snippets

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Contents

Against the blocking approach to the Bagel Problem

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Some languages have polarity-sensitive items that are licensed in downward entailing (DE) environments, but not under sentential negation. Sentential negation creates antimorphic contexts, which have a proper superset of the formal properties of DE environments. Hence, the existence of polarity-sensitive items that are licensed in DE environments, but blocked under sentential negation creates a paradox, which became known as the 'Bagel Problem' (Pereltsvaig 2004).
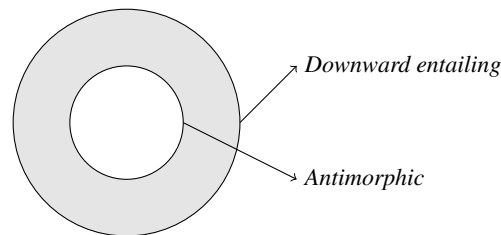

Figure 1: The 'Bagel Problem' (Pereltsvaig 2004)

Although the Bagel Problem is often discussed in connection with weak NPIs, the paradox is also found in languages that have Free Choice Items (FCIs). For instance, Portuguese *qualquer* is licensed in existential modal sentences, and DE-environments, but banned under sentential negation. The *qualquer*-variant of (1) is only acceptable if the FCI is stressed; in that case, the sentence conveys that the speaker did not read just any book, but rather a special, or noteworthy one. Crucially, a basic existential reading of *qualquer* is unavailable for (1).

(1) Eu não li   {×qualquer   / ✓nenhum}   livro desse   autor.
    I   NEG read { QUALQUER / NENHUM } book by this author
    Intended: 'I didn't read any book by this author.'

To explain the distribution of weak NPIs in a variety of languages with the Bagel Problem, Pereltsvaig develops a proposal based on morphological blocking: certain polarity-sensitive items compete for lexical insertion with Negative Concord Items (NCIs), which are exclusively licensed under negation. Since the former have a less specified lexical entry in comparison to NCIs, they lose the competition. Chierchia 2013:278 hypothesizes that blocking effects might also account for the incompatibility of some FCIs with negation.

A blocking approach predicts that words like *qualquer* should be *uniformly* unacceptable under negation. This prediction is not borne out: negated *qualquer* improves when it has abstract mass nouns (like *confidence*, *sensitivity*, and *interest*) in its restrictor. This is illustrated with the naturally-occurring Portuguese examples below:

(2) a. Ele não tinha {✓qualquer / ✓nenhuma} confiança em si mesmo.
      he NEG had { QUALQUER / NENHUMA} confidence in himself
      'He didn't have any confidence in himself.'[1]

    b. A Petrobras não tem {✓qualquer / ✓nenhuma} sensibilidade com a população.
      the Petrobras NEG has { QUALQUER / NENHUMA} sensitivity with the population
      'Petrobras does not display any sensitivity to the population.'[2]

    c. O Fluminense não tem {✓qualquer / ✓nenhum} interesse em Moisés.
      the Fluminense NEG has { QUALQUER / NENHUM} interest in Moisés
      'Fluminense does not have any interest in Moisés.'[3]

Similar facts hold for Russian *-libo* items (Polina Pleshak, p.c.). Moreover, Bar-Lev and Margulis 2014:74 make an observation about the distribution of the quantifier *kol*, in Hebrew, that seems to point to the same pattern. In all the sentences above, the NCI *nenhum(a)* could have been used instead of *qualquer*. That being the case, why would *nenhum(a)* block *qualquer* in (1), but not in (2a-c)? Note that some speakers *prefer* the counterparts of (2a-c) with an NCI — potentially because of competition. However, this preference alone is not enough to categorically block *qualquer*. Furthermore, even these speakers acknowledge that (1) is completely unacceptable, while the other sentences are only unnatural.

Future work might focus on the nature of the alternatives invoked by abstract mass nouns, and on the interplay of these alternatives with negation. That might lead to a more principled account of the Bagel Problem, and to a better understanding of the licensing of polarity-sensitive items more generally.

References

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Pereltsvaig, Asya. 2004. Negative polarity items in Russian and the 'Bagel Problem'. In *Negation in Slavic*, Sue Brown and Adam Przepiórkowski (eds.), 153–178. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers.

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[1] https://nazareuniluz.org.br/confianca-inabalavel/

[2] https://www.poder360.com.br/governo/petrobras-nao-tem-qualquer-sensibilidade-diz-bolsonaro/

[3] https://www.saudacoestricolores.com/apesar-dos-rumores-fluminense-nao-tem-qualquer-interesse-em-moises/