionally been analyzed as involving A’-movement of the wh-remnant and subsequent TP-deletion [5] [8]. This is referred to as the Move-and-Delete Approach (MDA). However, [2] do not know [_popup], [popup] Alex read t ?]

In addition, some languages are claimed to have clitic sources, in which the wh-remnant is the pivot of a cleft.
(3) …but I do not know [_popup, cite t]>

However, another possibility is that the wh-word remains in situ and the rest of the clause is deleted. This is known as non-constituent ellipsis (NCE) [7].
(4) …but I do not know [_popup, cite t]>

Movement or No Movement?

In French, the form of the wh-word is NOT interchangeable: que surfaces in matrix position, whereas quoi is in the situ form:
(5) a. Que+quoi dit-il?
   b. Il dit quoi+que?

What he says
what he says

What is he saying?
Lit. ‘He is saying what?’

These wh-words are analyzed as allomorphs, with que being a clitic [13] [16].
(6) Que dit-il?

In embedded declaratives, T=CT movement is not possible, and the fronted form surfaces with a demonstrative.
(7) Je ne sais pas que dit-il.

I NEG know,1SG not this that/wh-que say3SG
‘I do not know what he is saying.’

Sluicing always features the in situ form (8b):
(8) a. Il mange quelque chose, mais je ne sais pas ce qu’il mange.
   Il eat3SG some thing, but I NEG know1SG not this that he eat3SG
   ‘He is eating something. BIDK what he is eating.’
   b. Il mange quelque chose, mais je ne sais pas ‘que+quoi’.

Quo-quois seem to pose a problem for movement-based approaches.

We offer an analysis that is amenable to the MDA, and captures the behavior of quoi more generally.

Distribution of Quoi

On the surface it seems that quoi must remain in situ. However, there are contexts in which quoi surfaces in a fronted position:

Movement of Quoi within a Larger Phrase:
(9) De quoi s’agit-il?
   (Quoi + PP)

   of what CL act3SG-it
   ‘What is it about?’

(10) Qui ou quoi protège ce bâtiment?
   (Coordinated Qs)

   who or what protect3SG this building
   ‘Who or what is protecting this building?’

(11) C’est quoi que tu aimes?
   (Cleft Questions)

   this-he.3SG what that you like3SG
   ‘What is that you like?’

Restrictions on Clefts: No short source likely for quoi-sluices.
(12) Qui faire?
   (AND)

   what do.INF
   ‘What to do?’

(13) Que faire?
   (AND)

   what do.INF
   ‘What to do?’

We assume the framework of Distributed Morphology, where the wh-word (que/quoi) is initially represented as a wh-feature bundle, and the morphological form is determined via vocabulary insertion (VI) rules that are sensitive to the relation between the wh-feature and C. We assume that the wh-bundle undergoes morphological merger to the local C head when it moves to Spec C.

We also follow Thoms (2010) in assuming that C is deleted in sluices, consistent with the Sluicing-COMP generalization [5].

The wh-feature bundle surfaces as ‘que’ whenever there is a local relation with a complex C+V head (16a). When there is no V-movement, the doubled form ‘ce que’ surfaces to provide quantificational force [9] (16b).

The “in situ” form ‘quoi’ surfaces everywhere else— that is, when there is no local relation to C (16c). This predicts that ‘quoi’ should always surface in sluicing, regardless of whether or not in situ would normally be allowed (e.g. embedded questions (18) [2]).

   b. [+wh, +human] ?= ce que/ C [+WH] +FIN
   c. [+wh, +human] ?= quoi / elsewhere

   a. Jean mange quelque chose, et je me demande [+wh] Jean mange quelque chose, et je me demande [+wh]
   (movement)

   b. Jean mange quelque chose, et je me demande [+wh] Jean mange quelque chose, et je me demande [+wh]
   (deletion)

   c. Jean mange quelque chose, et je me demande quoi. Jean eat3SG some thing and I REFLEX ask1SG what
   ‘Jean is eating something, and I wonder what.’

   Vi Rule (16c)

(18) ‘Je me demande Jean mange quoi.

Optionality in infinitives? Possible due to the low position of the infinitival verb, and the relative position of the wh-word.

Sluicing Analysis

Aggressively Non D-Linked Phrases

A potential objection for analyzing ‘que’ as a clitic might come from aggressively non-D-linked expressions, such as (19).
(19) Que diable a-t-il dit?

What devil have.3SG he say
‘What the devil did he say?’

Here we argue that the que in this expression may be different. It can surface on its own, for example, as an exclamative:
(20) Que diable!! (compare with fragments: *Que? and Quoi?)

Conclusions

- Although quoi-sluices may seem to be a challenge for the MDA on the surface, we argue that these involve movement.
- The fact that quoi can surface in matrix position suggests that the “in situ” form does not signal a lack of movement.
- Allomorphic variation between the clitic (que) and strong form (quoi) is able to capture sluicing in French.
- The form of the wh-remnant is determined via VI rules.

Remaining Questions

1. Are all sluices derived via the same mechanism?
2. Could sluicing illuminate the (non)-clitic nature of other wh-words?

References


Acknowledgements

Special thanks Viviane Dèpres, Timie Xiang, and audiences at PLC 2019 and the Rutgers syntax group (MS&J).