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Dire N'IMPORTE-QUOI:
Identifying a polarity item in Quebec Sign Language

1. Proposal: Recent years have seen a renewed interest in cross-linguistic polarity phenomena, as authors have added insights from Greek (Giannakidou 1999, 2001), Dutch (Zwarts 1993), Catalan (Quer 1998), and numerous other languages (Haspelmath 1997) to a theoretical model which had previously been primarily based on English data. However, though the spoken languages of the world seem fairly well represented, there is a gap in the research when it comes to the distribution and behavior of polarity items in signed languages.

It is possible that this gap results from a genuine absence of polarity items in these languages – indeed, that seems to be the current assumption. However, such a lack would be odd from a typological perspective. More importantly, the notion that signed languages as a whole do not have polarity items also seems to be empirically false. This paper presents novel evidence from Quebec Sign Language (LSQ), and, after examining the distribution of the sign in question, argues that it is a free-choice polarity item.

2. Main data and analysis: The sign that is the focus of this paper is glossed here as N'IMPORTE-Q, though Bourcier and Roy's dictionary of LSQ (1985) lists it only under the entry PEU-IMPORTE.

Like all polarity items, N'IMPORTE-Q has limited distribution. For example, it is ungrammatical in environments such as affirmative episodic sentences and existential sentences, both of which are known to be inhospitable to polarity items cross-linguistically:

(1) *HIER VOIR N'IMPORTE-Q
yesterday *see* *any*
I saw anything/anyone yesterday.

(2) $\overline{\text{TABLE PTE}-\text{3sg}}^{SR}$ IL-Y-A LIVRE N'IMPORTE-Q
table DET-*3sg* *have-there* *book* *any*
There is any book on the table.

This limited distribution is the hallmark of polarity items in general. For episodic or existential sentence containing negative polarity items, negating the sentence licenses the polarity item. This does not, however, seem to be true in the case of N'IMPORTE-Q, as we see in 3 and 4 below:

(3) *$\overline{\text{HIER}}$ $\overline{\text{VOIR}}$ $\overline{\text{N'IMPORTE}-\text{Q}}^{neg}$
yesterday *see*$_{neg}$ *any*
I didn't see anything/anyone yesterday.

(4) $\overline{\text{TABLE PTE}-\text{3sg}}^{SR}$ $\overline{\text{IL}-\text{Y}-\text{A}}$ $\overline{\text{LIVRE}}$ $\overline{\text{N'IMPORTE}-\text{Q}}^{neg}$
table DET-*3sg* *have-there*$_{neg}$ *book* *any*
There isn't any book on the table.

If, as examples 1 and 2 suggest, N'IMPORTE-Q is a polarity item – and if, as we see in 3 and 4, it is not an NPI, the next logical step is to see whether it is a free-choice item.

As the following examples – suggested by Giannakidou's (1999) list of distributional environments for English *any* – illustrate, N'IMPORTE-Q is licensed in precisely the same environments as other free-choice items.

(5) APPUYER-TOUCHE N'IMPORTE-Q
press-button *any*
Press any button. [imperative]

(6) $\overline{\text{2sg}-\text{DIRE}-\text{A}-\text{3pl}}$ $\overline{\text{N'IMPORTE}-\text{Q}}^{SR}$ EXCUSE JAMAIS
if 2sg-tell-3pl *any* *forgive* *never*
If you tell anyone (else), I'll never forgive you. [*if*-clause]

(7) N'IMPORTE-Q POSSIBLE GAGNER.
any *can* *win*
Anyone can win. [modal verb]

(8) N'IMPORTE-Q CHAT MANGER SOURIS
any *cat* *eat* *mouse*
Any cat eats mice. [generic]

As is evident from examples 5-8 above, N'IMPORTE-Q is grammatical in a variety of environments which are known to be hospitable to free-choice items both in English and cross-linguistically.

3. A puzzle: Curiously, N'IMPORTE-Q also seems to be grammatical in the scope of weak intensional verbs such as *believe* – unusual behavior for a free-choice item.

(9) MARIE CROIRE N'IMPORTE-Q $\overline{\text{ETUDIANT}}^{SR}$ INVITER
Marie *believes* *any* *student* *invite*
Marie believes we invited any student.

However, the attentive reader may notice the presence of the 'SR' marker attached to *ÉTUDIANT* in both sentences. 'SR,' which stands for 'sourcils relevés' (or 'raised eyebrows') is a nonmanual marker associated with numerous syntactic functions in signed languages such as LSQ and ASL. Although it is usually analyzed merely as a topicalization marker, according to Dubuisson et al. (1999), it is also essential to the formation of interrogatives and conditionals. We could plausibly re-gloss 9 as "Marie believes we invited anyone who was a student," which resembles Giannakidou's (2001) example of FCI rescuing by subtrigging:

(10) John talked to any woman *{who came up to him}.

Giannakidou (2001) and Giannakidou and Cheng (2006) discuss primarily instances where subtrigging rescues FCIs used in episodic affirmative contexts (which, being veridical, usually rule out *any*). However, subtrigging can also make FCIs grammatical after weak intensional verbs.

If, cross-linguistically, conditionals following FCIs tend to make them grammatical in otherwise unacceptable contexts; if it makes sense to accept N'IMPORTE-Q as a free-choice item; and if it is preferable to assume that LSQ behaves like other languages without incontrovertible evidence to the contrary, then subtrigging is the best explanation for the grammaticality of N'IMPORTE-Q after weak intensionals.

4. Conclusion and implications: In Section 2, I presented novel evidence for the existence of a polarity item, N'IMPORTE-Q, in Quebec Sign Language. Typologically, this result should be unsurprising. Indefinite pronouns such as free-choice *any* are extraordinarily common in the world's languages, and it would be odd indeed for signed languages like LSQ to lack such an item. The fact that the literature has, up until now, assumed this to be the case seems to stem from a lingering sense that signed languages are somehow so exotic that they are not subject to the same constraints as other human languages. Ultimately, this paper provides more evidence that LSQ, like other signed languages, is at its core a human language with its roots in the human desire and ability to communicate systematically, and it most often works in very normal human ways.