Dire N’IMPORTE-Q:
Identifying a polarity item in Quebec Sign Language

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1 Introduction

Recent years have seen a renewed interest in cross-linguistic polarity phenomena, as authors have added insights from Greek (Giannakidou 1999, 2001), Dutch (Zwarts 1998), Catalan (Quer 1998), and numerous other languages (Haskelmath 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 and morphosyntactic properties of the sign in question, argues that it is a free-choice polarity item.

2 A note on conventions, and the sign in question

2.1 Representing signed-language data in writing

The LSQ data in this paper will be represented according to the conventions for signed-language data. For a comprehensive guide to these conventions, including a greatly expanded system for noting non-manual features, the reader is encouraged to refer to Dubuisson, Lelièvre, and Miller (1999). What follows here is a summary of the features which are most relevant to this paper.

Examples consist of three lines: on the first, manually-produced lexical items (signs) are written as individual words in capital letters.\(^1\) Where more than one word is necessary to translate a single sign, the words are joined with a hyphen

\(^1\)Although there is not a universal consensus on this point, many authors choose to represent signs in the written language used in the same community as the signed language, and I have followed this practice. Thus, the words chosen to represent the signs are selected from the lexicon of French.
(such as, for example, N’IMPORTE-Q or IL-Y-A). The sign transcribed PTÉ is the “point,” used as a personal pronoun or as a determiner.

Non-manual items (for example, morphological markers or semantic operators produced by the face and upper body) are represented above the signs with which they co-occur, accompanied by a horizontal line corresponding to the duration of the non-manual element. For example:

- \( \text{neg} \): negation (a complex marker generally consisting of a head tilt, head shake and furrowed eyebrows)
- \( \text{SR} \): raised eyebrows (a marker which – depending on other factors – can indicate topicalization, focus, yes/no questions, or the protasis of conditionals)

Finally, LSQ verbs are conventionally represented using French verbs in the infinitival form. Where agreement features are explicitly marked on the sign, as in the class of “agreement verbs” (Padden 1988), a subscript before the verb indicates the starting point of the sign (which usually corresponds to the subject) and a subscript after the verb indicates the end point (which usually corresponds to the object). Thus, for example, “I tell you (singular)” would be represented as \( 1 \text{DIRE-A}_2 \); “he/she tells them” would be \( 3 \text{DIRE-A}_6 \).

The second and third lines of the examples follow conventions more broadly used in linguistics, which should be familiar to most readers. The second line contains a morpheme-by-morpheme gloss, while the third line contains an English translation of the example sentence.

### 2.2 Introducing N’IMPORTE-Q

The sign which is the focus of this paper will be transcribed in French as N’IMPORTE-Q, and glossed in English as “anything/anyone.” The manual components of N’IMPORTE-Q are identical to another sign, typically represented as PEU-IMPORTE “doesn’t matter,” and pictured in Bourcier and Roy’s (1985) dictionary of LSQ (see Figure 1).
Figure 1: PEU-IMPORTE (reproduced from Bourcier and Roy 1985).

The two signs, however, are distinguished by non-manual elements: PEU-IMPORTE requires explicit _neg_ marking, while N’IMPORTE-Q has no obligatory (lexical) non-manual component. (The photograph, therefore, is presented merely to assist readers in visualizing the data.)

Both the choice of the French gloss N’IMPORTE-Q and the English gloss and translation “any” are innovations on my part: since the sign has not yet been linguistically described, there has been no previous need to represent it in the form of written French peculiar to signed-language linguistics, or to discuss it in English at all. The term N’IMPORTE-Q is meant as the most economical way to indicate that the same sign can be roughly translated with either the French phrase _n’importe qui_ (anyone) or _n’importe quoi_ (anything).

These representational choices are, of course, more than neutral and convenient notations. They are empirical claims about the meaning of the sign they name: that it is a polarity item akin to English free-choice _any_-words.
3 N’IMPORTE-Q and (non)veridicality: arguments from distribution

3.1 Background

Polarity items, broadly defined, are those which are only grammatical in particular semantic contexts. The first analyses of these contexts focused on licensing conditions for negative polarity items, or NPIs, such as English negative-*anyone*:

(1)  
(a) *I saw anyone yesterday.
(b) I didn’t see anyone yesterday.

(2)  
(a) *There is anything on the table.
(b) There isn’t anything on the table.

Negative polarity items are ungrammatical in affirmative episodic sentences such as (1) a. and existential sentences such as (2) a. Crucially, they are rendered grammatical in sentences like (1) and (2) b. Ladusaw (1979) and subsequent authors (e.g. Hoeksema 1983, van der Wouden 1994, Dowty 1994) attempted to capture this generalization by claiming that negative polarity items are licensed by downward-entailing contexts. However, Giannakidou (1998) corrects this account with her licensing condition for NPIs:

(3) **Licensing condition for negative polarity items** (Giannakidou 1998):
A negative polarity item $\alpha$ will be licensed in a sentence $S$ iff $S$ is *antiveridical*,

where *antiveridicality* is defined as in (4):

(4) **Antiveridicality** (Giannakidou 1998):
In a context $c$ (where $c = <c_{g}(c), W(c), M, s, h, w_{0}, f, \ldots>$),
An operator $Op$ is antiveridical if it holds that:
$[Op\ p]_{c} = 1 \rightarrow [p] = 0$ in some epistemic model $M(x) \in c$. 
Giannakidou’s account also establishes NPIs as a proper subset of polarity items in general, a larger class of items which she argues are all sensitive to nonveridicality (a semantic property of which antiveridicality is a subtype).

She then turns her analysis to free-choice items (FCIs), another common type of polarity item most commonly associated with English free-choice “any.” She argues that FCIs are attributive existential quantifiers, which “come with the free choice requirement that their referent vary from one world to another.” In other words, for a free-choice item to be licensed in a given environment, the environment must be rich enough to provide more than one potential referent for the semantics to choose freely between. This accounts, roughly, for the difference in acceptability between sentences (5) and (5′) below.

(5) *The FBI might investigate any current spouse of mine.

(5′) The FBI might investigate any friend of mine.

Assuming a definition of *spouse* which entails a relationship that the speaker may be engaged in with only one other person at a time, “any current spouse of mine” denotes a set containing at most one member. (If the speaker is unmarried, of course, it denotes an empty set.) On the other hand, the speaker is not automatically semantically prohibited from having multiple friends, and “any friend of mine” offers a choice of at least as many alternative worlds as there are friends to investigate— not to mention worlds in which the FBI investigates various combinations of the speaker’s friends. The possibilities may not strictly be endless, but they are certainly more robust than the possible referents of “any current spouse of mine.” Giannakidou (1998) formalizes this property of FCIs as follows in (6), where M(x) is the set of worlds compatible with the speaker’s epistemic model and the worlds w′ and w″ are identical in every respect except the referent of α.

(6) Sensitivity in FCIs (Giannakidou 1998)

i. A free choice item α is an attributive existential quantifier.

ii. Attributive existential quantifiers must be evaluated wrt a set of i[dentity]-alternatives.
iii. A world $w' \in M(x)$ is an $i$-alternative wrt $\alpha$ iff there exists some $w'' \in M(x)$ such that $[\alpha]_{w'} \neq [\alpha]_{w''}$

Giannakidou notes that episodic environments force interpretation with respect to a single event taking place in a single contextual world, eliminating the possibility of referent selection among $i$-alternatives. Furthermore, veridical operators – that is, those which logically entail the truth of the proposition in their scope – force propositions to be interpreted only with respect to worlds which satisfy their truth conditions. This forcible narrowing of worlds available for interpretation also eliminates $i$-alternatives. Thus, both episodicity and veridicality create environments in which FCIs – which depend on the availability of a variety of non-identical referents – can not be licensed. Giannakidou captures this observation in (7):

(7) Anti-licensing conditions for free choice items (Giannakidou 1998):

i. A free choice item $\alpha$ will not be grammatical in a sentence $S$ if $S$ is veridical; otherwise $\alpha$ will be grammatical, provided that $S$ is not episodic.

ii. In certain cases, clause i is satisfied if $S$ gives rise to a negative implicature.

The licensing and anti-licensing conditions for polarity items correctly predict that all polarity items will be ungrammatical in affirmative episodic and evidential sentences, and that free-choice items specifically will also be ungrammatical in negated episodic sentences as well as all veridical environments – that is, those which do not provide alternatives among possible referents. FCIs should, however, be grammatical in nonveridical environments, which do provide $i$-alternatives.

Because analyses of veridicality and nonveridicality so often turn on the availability of variation in the models associated with the proposition at hand, it is necessary to include the notion of context and epistemic models in the definition of (non)veridicality. Giannakidou (1998) provides the following comprehensive and context-sensitive definition of relativized (non)veridicality:

(8) Relativized (non)veridicality (Giannakidou 1998):

Let $c = <cg(c), W(c), M, s, h, w_0, f, \ldots >$ be a context.
3 ARGUMENTS FROM DISTRIBUTION

i. A propositional operator $Op$ is *veridical* iff it holds that: $[Op \ p]_c = 1 \rightarrow [p]_c = 1$ in some epistemic model $M(x) \in c$; otherwise $Op$ is nonveridical.

ii. A nonveridical operator $Op$ is *antiveridical* iff it holds that: $[Op \ p]_c = 1 \rightarrow [p]_c = 0$ in some epistemic model $M(x) \in c$.

iii. Epistemic models are: belief models $M_B(x)$ [representing worlds compatible with what an individual $x$ believes to be true], dream models $M_D(x)$ [representing worlds compatible with what $x$ dreams], models of reported conversations $M_{RC}(x)$ [representing worlds compatible with what $x$ believes to have been said], and nothing else.

With these criteria in mind, we can use sensitivity to veridicality – as defined in (8) and applied in (3) and (7) – in a variety of environments as a diagnostic for polarity items.

3.2 Distribution of N’IMPORTE-Q in veridical and antiveridical environments

Like other polarity items, N’IMPORTE-Q is limited in its distribution, and apparently sensitive to (non)veridicality. It is ungrammatical in explicitly veridical environments such as affirmative episodic sentences and existentials:

(9) *HIER VOIR N’IMPORTE-Q
    yesterday see anything/one
    I saw anything/anyone yesterday.

(10) *TABLE PTE SR IL-Y-A N’IMPORTE-Q
    table det exist anything
    There is anything on the table.

This, of course, is a property shared by both NPIs and FCIs – so, although (9) and (10) indicate that N’IMPORTE-Q is likely a polarity item, they offer little guidance in determining what kind of polarity item it is. However, the licensing condition for NPIs in (3) indicates that, if N’IMPORTE-Q is an NPI, it should be licensed in the scope of a negative operator such as LSQ $neg$. As we see in (9’) and (10’), however, merely negating these sentences does not improve their grammaticality:
(9') $\text{HIER VOIR N'IMPORTE-Q}^{neg}$
\begin{align*}
&yesterday \quad see_{neg} \quad anything/one \\
&I \text{ didn’t see (absolutely) anything/anyone yesterday.}
\end{align*}

(10') $\text{TABLE PTE IL-Y-A N'IMPORTE-Q}^{neg}$
\begin{align*}
&table \quad det \quad exist_{neg} \quad anything \\
&There \text{ isn’t (absolutely) anything on the table.}
\end{align*}

The results from (9)-(10) and (9')-(10') indicate that, while N’IMPORTE-Q is anti-licensed in explicitly veridical contexts, as expected of a polarity item, it is not automatically licensed in the scope of a negative operator, and is thus not an NPI. In fact, it is ungrammatical in all episodic sentences, whether affirmative or negative, as predicted in clause (i) of the anti-licensing conditions for FCIs.

In addition to assertions and episodic sentences, which are veridical with respect to the epistemic model held to be true by the speaker, polarity items are also ungrammatical in sentences which are veridical with respect to other contextually-salient epistemic models. Weak intensional verbs such as believe, dream, say or know, for example, create veridical environments “warranted by truth not with respect to the speaker but with respect to the individual that believes, dreams, says or knows” (Giannakidou 1998). Recalling the definition of relativized (non)veridicality, we can say that, if $x$ is the individual who believes, $[\text{believe} (x, p)]_{B} = 1 \rightarrow [p] = 1$ in the belief model $M_{B}(x)$. In other words, saying that $x$ believes $p$ entails that $p$ must be true in all worlds compatible with what $x$ believes; thus, believe (and the other weak intensional verbs) create explicitly veridical environments which we would expect to anti-license FCIs. Indeed, this is the case in Greek, as we see in example (11); it is also the case for N’IMPORTE-Q, as we see in (12):

(11) $^*\text{O Pavlos pistevi oti aghorase opjodhipote vivlio.}$
\begin{align*}
&\text{the Paul believe.3sg that bought.3sg any book} \\
&Paul \text{ believes that he bought almost any book.}
\end{align*}

(12) $^*\text{MARIE CROIRE N'IMPORTE-Q INVITER}$
\begin{align*}
&Marie \quad believes \quad anyone \quad invite \\
&Marie \text{ believes that we invited anyone.}
\end{align*}
3.3 Distribution of N’IMPORTE-Q in nonveridical environments

While it is useful to know where polarity items are not licensed, it is also helpful to test potential polarity items in environments where they are expected to be licensed (or, in the case of free-choice items, non-anti-licensed). In addition to defining inhospitable environments, Giannakidou (1998) provides a list of classic nonveridical environments in which FCIs should be grammatical.

The first such environment, the imperative sentence, is nonveridical in that the meaning of an imperative can not be stated in terms of truth conditions. An imperative operator can no more entail the truth of the proposition in its scope than it can require that proposition to be false. Giannakidou summarizes this characteristic of imperatives in clause (ii) below:

(13) Nonveridicality of nondeclaratives (Giannakidou 1998):

i. If $?p$ is a wellformed question, then $p$ does not have a truth value.
ii. If $!p$ is a wellformed imperative, then $p$ does not have a truth value.

Thus, it is unsurprising that FCIs like Greek opjodhipote “any” are grammatical in imperatives– as is N’IMPORTE-Q:

(14) Pare opjodhipote milo.
     take.2sg any apple
Take any apple.

(15) APPUYER-TOUCHE N’IMPORTE-Q
     press-button anything
Press any button.2

The next environment which we will consider, the antecedent of conditionals, “is nonveridical in virtue of its being nonassertive” (Giannakidou 1998). The antecedent of the conditional restricts the set of possible worlds in which the truth conditions of the main proposition are met, but it does not impose any additional truth conditions

2Literally, “Perform the action of button-pressing on anything.”
within those worlds, and thus contributes no assertive meaning to the sentence as a whole. This being the case, we expect that FCIs will be grammatical in the conditional protasis, which is precisely what we see in (16) for Greek (in an example from Giannakidou 2001) and (17) for LSQ:

(16) An kimithis me opjondhipote, tha se skotoso.
    if sleep.2sg with FC-person fut you kill.1sg
    If you sleep with anybody, I'll kill you.

(17) 2DIRE − A6 N‘IMPORTE − Q EXCUSE JAMAIS
    if 2sg.tell.3pl anyone forgive never
    If you tell anyone (else), I'll never forgive you.

Epistemic and deontic modal verbs, likewise, do not entail the truth of any proposition: at their strongest, the most they express is a speaker’s opinion of the reasonable likelihood of a proposition in worlds compatible with the speaker’s belief. The weaker modals, of course, do not even express this degree of commitment to the truth of the proposition in their scope. Thus, modals, too, are nonveridical, and provide suitable licensing environments for free-choice items:

(18) Opjodhipote bori na lisi afto to provlima
    anyone can.3sg subj solve this the problem.
    Anyone can solve this problem.

(19) N‘IMPORTE-Q POSSIBLE GAGNER.
    anyone can win
    Anyone can win.

(20) Boris na danistis opjodhipote vivlio
    can.2sg subj borrow.2sg any book.
    You may borrow any book.

(21) PERMETTRE LIRE N‘IMPORTE-Q PERMETTRE
    may read anything may(emph)
    You may read anything.
3.4 Conclusions based on distribution

Polarity items are defined by their distribution. Sensitivity to (non)veridicality is not just a characteristic of polarity items, but rather the characteristic which distinguishes polarity items from the rest of the lexicon. It is both necessary and sufficient, when determining whether a given lexical item is a polarity item, to demonstrate that its distribution is constrained by (non)veridicality sensitivity – and this is precisely what the data in 3.2 and 3.3 demonstrate. Table 1 summarizes the distribution of English free-choice anything/one, Greek free-choice -dhipote items, and N’IMPORTE-Q:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment:</th>
<th>English FC-anything</th>
<th>Greek -dhipote</th>
<th>LSQ N’IMPORTE-Q</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>episodic sentences</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>existentials</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weak intensional verbs</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>imperatives</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conditionals</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>epistemic modals</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>deontic modals</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Distribution and grammaticality of N’IMPORTE-Q and other free-choice items

As Table 1 illustrates, N’IMPORTE-Q perfectly fits the pattern of distribution which defines free-choice polarity items. It is, to recall the anti-licensing criteria in (7) above, ungrammatical in episodic and veridical environments and grammatical in nonveridical environments. Thus, N’IMPORTE-Q is, by definition, a free-choice item.
4 N’IMPORTE-Q and subtrigging: arguments from and about LSQ syntax

4.1 A counterexample?

In the previous section, we saw that free-choice items are categorically anti-licensed in the inherently veridical environments created by weak intensional verbs such as believe, dream, say or know. Examples (11) and (12), reproduced below as (22) and (23), illustrate this point with respect to Greek and LSQ; we see in (24) that the generalization also holds for English FCIs:

(22) *O Pavlos pistevi oti aghorase opjodhipote vivlio.
Paul believes that he bought almost any book.

(23) *MARIE CROIRE N’IMPORTE-Q INVITER
Marie believes anyone invite
Marie believes that we invited anyone.

(24) *Jane believes (that) any boat set sail.

It is thus somewhat startling at first that a sentence such as (25), which contains N’IMPORTE-Q in the scope of CROIRE “believe,” is in fact grammatical:

(25) MARIE CROIRE N’IMPORTE-Q ETUDIANT INVITER
Marie believes any student invite
Marie believes we invited any student.

At first glance, this seems doubly anomalous: not only is N’IMPORTE-Q suddenly grammatical in an environment which is hostile to FCIs, but it has also spontaneously mutated from a noun phrase (“anyone/thing”) to an apparent determiner (“any”) combining with a lower NP (“student”). Either N’IMPORTE-Q is not a true FCI after all; or there is a new class of FCIs which are somehow licensed by weak intensional verbs; or else there must be another explanation for this odd behavior.

Given that N’IMPORTE-Q exhibits distributional patterns that are otherwise quite typical of FCIs, it would seem unnecessarily complicated to turn around and
argue that they belong to a special and heretofore unattested class of faux FCIs which can be distinguished from true free-choice items only by their acceptability with weak intensional verbs. It also seems unnecessary to propose an entire new category of polarity items which are FCIs, but which, unlike any other FCI ever seen before, have an affinity for weak intensionals. Not only are these two explanations unmotivated by any other evidence and completely unparsimonious, they also reek of sign-language exceptionalism, which has a track record of being disproven in cases where there is no explicit tie to modality differences.\footnote{Sign-language exceptionalism also has a long and awkward history of cropping up in situations where it is motivated more by language ideology than by linguistic evidence.}

Without a good reason to believe that some specific property of the manual modality gives rise to new possibilities in semantic representation, I am loathe to argue that N’IMPORTE-Q is some sort of outlaw polarity item.\footnote{This reluctance, of course, also reflects ideological preferences on my part.} In short, it seems most plausible to pursue the third option – that is, to look for an explanation which has not been created \textit{ad hoc} for this phenomenon alone.

As it happens, in addition to being aesthetically and theoretically preferable, the third option also yields results: upon closer inspection, (25) is less anomalous than it initially seems.

### 4.2 Considering non-manual morphology

In order for (25) to be grammatical, the sign ÉTUDIANT must co-occur with the non-manual marker \textit{SR} (“sourcils relevés,” or “raised eyebrows”), which has several distinct possible meanings.

In American Sign Language (which is closely related to LSQ), raised eyebrows can mark yes/no-question scope, topicalization or the protasis of conditionals, depending on what they co-occur with (Baker-Shenk and Padden 1978). Although there is, in general, far less research on LSQ than on ASL, eyebrow raising has been the subject of at least one study: Dubuisson et al, in their (1999) corpus study of \textit{SR} in LSQ, conclude that it marks conditionals when it extends over a phrase, but that when it extends over a single constituent (and that constituent is not a verb), it marks...
narrow focus. However, though this typology accounts for the data in Dubuisson et al’s corpus, it does not seem to be the case that SR in sentences like (25) is a focus marker.

If (25) used eyebrow raising to mark narrow focus, we would expect the sentence to have the following reading:

(25) a. *Marie believes that we invited any student (not any professor).

This is not, in fact, what (25) means: there is no sense of emphasis, focus, or contrast. Furthermore, an analysis which treats ETUDIANT as focused still cannot account for its grammaticality with “believe.” There is nothing about focus (as illustrated by the unacceptability of (25) a. in English) that improves the grammaticality of polarity items under weak intensional verbs.

It is worth noting, on this point, that SR is not a cure-all for ungrammaticality. In (26) – which is a clear-cut case of focus – it fails to improve the grammaticality of the sentence:

(26) *MARIE CROIRE NIMPORTE − Q INVITER

Marie believe anyone invite

*Marie believes that we invited anyone (not just a select few).

If any non-verbal constituent with SR marking can be assumed to receive narrow focus, it is unclear why (25) should be significantly more grammatical than (26), nor why (26) is uncontroversially interpreted as a focus construction while (25) resists such an interpretation.

I propose that the difference between (25) and (26) – and the key to the acceptability of (25) – lies precisely in Dubuisson et al’s initial typology: ETUDIANT is not, as we have been assuming, a single NP (or any other minimal constituent), and thus SR does not mark focus. Instead, ETUDIANT is a predicate – roughly, “x.be.a.student” – and ETUDIANT is a conditional CP: “if x is a student.”

This proposal is well-founded. Although there is no explicit mention in the literature of embedded conditionals in LSQ, sentences like (27) are extremely common:
(27) \( \begin{array}{c}
ETUDIANT^{SR} \\
if student
\end{array} \) INVITER

If (a person) is a student, (he or she) is invited.\(^5\)

Furthermore, embedded CPs appear in sentences like (28) without overt complementizers:

(28) \( \begin{array}{c}
MARIE \\
CROIRE \\
PIERRE \\
BEAU
\end{array} \)

Marie believes (that) Pierre is handsome.

Even (29), with a clear embedded relative (simplified from an example in Dubuisson, Lelièvre, and Miller 1999), is uncontroversially acceptable:

(29) \( \begin{array}{c}
HISTOIRE \\
RACONTER \\
3INVENTER
\end{array} \)

The story (that) he told, he made up.

It seems like a very small step indeed to posit that (25) contains, under CROIRE, an embedded CP something like the very simplified structure in (30):

\[ \text{(30)} \]

\[ \text{C} \]
\[ \emptyset \]
\[ \text{XP} \]
\[ \text{N'IMPORTE-Q} \]
\[ \text{ETUDIANT}^{SR} \]
\[ \text{CP} \]
\[ \text{INVITER} \]

“…that anyone, if s/he was a student, was invited (by us).”

\(^5\)Note that while this is a perfectly acceptable literal translation, the flavor of (27) is actually much closer to the English free relative \textit{whoever}, as in “Whoever is a student is invited.”
This structure allows us to revise our interpretation of (25) and re-gloss it with an embedded conditional, as in (31):

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{(31)} \\
\text{MARIE CROIRE N’IMPORTE-Q } \underline{\text{ETUDIANT}}^\text{SR} \text{ INVITER} \\
\text{Marie believes anyone if-student invite}
\end{array}
\]

Marie believes we invited anyone if s/he was a student.\textsuperscript{6}

### 4.3 Why embedded conditionals matter

The analysis in (30) and (31) reveals that the acceptability of N’IMPORTE-Q in (31) is not as anomalous as it initially appeared, and certainly does not require a re-analysis of the semantics of N’IMPORTE-Q. The fact that N’IMPORTE-Q seems to be grammatical in the scope of a weak intensional verb can be attributed to the presence of the conditional relative clause \underline{ETUDIANT}^\text{SR}.

The term ‘subtrigging,’ originally coined by Legrand (1975), describes cases in which an FCI which would ordinarily be ungrammatical is made acceptable when it is followed by a relative clause. Legrand illustrates the phenomenon with sentence pairs such as (32) and (32′), arguing that “it is the presence of the relative clause dependent on any in sentences like [(32′)] that triggers the any.”

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{(32) } \ast \text{She bought anything from Carson’s.} \\
\text{(32′) She bought anything she needed at Carson’s.}
\end{array}
\]

(32) is an affirmative episodic sentence, which is classically hostile to FCIs and polarity items in general because it is an explicitly veridical environment. Specifically, it does not provide identity alternatives for the referent of the FCI, and thus closes off the avenues for free choice which are necessary for the FCI to be grammatical.

\textsuperscript{6}Or, more freely, “Marie believes we invited anyone who was a student.” I take Quer’s (1998) and Giannakidou’s (2001) position that the relative clause “who was a student” is semantically an underlying conditional, and thus that the two glosses are semantically equivalent. In my experience, English speakers seem to prefer the who-relative to the overt conditional in this case, perhaps because it side-steps the pragmatic awkwardness of selecting a gendered pronoun for an unknown referent.
(32’), on the other hand, sets up the potential for i-alternatives because (according to Quer 1998), it essentially involves an unstated conditional of the type schematized in (33):

\[(33) \forall w, x \left[ \text{thing} (x, w) \land \text{needed} (m, x, w) \right] \rightarrow \text{bought-at-Carson’s} (m, x, w)\]

We are already familiar with the notion that overt conditionals induce potential variation and provide i-alternatives for the interpretation of FCIs which are found in their protasis. Subtrigging extends that principle, inducing variation by introducing the possibility that anything could pick a referent from either the set of all \(x\) such that \(x\) is a thing or from the set of all \(x\) such that \(x\) is a thing and \(m\) needs \(x\). In the first case, \([\text{bought-at-Carson’s} (m, x, w)] = 0\); in the second, \([\text{bought-at-Carson’s} (m, x, w)] = 1\). Thus, subtrigging satisfies the need for an FCI to appear in an environment where the truth of the proposition is variable depending on the context on interpretation. In other words, the introduction of a relative clause dependent on the FCI – what Giannakidou (2001) calls “rescue by subtrigging” – weakens veridicality just enough that FCIs are no longer anti-licensed.

4.4 Conclusions from syntax

Since N’IMPORTE-Q behaves in all other respects like a free-choice item, an explanation of its acceptability in hostile contexts makes most sense in a model where it can be subject to subtrigging by an embedded conditional. It is thus more economical to accept that raised eyebrows can mark conditionals outside of ‘if...then’ constructions (or that they can simply function as a relativizer) than to resort to ad hoc hypotheses about anomalous free-choice items, or to insist that free-choice items can not exist because there are no embedded conditionals or other relative clauses present to license them.

Given that there is independent evidence both for an embedded-conditional analysis and for an analysis of N’IMPORTE-Q as an FCI, an appeal to subtrigging not only explains the apparently anomalous counter-example presented in (25), but in fact provides additional evidence in support of the account of N’IMPORTE-Q as
an FCI. Not only does N’IMPORTE-Q exhibit the distributional hallmarks of a free-choice item, it also displays sensitivity to subtrigging, a phenomenon associated exclusively with free-choice items.

5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have used a two-pronged approach to demonstrate that any presumed lack of polarity items in LSQ is erroneous. First, I used a distributional analysis to show that the sign N’IMPORTE-Q fulfills the definitional criteria for a free-choice polarity item. Second, I presented a sentence which would be ungrammatical if N’IMPORTE-Q were not a free-choice item subject to subtrigging by a dependent relative clause. Since this sentence was, in fact, grammatical, this construction demonstrated from a morphosyntactic perspective that N’IMPORTE-Q is indeed a free-choice item.

It is tempting to look at a language as seemingly exotic as LSQ and assume that it is not subject to the same constraints as other human languages – that it is either lacking in constructions which many spoken languages possess or endowed with a panoply of constructions, phenomena, and semantic items which do not exist in any other language. Ultimately, however, the reality appears time and again to be much more pedestrian: 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.
References


